Communications Peer Review
Stevenage Borough Council

6th to 8th November 2017

Feedback Report

1. Executive summary

Stevenage Borough Council is a hugely ambitious council and there is an evident will at all levels to deliver change. Its plans for the regeneration of Stevenage demonstrate a level of ambition more typical of a city council than a District. The Council aspires to be a leading co-operative council and already demonstrates many of the qualities of such an organisation in practice, such as how it engages with and listens to its communities. It is developing a new Local Plan and Cultural Strategy and undertaking a series of business reviews to reshape its services as part of the Future Town, Future Council programme.

The Council benefits from strong political leadership. A new officer leadership team has been established which provides an opportunity to refresh the Council's approach to communications, building on the strengths which are already in place to achieve more strategic and effective communications. These include very strong communications leadership from the Council's Leader. The Chief Executive has shown clear staff leadership since his appointment in 2015 and there is a strong commitment to improving communications across the Council's leadership. Communications is now one of the core competencies for appointments at senior management level and is being introduced for other management posts.

The council now needs to step up its communications effort to match the ambition of the Council. Communications effort and resources need to be strategically aligned with the Council's agreed priorities. Those priorities should mandate communications activity, and enable finite resources to be directed towards that which is important, not simply the urgent or familiar. Consideration of communications issues should take place at an earlier stage in the decision-making process, and in the development of policy and strategy.

The starting point for this more strategic approach to communications should be the development of an agreed place narrative for Stevenage and a related corporate narrative for the Council. The key elements for these already exist, they just need to be worked up through the Executive Board and Strategic Leadership Team. The place brand can build on Stevenage's heritage as both the first post war New Town and its medieval history and characterful Old Town; high tech industries and good connectivity by road, rail and air. The corporate narrative needs to articulate what it means to be a co-operative council, the values which underpin this and how these will help deliver the clearly understood priorities of regenerating the town centre and providing more housing. Taken together, the two should help to promote Stevenage to potential investors, visitors and new residents.

A more confident, less risk averse approach to communications is required. The Council should be prepared to promptly rebut inaccurate stories about the area or the authority. It should be prepared to make greater use of leading elected members as spokespeople on behalf of the Council (but not in a party political role).

Communications planning and activities should give greater attention to desired outcomes, not processes or techniques to enable a more flexible response but one which remains driven by Council priorities. It should be informed by evaluation and an understanding of what 'good looks like' for the Council and what work best for

different audiences. The use and deployment of communications resources across the Council needs to be better understood and co-ordinated. Internal communications are clearly seen to have improved, but scope remains for further improvement – in particular across different services and increased networking opportunities for managers.

The credibility of the Council's communications will be determined by delivery. Previous plans to regenerate the Town Centre have been frustrated by external factors, such as the financial crash in 2008. It now needs to make a reality of its regeneration plans – Stevenage Central – to meet residents' expectations. Similarly, the website needs to be enhanced to ensure it is more user friendly and mobile friendly, in keeping with Stevenage's reputation as a home for high-tech industries. Within the authority, implementation of a much more effective intranet soon is seen as a litmus test by staff of its ability to deliver.

2. Recommendations

The following recommendations will enable Stevenage to deliver more effective strategic communications to support its ambitions for the Borough. These include some key recommendations to establish the framework and direction for strategic communications and further, operational, recommendations to make communications both by the Corporate Communications Team and across services in general more effective.

Strategic recommendations

a) Hold a joint Executive / Strategic Leadership Team visioning session to articulate the Co-operative Council narrative and Stevenage place brand – and share the agreed outputs with Members, staff, residents and partners

b) Implementation of agreed narrative and place brand to be led strategically by the Corporate Communications Team

c) The Stevenage narrative and future direction for the Co-operative Council should be jointly communicated by the Leader and Chief Executive

d) Wider communications activity to be shared at senior Member and officer level, in support of the Leader and Chief Executive

e) Develop new corporate communications and internal communications strategies to encapsulate the new strategic approach.

