Epsom & Ewell Borough Council Communications Peer Review

15 – 17 January 2020

Feedback Report

1. Purpose of report

This report provides a summary of the findings of the Epsom & Ewell Borough Council communications peer review. It builds on the messages discussed with lead members and officers from the council at our feedback session on 17 January 2020. It is intended to provide a basis for consideration and action by the council to enhance the effectiveness of its communications activity and to ensure the best use of resources deployed to support those.

2. Context and focus of the review

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has undergone significant change in recent years, at both political and corporate levels. A new chief executive, chief operating officer, chief legal officer and Head of Planning have joined the senior leadership team over the last couple of years. Following the May 2019 local elections there has also been a new intake of members. Some months on, the council is on the cusp of launching its new four year plan and first ever long-term vision for the Borough which will set the direction for the coming years.

With this in mind, alongside the development of projects such as the new local plan, now was considered an opportune time to review the council's communications function and ensure it is fit to fully support its new plans and priorities.

The council approached the Local Government Association to commission a three-day communications peer review focused on a number of specific priorities. These were:

- **Strategy and priorities.** How effective is the council in getting its message out across the Borough How do we ensure our approach to communication and engagement is embedded within the organisation and central to the way we do business?

- **Structure, 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 it operates? How might the council improve its approach to communication and engagement, whilst recognising the constraints in which it operates?

- **Governance, commissioning and oversight.** What approach could be used to evaluate the outcomes of the council's communication and engagement activities?

- **Ways of working.** How could the council take a more integrated approach to its 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?

3. The peer team and process

Peer reviews 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 peer team members were:

- Lead peer: Fran Collingham, LGA Associate and former Assistant Director of Communications at Coventry City Council
- Member peer: Cllr Claire Wight, Independent, Devon County Council
- Senior communications officer peer: Leo Whitlock, Head of Communications, Canterbury City Council
- Senior communications officer peer: Louisa Dean, Communications and Marketing Manager, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
- Review manager: Éilis O'Connell, Communications Improvement Adviser, LGA
- Shadow peer: Chloe Newman, Communications Assistant, LGA

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Reviews are improvement focused 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 four year plan, communications strategies and position statement.

The team then spent three days at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 40 people, including a range of council staff, councillors and external stakeholders
- Gathered information and views from around 24 interviews, focus groups and meetings
- Collectively spent more than 125 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending three working weeks on site

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 manage 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 -** Communications 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**

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5. Executive summary

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has seen significant change in recent years. With the development of a new four-year plan and its first ever long-term vision, the council is now looking to position itself in a more ambitious direction externally. Delivering effective communications will be vital if the council is to be able to do this, achieve its new goals and effectively embed a new vision and narrative.

It was clear from our time on site that both political and corporate leadership appreciate the important role that strategic communications can and should play in this process. The peer team was impressed by the council's new vision and corporate plan – the final documents and the consultation process itself. Epsom & Ewell's new vision is clear and compelling, and

demonstrates evidence of the council's desire to tell a more positive story to residents about the borough – both as place and a council.

However, there was no communications plan in place for the launch of the council's new vision, which it plans to launch in the coming weeks, and which will ensure that it is effectively embedded over the coming months. We would urge the council to prioritise this activity, ensuring that there is a clear plan for delivery which includes working with partners, articulating the key messages and ensuring there are measurable objectives. The narrative workshop held by the LGA and Epsom & Ewell's senior management team on 28 January provided a starting point for this work.

It was clear from our time on site that the communications team is well regarded by its colleagues, seen as hard-working and committed, and is working hard to deliver for service areas. However, Epsom & Ewell's corporate communications function is largely traditional and operational. The lack of direction-setting by a senior communications professional has impacted upon the team's ability to act strategically and plan effectively. As a result, communications is not always utilised in the most proactive, effective way. It is our view that if the council is to deliver its plans in the medium and short term it should consider appointing a strategic communications and engagement manager to support the delivery of the new corporate plan and vision and develop an overarching communications strategy and messaging.

Whilst this lack of managerial leadership is evidently a barrier for the communications team, a lack of access to information and decision-making at senior leadership level has also impacted upon the team's ability to take a more strategic approach to communications. Current arrangements are hindering an understanding of the role that communications can play when the team is involved in initiatives early on. At present, the team is relying on officers to approach it with information and requests, resulting in ad-hoc, reactive communications. We were told that the chief executive used to have monthly meetings with the communications officers, which was seen as positive, and we would encourage these meetings to be reinstated whilst a manager is recruited.

