

Communications Peer Review Sevenoaks District Council

3 - 5 September 2018

Feedback Report

1. Purpose of report

This report provides a summary of the findings of the Sevenoaks District Council communications peer review. It builds on the main messages which were discussed with leading members and officers from the council at our feedback session on 5 September 2018. It is intended to provide a basis for consideration and action by the council to enhance the effectiveness of its communications activity and ensure the best use of resources deployed to support those.

2. Context and focus of the review

Sevenoaks District Council is currently in the process of developing its new corporate plan, having achieved the ambitions of its previous strategy ahead of schedule. The emerging plan focuses on a desire for the organisation to position itself as a 'seriously different council', with a focus on wellbeing running throughout each of its priority areas of focus. There is also a commitment to display excellence, innovation, and value through everything the council undertakes. The council recognises that effective communication has an important role to play in helping it to achieve these aims. In light of this, the council approached the Local Government Association to commission a three day communications review focused on a number of specific priorities. These were:

- **Capacity and capability.** Does the council have the right level of resources and model in place for delivering its communications and to meet the aspirations of Members? How effective is current communications activity? What are the communications skills the council needs now and in the future to meet its ambitions?
- **Digital.** Is the council making the most of the opportunities presented by digital communications? What role should communications play in the council's desire to enhance the customer journey?
- **Role of members.** With the current level of resources, are members appropriately supported and informed to be effective communicators for the council?
- **Internal communications.** Internal communications is recognised as critical to the organisations success. Is there sufficient resource and the right balance between internal and external communications activity? Are staff supported to be advocates for the organisation and its ambitions?
- **Priority setting.** With the council about to develop a new corporate plan, local plan and extend its services into public health, to what extent is communications activity adequately resourced and aligned with organisational priorities?

3. The peer team and process

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and were agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge were:

- Lead peer: Jayne Surman, (marketing and communications manager, Warwickshire County Council)
- Member peer: Cllr Kevin Bentley (deputy leader and cabinet member for infrastructure, Essex County Council)
- Senior communications officer peer: Lynne Morris (head of news and internal communications, Local Government Association)
- Senior communications officer peer: Jon-Paul Hedge (director of communications, Exeter City Council)
- Review manager: Claire Thurlow (communications improvement advisor, Local Government Association)
- Shadow communications officer peer: Kelsey Stubbs (communications and engagement lead for economy and infrastructure, West Sussex County Council)
- Shadow peer: Chloe Newman (communications improvement assistant Local Government Association)

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer reviews are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government communications to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information including the council's corporate plan, communications strategies and position statement.

The team then spent three days onsite in Sevenoaks, during which they:

- spoke to more than 50 people, including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
- gathered information and views from around 30 interviews, focus groups and meetings
- collectively spent more than 150 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending around four weeks in Sevenoaks.

4. Principles of good communication

In undertaking our work, we were guided by an understanding of the importance of good communications and how to achieve these. The LGA has found the following to underpin effective communications across the councils that it works with:

Why is good communications important?

- Articulates the ambition for your area
- Improves corporate and personal reputation
- Supports good political leadership
- Helps engagement – residents, partners and staff
- Builds trust
- Rallies advocates
- Drives change and can deliver savings
- Attracts investment (and good people)
- Can be used to managed performance
- Strengthens public support and understanding

What does good communication look like?

- **Leadership** - clarity of purpose and commitment
- **Brand** - what you stand for, values and trust
- **A clear vision** - be ambitious first...and then realistic!
- **Authentic**
- **Strategic** - Communication without strategy does not work
- A corporately agreed, fully evaluated **annual communications plan** - not just sending out ad hoc stuff!
- **Based on research and insight**
- Campaigns **linked to corporate priorities** and resourced accordingly
- **Evaluated**
- **Owned by everyone**

5. Executive summary

Sevenoaks District Council is an ambitious, high performing and evidently extremely successful council. Resident satisfaction levels are consistently high, it has achieved impressive results in respect of financial self-sufficiency and there is a clear appetite for continuing to develop, despite already being recognised as an example of excellence through a number of local government awards and accolades. It also benefits from an extremely positive culture and commitment to internal communication. The peer team was particularly struck by the consistently high levels of employee engagement,

enthusiasm and passion demonstrated across all of our interviews. It is a council that people are clearly proud to work for and represent as members. It is also a council with ambitions to broaden its reach and continue to tell its story more widely.