Operational recommendations

Making effective use of communications resources:

f) Undertake a full audit of all communications resources across the Council and use the findings to inform consideration of moving all communications resources into one team

g) Consider account manager / business manager model for the Corporate Communications Team

h) Review process for design and print

Planning communications activity:

    i)   Introduce campaigns planning based on the ROSIE model

    j)   Introduce a forward planning communications grid

    k)   Weekly communications meetings with the Leader, Chief Executive and Communications Manager

    l)   Review approach to response and rebuttal, to protect and promote the reputation of the Council in response to adverse media coverage

Making effective use of different communications channels:

    m) Make better use of resident insight to inform communications activity, share this and use consistently across all service areas

    n)   Analyse the findings of the recent resident survey and, as necessary, undertake a further 'Who reads what survey' to determine the most effective communications channels externally (resident survey) and internally (Members and officers)

    o)   Review *The Chronicle* and *Link* and setup editorial boards, to ensure a consistent approach to developing and selecting content and engaging a range of views in this process

    p)   Consider social media practices and consider implementing a social media management and monitoring system

    q)   Engage staff with the development of the new intranet, to ensure this is implemented effectively to meet high staff expectations

    r)   Refresh and review website to reflect the Council's ambitions and meet user expectations, and ensure that this is mobile enabled.

3. Scope and terms of reference for the review

The peer review looked at communications activity and the approach to communications across the Council, not just the work of the Corporate Communications Team. Stevenage Borough Council asked that the team focus on the following in particular:

- **Structure, capacity and capability**. Is the current model for delivering communications the right one? How effective are communications? Is there a robust system in place for planning activity, processes and evaluating outcomes?

- **Internal communications**. How effective is the Council at communicating with, informing and engaging all staff members?

- **Place branding**. How effective is the Council in promoting Stevenage as a place?

4. Peer review process

The peer review was undertaken by the following team of experienced local government peers:

- David Holdstock, Director of Communications, LGA
- Cllr Michael Payne, Deputy Leader & portfolio holder for Resources & Reputation, Gedling Borough Council
- Jacqui Gay, Head of Communications, Hull City Council
- Jo Moynihan, Communications Manager, Coventry City Council
- David Armin, review manager, LGA

In addition, Ben Smith, LGA Regional Adviser for the East of England, participated in the review as a 'shadow' peer as part of his professional and personal development.

The communications peer review is part of the Local Government Association's (LGA) bespoke sector led improvement offer. It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peers offer 'critical friend' support and challenge and reviews are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The findings presented here are mainly based on the team's discussions with a range of key people from across the council and its partners. People interviewed by the team reflected the focus of the review and included:

- The Council's Leader (and portfolio holder for Communications), other Executive Members and non-executive Members from across the political groups

- Chief Executive

- Senior managers from across different services

- Communications Manager and Corporate Communications team

- Service managers

- Staff focus groups

- Local media representatives

- Resident representatives

- Key partners from the public (including communications leads from neighbouring authorities) and voluntary sector.

The team were made to feel welcome on-site in Stevenage. People were open and honest with the team which has helped us in reaching our conclusions. The team would like to thank those people from Stevenage Borough Council who helped to prepare and plan for the review, and who supported the team during the course of its work.

5. Principles of effective communication

In undertaking its work, the team was guided by an understanding of the importance of good communications and how to achieve this. The LGA has found the following to be generally characteristic of effective communications across the councils that it works with. In summary:

Good communication is important because it -

- articulates the ambition for your area

- improves corporate and personal reputation

- supports good political leadership

- helps engagement – with residents, partners and staff

- builds trust and rallies advocates

- drives change and can deliver savings

- attracts investment (and good people)

- strengthens public support and understanding.

Achieving good communications typically requires the following:

- **Leadership** - clarity of purpose and commitment

- **A clear brand** - what you stand for, values and trust

- **A clear vision** - be ambitious first…and then realistic!

- Being **authentic**

- **A strategic approach to communications** - communication without strategy does not work

- A corporately agreed, fully evaluated **annual communications plan**

- All **communications** activity **based on research and insight**

- All **campaigns linked to corporate priorities** and resourced accordingly

- **Investing in evaluation**

- Ensuring **communications** is **owned by everyone**

These general principles and the experience of the peer team have guided it in formulating findings and in suggesting the actions Stevenage should take in addressing the issues which have been identified.