There are some strong traditional communications skills within the team. However, the peer team identified a noticeable skills gap around digital and social media, evaluation and insight, and strategic planning. Robust evidence and insight should underpin communications planning, targeting and evaluation – at present, the team is not measuring the success of its current approach. As a result, the council does not know which of its channels residents are engaging with, how residents wish to be communicated with and why. This lack of evidence and direction-setting means that Epsom & Ewell's current communications function is traditional and operational, rather than operating as a strategic function. However, there is a clear appetite across the council for developing new channels and tools for communications and to consider different ways of working.

We were asked to consider the structure of the communications team and its way of working with the engagement and consultation team. At present, it appears that there is little to no interaction between these teams. As a result, we believe that the council is missing out on a

great opportunity to share resource, lessons and learnings, and to develop a more modern and creative approach to engagement and consultation. This disconnect between communications and engagement is, in our opinion, leading to missed opportunities to deliver proactive, innovative communications. The Future40 project is just one example of the success that adopting a more innovative approach can bring. For this reason, we recommend bringing the communications and consultation and engagement teams together under a newly-created strategic communications and engagement manager post.

One of the greatest strengths that the council has is the resources and potential that already exist, which in many cases (such as with the engagement and consultation team) remains untapped. Epsom & Ewell also has a potentially strong network of support across local business and partners who are ready and willing to work with the council to get its messages out and support the new vision. We would encourage the communications team to utilise this support network more effectively, both internally and externally, and work collaboratively and strategically with partners on communications going forward.

Additionally, we believe that more can be done to channel the energy and enthusiasm of Members, many of whom are not always clear about their role and remit as community champions and place leaders. There are opportunities not currently being recognised for Members to speak up to champion the interests of all residents of Epsom and Ewell.

Whilst internal communications was not included in the scope of the review, it was evident from our time on site that the council must consider it as part of any future changes if it is to move towards a more strategic communications function. There are a number of internal communications tools such as What's Hot, Team Brief, Glitter Ball and Achievements, however there was a perception amongst the officers we spoke to that key corporate messages are being lost because they're shared across the organisation in an ad-hoc way. We would suggest that the council review its methods of internal communications, ensuring that messages are shared consistently across the Council.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has a strong communications and engagement baseline 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 greater impact.

6. Key recommendations

We have grouped our findings into 'quick wins', essentially those matters that can 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
- Consider establishing a communications and engagement team, bringing in the expertise that is currently sitting in the Policy, Performance and Governance service
- Ensure that the marketing role which currently sits within communications is fully integrated into this team to support team members working more collaboratively

- Recruit a strategic communications and engagement manager to coordinate and advise on internal and external activity
- Develop a communications action plan for launching and embedding the new vision and corporate plan, including key messages and measurable objectives
- Once the new strategic communications and engagement manager is in post they should produce an annual campaign based communications plan to support the implementation of the Councils Vision and Four Year Plan including internal and external communications, based on the agreed priorities.
- Develop and deliver bespoke social media training for Members to support them in taking a more of a lead on community issues
- Develop and deliver bespoke social media training for key officers in customer services and widen access to social media channels, supporting a more proactive approach.
- Agree a 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 receive information and their preferences
- Develop a simple process to ensure the communications team is regularly involved at the earliest stages of a major project, issue or initiative to enable effective planning
- Introduce an approach to monitoring, evaluating and reporting communications activity

Recommendations – medium term
- We were asked to consider the value of the council's traditional communications channels and tools – Borough Insight and Borough Boards – and if they are fit for purpose. Without any existing evaluation or insight into resident preferences it is hard for us to do so – therefore we would recommend the council conduct this research to reach its conclusion
- Once the strategic communications and engagement manager is in post, review ways of working with Members so that they are supported to develop their role as community champions and advocates for all residents.
- Consider investing in new and potentially more effective digital communications channels such as e-newsletters
- On the back of these findings, consider reviewing and refreshing internal communications channels and tools
- Consider implementing a residents' survey to gain insight into how residents feel about the council and to provide a benchmark for future changes in perception.
- Integrate the questions in the 'who reads what' survey into the regular residents survey to measure and inform any future changes in resident communications

7. Detailed feedback

7.1 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?