Delivering effective communications will be vital if the council is to achieve these goals; and it was clear from our time on site that the communications function is working extremely hard to meet the demand for communications support from service areas and members. This is particularly impressive given that the council's dedicated corporate communications resource is significantly smaller than the national average for a district council. The team is well regarded by many internal customers and has built strong and effective relationships with many service areas, members and media outlets. There is a strong willingness to always reflect the council's corporate commitment to customer service and deliver the support requested. Many officers we met with struggled to recall a request for support ever being turned down.

This commitment to customer service is extremely commendable. However it is our view that the current approach, with the current resources, is not sustainable in the long term, especially given the ambitions the leadership has for the organisation. Adopting a more strategic, structured approach to communications support, and considering the need for service areas and members to outline how their request supports the priorities of the emerging corporate plan, would make the council's communications even more effective. It is our view that it would also help to manage expectations around what the communications team can, and will, deliver. To support this work we would encourage the council to embed more strategic communications resource into the department and develop a new communications strategy aligned to the corporate plan. We would also encourage the council to develop a forward-looking campaign plan and news grid (agreed by senior officers, members, communications and service areas) to ensure that there are agreed, budgeted and focused opportunities to deliver proactive, strategic communications alongside day-to-day reactive demands.

Many of those we spoke to expressed an enthusiasm for exploring greater digital communications opportunities. While there are already some good examples of digital and social media communications, we would encourage the council to support more training and development in digital communications to ensure consistency across the council. Additional training would also help to meet demand, provide resilience and make sure that those tasked with communicating in this way have the correct skills to make the best use of these platforms. We would also encourage the council to introduce more regular ways to evaluate the impact of its digital and traditional channels, understand resident communications preferences and help members and service areas better see the impact and value that a strategic communications service can deliver.

We would also encourage the council to consider more direct ways to communicate with members. This should include providing more regular communication updates and exploring opportunities for members to contribute to proactive, strategic communications that align with agreed corporate priorities. Additional media and social media training would also be beneficial for ensuring consistent communications across the organisation and supporting members to communicate with a wider range of residents. In turn, we would encourage the council to ensure that officers, and in particular the communications service, are empowered to delivering the agreed

communications activities and are supported to prioritise this work above more ad-hoc requests.

Sevenoaks District Council has a strong communications base and a clear appetite to succeed. It is our view that by implementing the recommendations outlined in this report the council will be able to build on these solid foundations to deliver even greater impact.

6. Feedback

6.1 Capacity and capability

Sevenoaks District Council has a core communications team consisting of one communications and consultation manager, a communications officer and access to support from a policy and communications assistant. This brings the total dedicated communications resource to 2.4FTE – the national average for a district is 3.7 FTE¹. Despite comparatively few posts, communications has responsibility for an extremely wide range of activities including, among others, media relations, reputation, the council's communication channels, public notices, consultation, marketing, social media and brand and reputation.

While the activities the team is engaged in are those that we would expect to see in a modern council communications function, the peer team was concerned about the level of resources available to deliver all of this work. With such a wide remit, there is a risk that the communications function will be faced with too much demand and will be unable to deliver all that is requested of it.

It should be noted, that we actually came across only a few examples where the communications had not been able to meet demand. Many of those we met with highlighted the incredible goodwill, and willingness of the communications team to meet demand and deliver support to its internal customers and external stakeholders. Few of those we spoke with could remember requests ever being declined and there was great recognition across our interviews of the extremely high levels of professionalism and commitment demonstrated by the service. This ability to multi-task and juggle demands is to their credit.

However, it is our view that current resources, and the somewhat uncoordinated requests for communications support, are limiting the time that the team has to pause, think and plan; and develop proactive campaigns to meet the councils short, medium and long term objectives. The almost constant demand for support could make it difficult for the team, and the council, to achieve the strategic ambitions that it is setting out in its emerging corporate plan, and leaves little room to discuss and develop more time and resource intensive activities or consider how to effectively evaluate its work.