6. Findings

6.1 Context

Stevenage Borough Council benefits from strong political leadership. It is a hugely ambitious council and there is an evident will at all levels to deliver change. Its plans for the regeneration of Stevenage demonstrate a level of ambition more typical of a city council than a District. These regeneration plans will require a higher profile for the Borough both regionally and nationally. There are several major, high-tech companies in the area whose longer term investment decisions will inevitably be affected by uncertainty arising from Brexit. This is further reason for Stevenage to strengthen its offer to both retain and attract business investment.

The Council aspires to be a leading co-operative council and already demonstrates many of the qualities of such an organisation in practice, such as how it engages with and listens to its communities. Examples of good community engagement include the 'Teddy Bears picnic', bringing together young mothers and families, and the 'Big Knock' whereby Members and officers visited council tenants in their homes to listen to people's issues and concerns. It is developing a number of key plans and strategies which will shape the Council and Borough into the future. It is developing a new Local Plan and Cultural Strategy and undertaking a series of business reviews to reshape its services as part of the Future Town, Future Council programme. A new officer leadership team has been established which provides an opportunity to refresh the Council's approach to communications, building on a number of strengths which are already in place to achieve more strategic and effective communications.

These strengths include very strong communications leadership from the Council's Leader, whose commitment to the Borough is evident and enjoys a high profile locally and more generally. The Chief Executive has shown clear staff leadership since his appointment in 2015 and there is a strong commitment to improving communications across the Council's leadership. There is evidence of good partnership working, such as Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse; The Social Inclusion Partnership and Stevenage First, which is driving its regeneration plans. The Council has continued to undertake regular resident surveys, for example to seek residents' views on priorities for the Borough. A number of councillors are participating in the Modern Member Programme. This is seen as a valued development opportunity and the modules selected by Stevenage include use of ICT and place leadership which are clearly relevant to effective communications.

6.2 Place branding

Stevenage already has a strong basis for developing a place narrative. As noted above, it is home to a number of high-tech industries, indeed the Mars Rover vehicle was made in Stevenage so can reasonably claim to be 'The UK's Houston'. It enjoys very good connectivity - regular train services put it within some 20 minutes of central London and it lies adjacent to the A1(M). Although the first new town created after the war, it also has a long history which can be traced back to the Doomsday Book in the 11th Century. Stevenage can speak in terms of both having a proud history and a bright future. The Council now needs to fully articulate and share a place brand for Stevenage - across the authority, with partners and potential investors and the wider community. Joint workshops between the Executive Board

and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) have previously been used to develop thinking around housing and regeneration. A similar approach could help to develop both the place and corporate narratives.

There is a good regeneration communications plan to support the redevelopment of Stevenage town centre. However, there needs to be wider buy-in to this and greater co-ordination with the Council's wider communications. There needs to be more joining-up with the Council's wider priorities and messaging – so that residents see that development is intended to benefit the wider community to enhance opportunities and prosperity. There should be more co-ordinated marketing of Stevenage as a place. The review team understand that there are multiple brands and some five or six different websites – which clearly needs to be made more coherent.

There is some understanding at a top level of what being a co-operative council means, but this understanding is not consistently expressed across the organisation. However, the desirability of being such a council is shared and understood in general terms as being one which listens and responds to its residents and works with them to make Stevenage a better place. A more clear and consistent articulation of what makes Stevenage a co-operative council is required. This needs to be illustrated by what this means in practice, to bring its co-operative principles to life, and needs to be embedded in both the new place narrative and in the Council's corporate and other plans.

The team found a high level of understanding of the Council's priorities for Stevenage across Members, staff and residents. The top two are clearly understood as regeneration of the Town centre and building new housing. Creating new jobs and changing the perception of Stevenage are also seen as priorities. It is important to note that Stevenage now needs to be seen to be changing, to give residents and staff the confidence that the Council can and will deliver. Members and staff are keen to be ambassadors for the Council and Stevenage, which will be aided by better alignment of internal and external communications. Previous attempts to regenerate the Town have been seen to falter, sometimes due to external factors such as the financial crash in 2008, which has given some a scepticism that Stevenage can deliver. It needs to take full advantage of the opportunities now being presented to it and to demonstrate that the Council is a key part of the partnership that will enable future delivery.