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is on the brink of releasing its first ever long-term vision and new four year plan, which were crafted as the result of its Future40 consultation project. These initiatives present a great opportunity for the council to lead some exciting place-shaping work and provide a compelling vision for the strategic direction of the council and borough. However, Epsom & Ewell's communications and ability to achieve this is currently hampered by a lack of strategy, priorities and campaign planning.

It is clear that both senior political and managerial leadership understand the importance of developing strategic communications within the council and the leading role that it could play in delivering its new vision. However, there is currently no communications plan for the launch or phased delivery. We see this as a priority issue to resolve given that the new vision is just weeks away from being launched. We heard from senior leadership that embedding the vision is a priority for them, however this will not be fully achieved without a considered and measurable communications plan. This is an area that we urge the council to address as soon as possible. The Government Communications Service provides an [OASIS campaign plan template](#) that could be easily adapted for this purpose.

Adding to its ambitious agenda, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council is currently working towards producing a new local plan for the borough.. With consultation due to start in the coming months, it will be vital that the council get communications and engagement right. The council is working with an external agency on the local plan and we would encourage the communications and engagement team to continue to be involved as this is likely to raise issues that may last past the agencies' tenure and filter through to business-as-usual communications.

Due to a lack of strategic approach, communications at Epsom & Ewell are predominately ad-hoc and reactive. Due to the lack of a communications lead the team have limited capacity to advise or influence leadership. With increased capacity at the professional level Greater access to information and decision making at a senior level will greatly help the corporate communications team to forward plan their activity based on council priorities. We heard that last year the corporate and political leadership agreed five key priorities for the council which was detailed in the council's Service Delivery Plans. This could have been further developed into a campaign-based approach for the council's communications activity for that same period.

We heard from officers at all levels of the organisation, as well as from the team themselves, that on occasions there is a lack of information sharing which creates challenges for the communications team. This means that communications activity until now has been largely dictated by the priorities of individual service areas rather than council priorities.. The communications team rely on individual services to brief them in order to plan their activity as they do not attend any regular service briefings. This was brought to our attention as a frustration for officers as it is time consuming and often means that communication officers are missing out on vital information.

The general lack of communications forward planning is impacting on not just the communications team's ability to be strategic but means that neither senior political or corporate leadership have an oversight of the priorities for communications. In order for communications to be effective in any organisation, big or small, it is usual for a senior officer responsible for the function to have access to the top table in order to be able to advise leadership on issues of potential reputational risk and to be able to base their team's activity on current priorities. And while the Head of HR & OD represents communications at Leadership Team supporting the overall strategic direct of the council, there is no lead senior communications professional to translate this into planned communications activity and set the direction and agenda for the team.

The current situation is impacting on the communications team's ability to be alive to the opportunities and issues arising at a senior level. With the council about to embark on the aforementioned local plan and tackling big issues such as climate change, we see it as a big risk to have no communications professional at a management level alert and informed to prevent and mitigate for any reputational risk. It also means there is no one in a proactive communications management   position who is the communications professional lead supporting and developing the strategic direction. This is an area of frustration for the team, who are aware this should be the case, but don't have the resource or access to information that they would need to attempt to bridge this gap. The team, and council, would therefore benefit from a strong professional communications lead in this area to give clear direction to the team's focus. We were told that the team used to have monthly meetings with the chief executive, and it was proposed that the comms team attended the corporate monthly team meetings for a period of time which occurred. We would recommend that consideration be given how best to ensure opportunities for the team to have contact with senior officers in the short term while the council considers its resource and structure so that the team can begin to plan more strategically.

The new vision and corporate plan will provide a strong foundation to develop an overarching communications strategy with an annual campaign plan identifying key priorities and initiatives for the year. This strategy should include key messages for the organisation, measurable objectives, details of the audiences and channels that the council needs to engage over the year and how communications activity will be evaluated. The annual campaigns plan should be agreed and signed off by the council's corporate and political leadership, providing the strategic framework that will help ensure that Epsom & Ewell's limited communications resource is dedicated to the issues that matter most to the council.

Communications activity is also compounded by a lack of any real evidence or insight into what residents think about the council, how they currently receive information, and how they would like to. The communications strategy and all subsequent activity should be evidence based. We would strongly recommend the council communications team conduct a survey to gain better insight into how residents currently receive information and how they would like to. This is elaborated on below in section 7.3.