To mitigate this risk, we would encourage the council to consider increasing its communications resource. In particular, we would recommend that the council explores

¹ Source, 2017 LGA Heads of Communications Survey - https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Heads%20of%20Communications%20Survey%20Report%202017%20-%20Final_0.pdf

opportunities to engage further strategic communications expertise into the team to help the council develop its communications strategy and help the organisation to create a function that has a strategic, advisory role within the organisation as well as a tactical delivery responsibility. It is our view that a role like this will, particularly in the immediate term, support the council to prioritise its activities and use its resources for strategic communications activities that will deliver even greater impact. We would also advise the council to consider additional tactical communications support into the communications function. This could take the form of an additional post or considering whether communications skills exist elsewhere in the organisation.

In addition to reviewing resource, we would urge the council to introduce a more structured way of requesting communications. While we would not wish to add unnecessary bureaucracy to a small organisation, it is our view that the current 'turn up and request help' approach is hampering the team's ability to operate strategically and focus its work on the council's emerging priorities. Developing a simple request form, outlining what service areas or members are looking to achieve, and how the work supports the emerging priorities of the council, would help communications to review and prioritise requests in a more structured way. It would also offer them more scope to turn down requests which do not meet corporate needs, or suggest alternative ways to achieve the desired outcomes. It is our view that empowering the team to use its expertise to advise on strategy and channels, rather than focus on delivering requests, will better position it as a strategic service. The team may also wish to consider introducing weekly meetings to review the requests received and discuss how they intend to approach them. While the function's clear goodwill and willingness to deliver is commendable, we would strongly advise them to have confidence in declining requests which do not fit the ambitions of the wider organisation or agreed priority areas of focus.

While we would encourage the council to increase its dedicated resource, the peer team agreed that the position of communications within the council's structure was correct. The function is overseen by the head of transformation & strategy who in turn reports to the chief executive. This clear line of access between communications and chief executive is considered as best practice in local government. The clear link between the service and the political leadership of the organisation is also appropriate.

There are also many other good examples of best practice within the communications team. They have regular corporate oversight of freedom of information requests and releases. Communications features as a standing item on all strategic management team meetings and there is a strong and highly visible brand. The weekly print quality group meetings, that communications coordinate, also ensure that there is corporate awareness of the materials that have been designed and an opportunity to ensure that they meet the council's brand guidelines in full.

We were however told that on some occasions, the weekly print quality meetings have provided the first opportunity for communications to see some materials that have been requested. Introducing a more formal process for communications support may help to reduce the risk of this and we would encourage the council to review the processes for ordering design work through the print studio and reinforce the need for all communications work to be formally requested through the communications team.

The rapid pace of change presents all communicators with the challenge of keeping their skills up to date, however it was positive to see the efforts the council has made to

meet this. The council is using social media platforms and has trained a number of colleagues across the organisation in social media management. It has also begun using video technology. In addition to channel expertise there is however an increasing requirement for local government communicators to demonstrate expertise in campaign planning, strategic thinking, and evidencing and evaluating the outcome and impact of its communications. As budgets continue to tighten across local government, it is essential that communicators are able to develop strategic, measurable campaigns, are familiar with using data and insight to inform planning and evaluate success, and can apply a broad knowledge of the correct channels to reach intended audiences. These skills will help to ensure that communications campaigns deliver tangible impact and will help the service demonstrate its value for money. As members of both the LGA and LGComms the council already has access to a great deal of best practice and training opportunities in the more strategic skills required by modern communications professionals. We would encourage the communications team to take up these opportunities and familiarise themselves with best practice and case studies available through the LGA's Comms Hub support pages.

6.2 Digital

Sevenoaks District Council has introduced a number of digital channels to communicate with residents and stakeholders. Externally the council uses Twitter and Facebook as both a corporate communications and customer services tool. It has also recently overhauled its website to ensure that it is more relevant and accessible to communities seeking to find information or complete transactions. Projects of this nature can be particularly extensive and it is to the council's credit that this has been achieved smoothly and efficiently. The council is also in the process of introducing a web chat facility for customers looking to talk directly to customer services, which is extremely positive.

The peer team was impressed by the effective relationship which appeared to be in place between communications and customer services in respect of social media platforms. Those we spoke with appeared clear about the different responsibilities and remits that each department had in respect of the corporate social media accounts and there appeared to be strong communications between both departments meaning that issues were flagged early. We were advised that several members of customer services had received training in how to use social media channels to provide some resilience and share expertise across the function. We would however encourage the council to explore greater opportunities for training a wider range of colleagues in customer services and the communications team to help position social media interaction as a core skill and support colleagues with developing the correct tone of voice, providing resilience and strengthening confidence in this area.

