

# Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Communications peer review

15 – 17 January 2020

Feedback

# Review team

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# Introduction

- We have been made to feel welcome and been well supported. Thanks to all who have helped with this – especially Clare and Eileen
- People have been encouraged to be open and honest
- Our feedback is based on what we have heard, seen and read
- We have conducted 24 meetings and focus groups and spoke to around 41 people.
- Collectively spent more than 125 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending nearly three working weeks in Epsom and Ewell
- Opportunity to discuss our findings and consider next steps and further support

# Why is good communications important?

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

# What does good 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!
- Be **authentic** to your local area
- **Strategic approach to communications** - Communication without strategy does not work
- A corporately agreed, fully evaluated **annual communications plan** - not just sending out ad hoc stuff
- All **communications** activity **based on research and insight**
- All **campaigns to be linked to corporate priorities** and resourced accordingly
- **Invest in evaluation**
- Ensure **communications is owned by everyone**

# Agreed focus of review (1)

## **Strategy and priorities**

- How effective is the Council in communicating its strategy, priorities and vision to external and internal stakeholders? Is the Council's communications aligned and integrated with the overall strategic direction of the Council?

## **Structures, capacity and resources**

- What are the communication and engagement skills the Council needs to realise its ambition in terms of communication and engagement? How does the Council ensure its approach to communication and engagement is embedded within the organisation and central to the way they operate? How might the Council improve its approach to communication and engagement, whilst recognising the constraint in which it operates?

# Agreed focus of review (2)

## **Governance, commissioning and oversight**

- What approach could be used to evaluate the outcomes of the Council's communication and engagement activities? Is the process for commissioning communications activity owned at a senior level?

## **Ways of working**

- How could the Council take a more integrated approach to communication and engagement activities? How effectively does the Council work with partners to communicate its ambitions and priorities for the area?

## **Channel use and digital communications**

- How can the Council make the most of digital channels as a means of communication and engagement? How effective is Borough Insight in getting the Council's message across compared to alternative communication channels?
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# Overall messages (1)

- Council wants to tell a more positive story about council and place
  - Recognition across the Council of the importance of strategic communications and the need to plug the gap in this area
  - New vision, four year plan and success of Future40 programme means it's an ideal time to review the role and function of communications in supporting Council's ambitions
  - The draft vision is clear, compelling and a great first step in developing a strong narrative for the Council and the place
  - Good traditional communications skills but recognition there's now a skills gap around digital and social media, insight, comms planning
  - An appetite across the Council to develop new channels and tools for communications and different ways of working
  - Communications colleagues are seen as hard working and committed
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# Overall messages (2)

- Potentially strong network of support across business/partners ready to work with Council on getting messages out
  - Communications is currently reactive, tactical and output focused
  - Need for clear direction, leadership and strategy for communications
  - Urgent need for a clear internal and external communications strategy to launch and embed the vision and four year plan
  - Lack of organisational communications strategy, campaign plan and agreement around communications priorities
  - Lack of resident and staff insight to underpin communications planning, targeting and evaluation
  - Lack of robust emergency planning communications procedures and protocols
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# Overall messages (3)

- Perception that key corporate messages are lost because they're shared across organisation in ad-hoc way
  - Members not always clear about their role and remit as community champions and place leaders and the opportunities available to speak up for Epsom and Ewell
  - Disconnect between communications and engagement leading to missed opportunities to deliver proactive, innovative communications
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# Strategy and priorities - strengths

- Future40, draft vision and four year plan are great opportunities for the Council to lead some exciting place shaping work with a compelling vision for the strategic direction of the Council
  - Vision and emerging four-year plan provide strong foundation to develop a communications strategy for the organisation with an annual campaigns plan and agreed communications priorities
  - Senior political and managerial leadership understand the importance of developing strategic communications to play a leading role in delivering the Council's vision
  - Partners welcome Future40, are keen for bold vision for future of the place and want to work with Council to deliver it
  - Plans for sharing vision with staff through face to face briefings are good and should be the start of ongoing conversations with colleagues about delivering the vision
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# Strategy and priorities - issues

- Lack of strategic approach means communications is ad-hoc, reactive and unable to influence discussions at the right time
  - Evidence not used effectively to plan campaigns, help targeting of messages and support evaluation of communications work
  - Little evidence of good communications planning for major campaigns, issues and initiatives - comms plans need to include key messages, tools, channels and understanding/targeting of audiences along with evaluation measures
  - No strategic communications forward planning or annual campaigns planner means senior political and managerial leadership have no oversight of priorities for communications
  - Members understand need for narrative but need to continue to be involved in process for it be fully embedded
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# Structure, capacity and resources - strengths

- Some real skills in marketing and traditional communications across the Council
  - There are good levels of interest in improving communications from officers and members at every level and people understand the role they could play in this
  - Pockets of communications and engagement across the Council that could be more effectively utilised
  - Colleagues across the organisation appreciate the hard work, commitment and expertise of the team in delivering day to day communications
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# Structure, capacity and resources - issues