Work has started on crafting a corporate narrative for Epsom & Ewell Borough Council using the new vision as a base. The Leadership Team recently attended an LGA workshop to help

them develop and hone this narrative, and we would encourage the council to continue to progress with this. It is important to keep in mind when developing this narrative that it is not about drafting a general vision statement ("making Epsom & Ewell the best place to live, work and play"), it's about telling a story about where the council has been, where you are now and where you want to get to. It needs to acknowledge what's tough or not working, explain how you'll overcome these challenges, the values and behaviours that will steer you on your journey and what your world will look like when you've achieved all you want. Following the workshop, the LGA has resources that can continue to guide you through this process, as well as case studies of councils who have effectively created and embedded a strong narrative. You can find the LGA's corporate narrative toolkit at here.

The vision has provided a great starting point for this work, and senior leadership is confident in the story that they can tell about Epsom & Ewell and all that makes the borough unique. It was clear from our time on site that Members understand the need for a narrative and the role it should play in council communications. However, we would stress that in order for the narrative to be fully embedded in the organisation, Members should continue to be involved in the process. This narrative will be valuable collateral that can be used by both officers *and* Members to ensure that all local communications reflect the organisation's wider ambitions and to embed the story that the council wants to tell.

7.2 Structure, 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 their approach to communication and engagement is embedded within the organisation and central to the way they operate? How might the Council improve their approach to communication and engagement, whilst recognising the constraint in which they operate?*

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has a corporate communications team, sitting under the Head of HR and Organisational Development, consisting of two communications officers and a marketing officer. This brings the total dedicated resource to 3 FTE – admittedly small when compared to the average size of a shire district communications team (5.5 FTE[1]). However, it was clear from our time on site that there are pockets of communications, engagement and marketing expertise across the council that can be better utilised and could facilitate a more cohesive way of working and communicating..

We recommend implementing regular, scheduled communications meetings, where colleagues can get together to share best practice, update on forward planning, learning and resources. Good work is being done by many teams that could be beneficial to the corporate communications team, for example the consultation and engagement team and venue marketing.

A siloed way of working across several relevant areas of the council was apparent to the peer team. Consultation and engagement sits separately to the communications team, within Policy, Performance & Governance, and we were told has very little interaction with

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[1] LGA Heads of Communications survey, 2018

corporate communications, despite their obvious similarities and overlap. There is further marketing expertise outside of the team, with venue marketing and marketing for the Playhouse, as well as a large customer services team with a range of communications skills.

Even within the communications team itself, working appears siloed. There appears to be a clear split between the communications officers and marketing officer who have very different work streams and have little interaction in a professional capacity. We heard praise for the marketing officer and the new skills he has brought to the council. However, we think the team would benefit from ensuring that this role is fully integrated into the corporate communications team and is working collaboratively with communications officers. This has not been helped by the fact that the marketing officer is matrix managed, so his work plan is set between communications and service areas. We would recommend that this role is brought solely within the remit of communications and any work for service areas is commissioned in line with other communications requests.

We were asked to consider whether communications and consultation and engagement could work more effectively together. It is our opinion that bringing these two teams together allows the council to use its existing skills more effectively and enable it to adopt a more modern, strategic approach to engagement and consultation. These teams used to report to the same director and were part of the same team, and it is our opinion that separating them was a retrograde step. There are good skills within the communications and engagement team and a real appetite for doing things differently and in a more creative way.

We have referred to the council's traditional approach to communications several times. Another consequence of this approach has been a lack of appreciation of the importance of resident engagement and an outdated approach that focuses largely on surveys. Future40 work is a great example of communications and engagement done well, the majority of this was undertaken by the in-house teams including engagement, marketing and communications. We would encourage the teams to use this as a model of best practice going forward and to place a greater focus on the 'asking, listening, responding' cycle of resident engagement. The LGA's guide to effective community engagement and consultation will be useful for the council going forward and can be found [here](#).

Whilst most of our recommendations are centred around the council improving the use of existing communications and engagement resources, we would strongly urge the council to create a strategic communications and engagement manager role to coordinate and advise on Epsom & Ewell's communications and engagement activity. As outlined above in section 7.1, having experienced, senior strategic communications expertise will be crucial to developing and embedding a strategic, proactive approach to communications and engagement.