During our time on site there appeared to be an appetite for making better use of social channels. Indeed the council has explored strengthening its social platforms by incorporating videos and gifs as part of its output and developing a less formal tone to its messages. This is positive to see and we would encourage the council to keep developing this work and ensuring that its content is always optimised for social platforms (for examples, images always being created in the dimensions required for social channels). We would also encourage the communications team to work collaboratively with colleagues across the council to identify positive people stories that could be shared through social channels. Sevenoaks has an abundance of positive

stories to tell and social media platforms can often be an effective way of engaging communities in these.

While the council has a social media policy in place there did not appear to be a dedicated digital strategy and shared (and agreed) social media plan. We would encourage the council to include digital as part of its work to develop a new corporate communications strategy and develop a social media plan to help structure and prioritise content in a consistent way. This should align with corporate priorities and be understood by both service areas and members. This will help to ensure that social media activity is consistent, coordinated and strategic wherever possible.

It is also important that both the communications service and wider council colleagues (service areas and members) understand the strengths and weaknesses of different platforms so that messages can be appropriately tailored to the correct platform and that proactive campaign messages can be coordinated across channels in a strategic way.

To support this we would encourage the council to invest time in evaluating the impact of its current digital channels and understanding who its digital audiences are. The most recent residents' satisfaction survey (conducted in 2015) indicated that only four per cent of those surveyed had seen the council's social media output in the past six months. It would be valuable for the council to understand if that level is still accurate and if so, why that is, to help inform campaign-planning and ensure that its efforts in respect of social media are delivering the desired impact. This insight will also help the communications team to explain the merits of different channels for achieving different aims to service areas and members. Conducting further research into how local people use social channels, or whether there is an appetite for digital communication channels outside of social media (for example, targeted e-bulletins) will help the council to plan and prioritise its resources. Understanding this detail could be easily achieved by including greater questions around communication preferences in the next resident satisfaction survey (due to release in October 2018). Should this research indicate an appetite among residents for more digital channels, the LGA can connect the council with other organisations using other digital platforms, if that would be of interest.

Going forward, it will also be important for the council to understand the level of expectation that residents have about contacting the council through digital channels, particularly out of hours. Currently the council provides social media coverage on week days only but as times change it is possible that there will become a greater expectation for 24/7 cover, or increase demands from the local media for greater digital content. This challenge is one facing local government as a whole but would be worth the council considering as part of the longer term strategic planning.

6.3 Role of members

It was clear from our time on site that Sevenoaks benefits from members with great passion and enthusiasm for their roles. Many of those we met with expressed an appetite for the council to make the most of communication opportunities, with several councillors bringing a knowledge of public relations and marketing practices from their own professional backgrounds. This willingness to share knowledge has clearly been of value to the council in recent times, particularly in respect of helping the organisation to develop its brand story.

It was also clear from our time on site that the council as a whole recognises the important role that members have to play in communicating the council's activities to residents. The council's leader is also an extremely capable and dynamic communicator who demonstrates strong leadership around communications and passion for ensuring that the Sevenoaks story is heard far and wide. Indeed, the leader's own communications activity, particularly through social platforms, has been an important asset in helping to amplify the council's corporate messages to date.

We would encourage the council to support all members with developing their knowledge and confidence in using social media to ensure that all councillors are able to participate in engaging with residents in this way. The changing nature of communications means that many people, across many different age brackets, are using social media to discuss and engage in issues and it is important that as elected representative councillors have the required skills to participate in these discussions. We would advise the council to identify a training provider to help deliver social media training for councillors. We would also encourage the council to consider running media training for cabinet members to ensure resilience across the council when media interviews on key corporate priorities are required. There will be many occasions where the leader is the most appropriate person to speak directly to the media, however it is important that key portfolio holders are also trained and supported to fulfil this role as necessary.