- Resources are there - but not connected. More could be done to facilitate sharing of knowledge and activity across teams
  - Engagement expertise elsewhere in the organisation not closely aligned with communications so opportunities for creative communications and engagement are being missed
  - Structure and role of communications team needs to evolve to support the Council to deliver its vision and four-year plan
  - Lack of senior communications role hampers team's access to key information and its ability to provide strategic comms expertise at an early stage
  - Digital and social media expertise and confidence is a challenge
  - Communications shouldn't be dealing with routine customer service enquiries on social media
  - Unclear if communications is seen as everyone's job here
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# Governance, commissioning and oversight - strengths

- Senior leaders understand that they must own and lead communications and recognise the importance of embedding strategic communications at an early stage
  - The communications team is keen to have early engagement to help shape organisational priorities and campaigns
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# Governance, commissioning and oversight - issues

- Consultation and communications teams aren't sharing knowledge, insight and understanding of audiences which would help both deliver more effective outcomes
  - No insight into residents' perceptions of the Council, how they receive information or how they would like to receive information so can't baseline, track progress or measure against other councils
  - Little or no evaluation of communications activity to inform or improve future campaigns and plans
  - Communications team do not always have early access to information or insight into decision-making
  - Engagement activity over-focused on surveys/questionnaires but there's enthusiasm for a more creative approach
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# Ways of working - strengths

- Colleagues see service as responsive and supportive when they need it
  - Team is seen as hard-working and reliable
  - Appreciation for some of the internal comms tools and channels - What's Hot, Glitterball etc - but there's a challenge around encouraging two way/conversational briefings
  - Managers very positive about comms team
  - Good working relationship with media on day to day issues
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# Ways of working - issues

- Tendency to avoid proactive planning around operational sensitive issues – no horizon scanning
  - Focus is on broadcasting messages rather than two way conversations on social media
  - Limited planning or processes if there's a major incident or emergency and no out of hours comms cover in case of crisis/emergency
  - Over-reliance on traditional communications tools and channels
  - Sign off process not consistent or efficient
  - Communications and consultation and engagement working in siloes – little to no sharing of lessons learned, resource, etc
  - No process in place for embedding communications at the first stage of projects
  - Working relationship with partners on communications is ad-hoc and reactive leading to missed opportunities
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# Channel use and digital communications - strengths

- Acknowledgment across the Council that approach to communications has remained 'traditional' over the years and may be outdated
  - Appetite for developing digital communications and more sophisticated use of communications channels to support better targeting of communications
  - Awareness that Council needs to be more sophisticated in its use and understanding of audiences and communications channels - but not clear about how to do this
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# Channel use and digital communications - issues

- Social media channels solely controlled by communications
  - Customer services not closely involved in using and developing social media channels
  - Social media very broadcast focused and not used as an effective engagement tool
  - Despite the opportunities, there are concerns about widening access to social media (training and trust)
  - Microsites don't support effective and meaningful evaluation
  - Channel use isn't factored into communications planning or recognised as part of strategic communications
  - Many Members not confident about using social and digital media and its potential in supporting effective communications with residents
  - Some very traditional communications channels - Borough boards and Borough Insight.
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# Key quotes

- *'We need something self-sustaining and co-ordinated to deliver high level communications'*
  - *'We recognise there's a gap and there needs to be a better way to manage our reputation'*
  - *'Our communications team should be all-seeing, all-knowing, all-media using and proactive when engaging with the public'*
  - *'With the challenges and opportunities we are facing, we need residents onside and communications is the key to that'*
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# Recommendations (immediate)

- Consider establishing a communications and engagement team, bringing in engagement expertise currently elsewhere and fully embedding marketing within the team
  - Create new role of strategic communications and engagement manager
  - Develop and agree a communications plan, action plan and evaluation measures for the new vision and four-year plan
  - New strategic communications and engagement manager to produce an overarching communications strategy (including internal and external communications) and an annual campaigns plan based on priorities
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# Recommendations (immediate 2)

- Hold social media workshop for Members to support them taking more of a lead on community issues
  - Hold social media workshops for key colleagues and widen access to social media channels, supporting a more proactive approach
  - Agree process for communications to meet regularly with senior managers to support strategic communications planning, sharing key information etc
  - Conduct a 'Who Reads What' survey for insight into how residents currently receive information and their preferences
  - Develop a simple process to ensure comms is regularly involved at the earliest stages of a major project, issue or initiative to enable effective planning
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# Recommendations – medium term

- We're unconvinced about the value of traditional communications channels and tools – Borough Insight and Borough Boards – but you need to understand what your residents want before making decisions around their future
  - Once new manager in post, review ways of working with Members so comms can support them to develop their role as community champions and advocates for all residents
  - Consider new and potentially more effective communications channels such as e-newsletters
  - Understand staff's views on comms and engagement and review and refresh internal comms channels and tools
  - Consider regular residents survey to gain insight into how residents feel about the council and to provide a benchmark for future changes in perception
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# Discussion

- Reflections on our findings
- Next steps
- LGA support