It will be important for the Council to recognise that bringing in additional resource is not simply about the size of the team, but about ensuring that there are the right modern communications skills and strategic experience needed to undertake the work that the council has acknowledged it needs to do. This includes supporting the leadership to embed the new vision, developing a communications strategy and planning proactive

communications activity. The ideal candidate will have experience in project management, developing, delivering and evaluating insight-based communications campaigns and an understanding of how to engage with different audiences. These are all areas of significant skills shortages in the council.

It will be important that should this manager be recruited, they are given the time and space to be the strategic adviser that Epsom & Ewell needs and wants. They will be instrumental in helping to tackle the recommendations we have outlined in this report and will need to work with colleagues across the council to develop the right model for communication and engagement for the future.

7.3 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?*

It is extremely positive that senior leaders at Epsom & Ewell understand that they must own and lead communications activity and that they recognise the importance of embedding strategic communications at an early stage. It is important that senior leaders also recognise what this looks like in practice. We have already outlined in section 7.1 that the lack of structured and systematic information sharing from the top down to the communications team has been an issue for the communications team and as a result the focus remains reactive – for example responding to a local media story rather than planning a proactive campaign based on a council priority. The communications team is keen to have this early engagement to help it shape its own priorities and to plan more effectively.

As part of implementing the desired strategic approach we recommend the council should develop a clear process for commissioning communications activity. To have such a process would allow the council to identify a clear focus for its communications activity directly linked to its own priorities. It is our view that this process will help service areas and the communications team to work together on deciding what messages and channels are most effecting for engaging the desired audiences and the outcomes that service areas are looking to achieve.

Modern, strategic communications must be based on evidence. This is one of the biggest barriers we observed during our time at Epsom & Ewell Borough Council - there is little to no insight into residents' perceptions of the council, how they receive information or how they would like to receive information. This means that the communications team cannot baseline its results, track progress over time or measure their success. We heard that resident engagement happens primarily in the form of formal consultation on specific issues and is something of a 'tick-box' exercise. We would recommend as a first port of call the council commissions a "Who Reads What" survey to establish how residents access information about the council and would prefer to. It is recommended that this is followed up with a residents' survey to gain a better overall understanding of what residents think about the council and the services it provides

The LGA has produced guidance for councils to help ensure resident surveys are tailored so they can be benchmarked against other local authorities. Our [understanding the views of residents resource](#) also offers support on commissioning surveys and suggested questions to understand how residents prefer to be communicated with. In the short term, we would recommend the council quickly conduct a 'who reads what' survey to gain insight into the communications preferences of residents. The LGA has produced [a set of survey questions](#) that the Council can use, designed to gauge residents communications needs and interests. Should the Council choose to invest in a larger resident survey in the future, we would recommend that they include the communications questions in this survey and also benchmark against other councils using the [LGA's Inform service](#).

It was apparent that without any real insight into how residents get their news, decisions about how best to communicate are made on an ad-hoc basis and informed by guesswork. This can often result in choosing the wrong tactics for sharing information and poor outcomes. One example we heard throughout our time on site was that a survey to measure the effectiveness of Borough Insight was sent out in the magazine and online. Whilst testing the effectiveness of the magazine is an activity we think important, sending the survey out in this way means that it will likely only be completed by residents already engaging with the magazine. The team need to be incorporating the views of those outside of this demographic in order to truly test their effectiveness and refine their approach. There is currently little to no process for analysing, evaluating or reporting communications activity, meaning that the communications team does not know how effective its current approach is.

Both the senior management team and the communications team are aware that this is an issue for the council and are keen to adopt an approach to monitoring and evaluating communications activity. We would recommend that the communications team implement a simple dashboard of activity, shared internally, to begin this process. It is important that the focus of any evaluation is on desired and measurable outcomes (changing resident behaviour) rather than outputs (the number of press releases, social media posts, etc). The LGA has guidance on incorporating insight and evaluation available [here](#).

Epsom & Ewell currently has a Citizen's Panel which is consulted on a regular basis on a range of local issues and services. It appears to us that although the principles of the Citizen's Panel are good – a representative group of local residents – the group is no longer effective in practice. It is not representative of the borough residents and fails to capture the views of key demographic groups including students and young professionals. We heard that as the panel is self-selecting, it often consists of people who have a pre-existing relationship to the council or who have their own agenda on a key issue. The council should consider reviewing the Citizen's Panel as part of its review of its consultation and engagement activities.