The size of the communications team, and need for a communications strategy aligned to corporate priorities is contributing to a sense of frustration among some members. Some of those we met highlighted occasions where they felt they have had to wait for support to be provided, or where the function had been unable to directly deliver on communications requests. Embedding further resource into the communications team will assist with providing extra resilience and capacity to manage requests, but it is important for members to understand the need for communications to focus its activities on agreed corporate priorities. To help manage expectations and avoid disappointment we would encourage the council to find opportunities for members to contribute their thoughts into the early planning stages on which corporate campaigns the council will focus on each year. It is our view that ensuring members have greater involvement at the early stages in inputting into what the communications function will focus on may help to avoid disappointment later down the line.

We would also recommend that the council considers introducing a regular bulletin for members to keep them informed about what the council has been communicating, the coverage and reach that it has achieved and the impact that it's more proactive, and strategic approach to communications is delivering. It is our view that introducing more regular updates directly to members will help them to better understand the wide range of activities the communications team is engaged in and may help to manage expectations.

The changing nature of communications means that councils now have even more channels available for communicating with residents and stakeholders. There is also an even greater requirement for communications practitioners to have a wider range of skills and expertise. To help members understand the new landscape, and the reasons why non-traditional communication channels may be more appropriate for certain messages, we would encourage the council to share the LGA's [#FutureComms](#) guide.

6.4 Internal communications

Sevenoaks District Council is an organisation that clearly recognises the importance and value of internal communication. Its Investors In People platinum status illustrates the high regard in which internal communication and employee engagement is held in, and many of those we met highlighted that they felt extremely well informed about council news and activities. The passion, dedication and enthusiasm that employees have for working at Sevenoaks District Council is both palpable and impressive. Indeed, the latest staff survey results reveal that 90 per cent of employees are proud to work for the organisation. The council should be extremely proud of these results.

The council's quarterly staff briefings were singled out as particularly effective for keeping employees informed. Many of those we met with praised the openness with which these meetings were conducted, and the flexible way in which the sessions were arranged in order for both part time and remote workers to attend. Other communications channels, including *Grapevine*, the council's internal staff bulletin, and the intranet were also subject to praise, with many employees highlighting that the information was easy to digest, relevant and helped to foster a strong sense of community and collaboration amongst colleagues from across the council.

Several of those we met with also identified the visibility of both the chief executive and leader as key contributing factors to these high levels of internal engagement. There is widespread appreciation for the approachability and openness displayed by the council's corporate and political leadership, with many commenting specifically on the efforts both have made to create a supportive, empathetic, 'no blame' culture in which employees are known by name and people trust that issues will be dealt with effectively and transparently. This approach to internal communication is to the council's credit, as is its decision to include communications as a standing item on the council's induction programme – illustrating the extent to which the importance of staff communication is emphasised from the very beginning.

The peer team could find little in the way of improvements to suggest to the council in respect of internal communication. Developing a shared calendar of events across the council could be considered to help ensure that all service areas and members are aware of upcoming activities and to ensure that internal messages are coordinated in the most effective way. As previously highlighted, re-introducing a member bulletin would be a valuable exercise to ensure that there is a channel dedicated to communicating internally with members. It is also important that the council ensures internal communications are fully integrated into its new corporate communications strategy and factored into proactive campaigns aligned to organisational priorities. This will ensure that the council delivers a consistent communications message to its internal and external audiences and has more time and opportunity to maximise the value and reach of its campaign content.

6.5 Priority setting

The council has a strong history of setting, and achieving, the priorities set out in its corporate plans. Indeed the organisation's determination and clear focus on achieving its ambitions resulted in the council fulfilling its aim to be financially self-sufficient early. We were informed during our time on site that the organisation is currently in the process of developing a new corporate plan which will launch later in the year and will

include a focus on the environment, housing, economy, health and community safety. The new plan will also feature the strapline 'seriously different council' and will emphasise the values of striving for excellence, innovation and value.

During our time in Sevenoaks there were mixed levels of awareness of the detail of the emerging corporate plan and strapline. This is unsurprising giving it is still in development, but we would encourage the council to ensure that the communications team is involved in supporting the corporate and political leadership with the development of a simple, plain English corporate narrative to help articulate the vision of the emerging plan to internal and external audiences. Developing a robust corporate narrative will help the organisation to tell its story in a consistent and engaging way and will be an important asset in ensuring that service areas, and members, are clear on the priorities that the council will be focusing on in the years ahead. Further support on developing a corporate narrative can be found in the LGA's [corporate narrative toolkit](#).