Internal and external communications are both parts of a strategic approach to communications and are two sides of the same coin. Any communications strategy, delivery plan or campaign must include both internal and external communications. The council has capable and committed staff who deliver good services to residents, businesses and

partners. They want to tell a positive story about their council and borough. With effective internal communications, staff will be invaluable ambassadors for Epsom & Ewell.

It was clear from our time on site that because of a disjointed approach to internal communications, some staff are missing out on receiving key corporate messages. Currently, there appears to be an over-reliance on Heads of Service passing information down, which we think is sometimes the reason for key messages failing to reach staff. We would encourage the team to revise its approach to internal communications and ensure that key corporate messages are made a priority for core channels.

The last staff survey was held over five years ago and we felt a frustration amongst some of the longer serving officers that they had never seen the results or an action plan from it. While these views were from a long time ago there was also a perception that in recent months there had been less two-way communications with staff sometimes feeling unable to ask questions or challenge issues. We would encourage the council to consider undertaking greater engagement with staff to review how staff are feeling and their preferences in regards to communications. We heard positive feedback around existing channels 'What's Hot' and the Glitterball.

5.4 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?*

The communications team is held in high regard by its colleagues across the council. Colleagues see the service as responsive and supportive and team members are seen as hard-working and reliable. There is an appreciation for some of the internal communications tools and channels managed by the team, in particular 'What's Hot' and the Glitterball. Additionally, we heard about the good relationship that the team has built with local media over time.

Epsom & Ewell has a large and competent customer services team and we suggest that closer working between these two teams could take some pressure off them both. We heard throughout our time on site that there is a lack of coordination between these teams on key issues. It is our opinion that the communications team should not be dealing with routine customer service enquiries, so that their time can be spent focusing on the council's strategic priorities and working around a forward plan. We recommend, after the appropriate training, customer services are given access to the council's social media monitoring service and manage all customer service enquiries. The council has already invested in Hootsuite, a social media monitoring service that will allow them to share ownership, so it is a shame that it is not being used to the best of its ability. The communications team can then lead on content creation and distribution and support the customer services team in dealing with any difficult questions. Equally, it is important that the communications team continue to brief customer services on key issues. This should be part of all communications plans going forward.

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council has an evidently strong network of partners who we were told work well together and have been involved in the development of the council's new vision and plan. This is a great asset to have as a small council, so we were pleased to hear this feedback echoed with partners we spoke to. However, it is our concern that partnership working could be used more effectively when it comes to communications. There is a Surrey communications network that meets on a regular basis and includes the county council and neighbouring districts and boroughs. We would encourage the communications team to prioritise maintaining these strong relationships to bolster the support available to it. We heard that at present this working relationship is ad-hoc and reactive, therefore leading to missed opportunities for the team.

There is an opportunity for the council to work more closely with the voluntary sector. We would encourage the council to build on and make greater use of these relationships. The business breakfast meetings are welcomed as good networking opportunities and seen by partners as an opportunity to engage directly with the council. We were pleased to hear that the council is planning to implement a similar meeting for voluntary sector partners.

7.5 Channel use and digital communications. *How can the council make the most of digital channels as a means of communications and engagement? How effective is Borough Insight in getting the council's message across compared to alternative communication channels?*

There is a genuine passion for the local area across the council, at both political and corporate levels. It seemed to us that because of the unique political makeup of the council, there is a perception that many members speak on behalf of and to their residents only. However, we believe more can be done in supporting Members to take on the role of community champions and in helping them to understand the role that they can play in delivering effective communications to all residents of Epsom and Ewell.

Epsom & Ewell is the only council to have always been led by a Residents Association and this provides the basis for positive communications around the council being truly led by its residents, rather than political parties. The local MP is effective with communicating their political narrative in the area, one example being the hospital, and Members do not always seem to be confident to speak out and speak for the council. The LGA offers a series of events called 'Leadership Essentials' which are learning opportunities for councillors. Our workshop 'Getting your message across' provides councillors with the new ideas, strategies and techniques for achieving more effective communication with both internal and external audiences. They would be supported to learn how to influence others towards achieving mutually beneficial objectives and adapt their communication style to convey messages more persuasively to people who have a different communication style. More information on this course can be found [here](#).