Launching the strategy to internal and external audiences will also require the council to develop some shorter key messages that can be used by service areas and members to reiterate significant aspects of the council's new story. We would again encourage the council to ensure that the communications function is involved in supporting the council to developing this wording and promote it among audiences.

Internally, the council may wish to consider developing some bespoke communication plans to fully engage its employees in the new values of striving for excellence, innovation and value. It was clear from our time on site that the engagement base is already very high and provides the council with excellent foundations for doing this. There are also clear plans to feature details about the plan in staff briefings later in the year. These values messages could be further amplified through other internal channels such as the intranet, grapevine, or internal videos, or perhaps developing bespoke internal campaigns that illustrate employees embodying these values in their work. The LGA can connect Sevenoaks District Council with other organisations who have embarked on similar projects if that would be of interest.

While the communications team will have an important role to play in promoting the new corporate plan, there is also a need for them to develop a communications strategy driven by and aligned to the council's new priorities. We would encourage the council to address this as a matter of priority to ensure that the communications team are able to focus their activities and resources on the areas of greatest importance to the wider organisation and can identify greater opportunities for proactive activity. It is also our view that developing a clear communications strategy will support the function with managing both demand and expectation for communications assistance from both service areas and members. The new communications strategy should include key messages, audience insight, measurable communications objectives and details of what success looks like and how it will be measured. In light of the council's history of achieving its objectives early, it is important for the strategy to be reviewed annually to ensure that it is able to develop with the council's progress and reflects the most up to date priorities of the organisation.

Alongside the communications strategy we would recommend that the council develop an annual campaign plan to help the organisation to proactively communicate its priorities. While the exact number of campaigns is a matter for the council to decide, the organisation may find it helpful to proactively plan at least one proactive campaign for

each of its corporate priorities. In our experience of delivering communications support to councils, this approach has often been an effective way of ensuring that limited communications resources and budgets are directed towards the areas that will add greatest value and the LGA can connect the council with other organisations who have implemented this approach if it will be of interest or assistance. It is important that both the corporate and political leadership of the organisation agree and sign off the annual campaign plan, and allocate dedicated budgets to each as appropriate. We would also advise the council to ensure that service areas and members have a chance to offer their input into what the annual campaigns should be to encourage a sense of shared ownership over what corporate campaigns the council will be running each year. The communications team should however be supported to deliver on the detail.

Adopting a more campaign-focused approach to communications will enable the communications team to develop more detailed, integrated and proactive communications plans, which are likely to yield greater impact and reach of its key messages. Working in this way may also require a reduction in the level of ad hoc or reactive support that the communications team is able to provide to service areas and members. While flexibility should be factored in and there will always be a need to respond to emerging or changing corporate priorities, it is important that the communications function is empowered to focus its time and resources on its agreed annual campaigns and activities linked to the corporate priorities. Further advice and guidance on working in a more campaign-focused way can be found in the Government Communications Services' [OASIS campaign planning model](#).

As part of developing corporate campaigns and communication priorities we would encourage the council to make greater use of data and insight. During our time on site we could see little evidence of how the organisation evaluates the success and impact of its communication channels or activities or how data collected by other parts of the organisation is used to inform future communications planning.

The size of the team and varied demands on their time makes this gap unsurprising. However, the emerging new corporate plan presents an ideal opportunity to try working in a more insight-driven way. We would encourage the communications department and service areas to discuss what data is currently held under each of the new priority areas of focus and consider whether there are opportunities for the council to create communications campaigns to help address issues or trends (for example, if data sets suggest there are high levels of recycling contamination, could a proactive communications campaign be developed to help fix this challenge in support of the council's environment priority). Working in this way not only helps to position the communications team as a more strategic service, it also provides greater opportunity for them to illustrate the impact of their work.

We would also advise the council to carry out more regular evaluation of its channels and strengthen its understanding of how residents consume information about the council and would prefer to. This could be quickly achieved by including some additional, more detailed questions about channel preferences into the existing residents' satisfaction survey. This will help the communications team to direct their resources into the channels with greatest impact and potentially free up some capacity to trial other ways to communicate with people, such as through video or email bulletins, as they look to tell the story of their new corporate plan.