We would recommend that the council consider conducting social media and media training for Members and consider making this part of their new Member induction process to ensure that communications remains a priority for Members regardless of potential political changes. The LGA offers this support, as well as online guidance and resources which can

be found [here](). Once a communications and engagement manager is in place work should be undertaken to build a strong proactive relationship with Members to advise them on the impacts of decisions and methods of communicating decisions. The council should be driving the agenda and in order to support this, consideration should be given to communications working with the relevant services and Committee Chairman.

As discussed in section 7.3, there is little to no audience segmentation (the breaking up of audiences for specific targeting) or evaluation of the channels that the council is using to communicate. We were asked to consider the use of Borough Insight, the council's printed magazine, and whether this remained fit for purpose. We were met with a variety of opinions from officers and politicians, but without having any evidence we do not feel able to provide a definitive answer to this question. Some months ago, the communications team ran a survey on the effectiveness of the magazine. However, it was only sent to residents who already received and read the magazine. We would encourage the council to base its decision on the results of the 'who reads what' survey. Should the council decide to continue with the production of the magazine, we would encourage it to carefully consider the cost of production and ensure that the content is engaging and meaningful to residents.

The council also produces E-Borough Insight, an online version of the magazine which is produced approximately 10 times per year. Whilst the move to a digital channel is a smart one, we are concerned that the council is not using the most valuable or effective channel available to them. E-Borough Insight is hosted on a microsite, which, in our opinion, is out-dated and difficult to access. Microsites don't support the effective and meaningful evaluation which is needed to improve Epsom & Ewell's communications. We would recommend that the council consider investing in an E-Newsletter system, which can be used for more than delivering E-Borough Insight and could also be adopted across service areas and internal communications. Email marketing platforms such as [Granicus](), used by the majority of councils, are affordable, easy to use, do not require design skills and will allow the council to gather useful insight such as what links residents are opening, how many residents are opening the newsletter, etc.

Social media is currently used primarily as a broadcast tool to deliver information to residents, rather than as an engagement tool. The communications team uses Hootsuite to manage and monitor the corporate social media channels. The team admit that they are not entirely sure how best to use social media – should they be generating original content or sharing messages from partners? Social media needs to be thought about strategically, carefully considered as part of any future planning and to be used as appropriate depending on the desired audience.

A council's social media pages are important for many reasons. They form part of its public image, are valuable communication channels that reaches new audiences and, perhaps most importantly, connect the council with residents and stakeholders. This is what makes it an important channel for engagement – it enables two-way communication on a platform in which people are already active and allows the council to keep an 'ear to the ground'.

We would recommend that the team take a more proactive and strategic approach to what is

shared on the council's social media pages. Consider what do you want to highlight – and why? Adapt content and copy, including visuals when possible, to suit relevant platforms. When reposting or sharing posts from another organisation, you should aim to add value. Why are you sharing it? The team would benefit from taking a look at what other councils are doing for inspiration. Sandwell Council has a good [Facebook page](#) and you can find a list of councils on Twitter [here](#).

The team should also look at what evaluation can tell it about its social media performance and how it can improve. Like all other areas of communications, evidence is needed to develop a strategic approach to content. Who is your audience and what content works well on which platform? How can you prove and measure the value of the posts? We would recommend using the insight tools provided by each platform to start with. Both Twitter and Facebook analytics provide a good overview.

8. Immediate next steps

We appreciate that you will want to reflect on these findings 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. Mona Sehgal, Principal Adviser, is the main contact between your authority and LGA for any wider support. Her contact details are: Mona.Sehgal@local.gov.uk or 07795291006.

On behalf of the peer team

Éilis O'Connell, Communications Improvement Adviser, LGA

Appendix A: LGA resources and support

- Corporate narrative toolkit - https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/corporate-narrative-toolkit-0

- LGA Heads of Communications survey, 2018 - https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Heads%20of%20Communications

[%20Survey%202018_FINAL.pdf](#)

- Guide to community engagement and consultation - https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support

- Understanding the view of residents - https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/resident-communications-0

- Who Reads What survey - https://local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/resident-communications-3

- LG Inform platform - https://lginform.local.gov.uk/

- Guide to insight and evaluation - https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/futurecomms-building-local-5

- LGA Leadership Essentials 'Getting your message across' event - https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/leadership-essentials

- Social media guidance - https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/digital-communications/social-5