Developing a simple evaluation dashboard to illustrate the impact of its activities may also be something the council wishes to consider to help make better use of data and insight and support service areas and members to understand which messages, channels and activities deliver greatest value to target audiences.

During our time on site several of those we met with highlighted the council's ambition to extend its services into public health and broaden the reach of its messages about the council's ambitions for the local area. Effective partnership working will be an important asset in achieving these goals. While there appeared to be some very strong relationships with local partners and service areas, there was limited evidence of the council's communications team working directly with colleagues from partner organisations. We were also informed that the council was engaged in a number of partnership projects where communications activity was being managed outside of the council, for example on projects including One You or the Kent Partnership Group's recycling projects. While it will often be appropriate for other organisations to lead the communications around multi-agency activities, we would encourage the communications service to identify opportunities to develop relationships with communicators from partner organisations. This could include quarterly communication meetings, or more informal opportunities to share learning and best practice, or discuss potential opportunities for collaborative campaigns. As a small function it is important that the council's communications team has the right relationships in place with partner colleagues to be able to support in times of crisis and high demand and to share learning and ideas. Collaborating on campaigns that benefit the wider Sevenoaks area may also enable the council to achieve greater impact and reach of their messages by sharing resources and dividing the workload.

From a practical perspective we would also encourage the council to conduct an audit of current communications spend. This will help the council to understand how much money is being spent on communications activity across the organisation and put the council in a stronger position to decide whether current activity is aligned to corporate priorities. We would advise the council to consider consolidating communications budget into a central pot to ensure that it can remain focused on financing agreed, proactive campaigns.

7. Key recommendations

We have grouped our findings into '**quick wins**', essentially those matters that could and should be dealt with as soon as possible, which, if addressed will create the environment for the **medium term** recommendations to also be achieved.

Quick wins

- Embed additional strategic communications resource and communications skill into communications team
- Audit communications spend across the council to identify where money is being spent
- Re-introduce member bulletins to provide updates on the council, its communications activity and impact
- Identify a training provider to deliver social media training for relevant service areas (e.g. customer services) and members to improve consistency, provide resilience and strengthen skills
- Arrange media training sessions for portfolio holders

- Conduct a skills audit to identify additional communications expertise and capability across the organisation to support resilience
- Identify opportunities for communicators from partner organisations to meet, share best practice and ideas, and explore opportunities for future collaboration
- Further develop weekly news grid to identify more proactive communications opportunities (aligned to emerging corporate plan). Build in opportunities for council-wide input to strengthen oversight and forward planning
- Establish more regular link between full cabinet and communications team
- Take up training and best practice opportunities afforded by existing membership of LGA and LGComms
- Create measurement and evaluation dashboard to help demonstrate impact of communication. Define what success looks like and share monthly with senior officers and members
- Be prepared to say no to communications requests outside of emerging corporate priorities
- Create a communications process, aligned to emerging corporate priorities, to help service areas and members to request planned communications support which reflects organisation's priorities
- Extend evaluation of communication channels to better understand how residents would prefer to receive information about the council.
- Make the most of opportunities to demonstrate humour and human voice on social media channels – consider making more use of Skippy on corporate social media accounts.

Medium term

- Engage strategic communications resource to respond to corporate priorities and management of communications, print, design, internal communications, marketing and all council communication spend. Create a corporate communication strategy aligned to emerging corporate priorities. Strategy should include clear objectives, key messages and methods of evaluation.
- Introduce more regular opportunities for members and officers to agree timeframes for delivering communications which support corporate priorities.
- Create an annual communications campaign plan, aligned to corporate priorities. This should be agreed and signed off by the corporate and political leadership with input from service areas, members and communications.
- Consider opportunities afforded by digital technology to trial targeted resident communications. If successful, promote subscription opportunities through other channels (e.g. customer services to promote targeted bulletins, web pop ups)

8. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate that you will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with your senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the council wishes to take things forward.

As part of the communications peer review process, there is an offer of further support. I would be very happy to discuss any areas for development and improvement where the

LGA can help you. Kate Herbert, Principal Adviser, is the main contact between your authority and LGA for any wider support. Her contact details are:
kate.herbert@local.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely

Claire Thurlow
Review manager and communications improvement advisor
Local Government Association