6.3 Internal communications

People we spoke to were clear that there has been a big improvement over the past 18 months. The top team, in particular the Chief Executive, have demonstrated visible leadership. The Chief Executive's roadshows and briefings are widely welcomed, along with initiatives such as going 'back to the floor' with refuse collection teams. Staff engagement has improved and a number of innovative approaches to internal communications have been adopted, such as a graffiti board and using a burger van to increase attendance at the Chief Executive's early morning briefings at the depot. These have had a positive impact. The Council now needs to consider its capacity to deliver and sustain such a wide range of initiatives alongside other priorities for communications resources.

The Council's internal communications are supported by a range of different communications channels to reach different parts of the organisation. These include

meetings and briefings, e-mail and the intranet. *The Link*, the staff newsletter is published several times a year and distributed via e-mail and in hard copy, in recognition that not all staff can access a computer at work. Consideration should be given to establishing an editorial board including staff from across a number of service areas to give wider ownership of the content. Staff recognition includes celebrating success through a staff awards scheme.

Member communications are seen to have improved. The weekly decisions e-mail, produced by Constitutional Services, recording decisions made across the Council is valued. Members would like to receive *The Link* (although it is available via the intranet) and some would also welcome a regular e-mail briefing on matters of interest.

Staff reported some inconsistencies in the effectiveness of internal communications. It is generally better within a service area, rather than across different services, which suggest the existence of organisational silos. But even communication within services is mixed, such as the frequency of team meetings and the sharing of information more generally, which suggests much may depend on the style of individual managers. The cascade of information through tiers of management does not appear to be effective in all cases. The different response rates across different parts of the Council to the recent staff survey could be explored further, as this may say something about the level of staff engagement.

The inclusion of communications as a core competence for managers at Assistant Director (SLT) level for the recent appointment process is a positive development and we understand it is intended that this will be the case for recruitment to other posts in the management structure. The Council could use this to establish and enforce expectations around team meetings and communications across the organisation. There is a case for greater networking for all levels of management, in addition to SLT. This could include, for example, themed workshops looking at different issues arising from the Future Town, Future Council programme. The frequency of internal communications could be examined, to asses if more frequent circulation of *The Link* or the introduction of more regular e-mail briefings would allow more timely communication of issues.

Improving the Council's intranet is a key issue for staff. It is widely seen as being not fit for purpose. Staff report that previous plans to improve it have not been realised. We understand that the Council, through its ICT partnership arrangements with East Hertfordshire, is procuring a new intranet solution. It is important that staff are involved in the development of the new intranet, to ensure that it works for them. Delivering an effective intranet appears to have become a key test for staff of the Council's ability to improve more generally.

As with all aspects of communications, internal communications should both close the feedback loop and be subject to evaluation. Internal communications should allow the Council to demonstrate to staff that 'You said, We did ...' in response to issues and concerns raised. Evaluation should look at preferred communications channels and how it has helped staff to do their jobs better and feel more informed.

6.4 Structure, capacity and capability

In the peer team's experience, the Corporate Communications Team at Stevenage is relatively well resourced for a district council. The Communications Team is delivering a high volume of communications activity and materials. It has been

successful in gaining national media coverage, including a feature on BBC1's *The One Show* and in three series of *The Housing Enforcers*. It has also secured some detailed local media coverage, including an in-depth article on housing in the local paper, *The Comet*. The team's relationship with the local media is good. Members feel well prepared in advance of media interviews and value the media briefings they receive.

There are a range of good skills in the team, whose members show a commitment to their own personal development through investing in relevant professional and academic qualifications at their own expense, in accordance with the Council's policy. However, the team are concerned that the approach to communications appears to be based on an out of date competency model which pays insufficient attention to the increasing importance of digital communications and the development of an organisational narrative and place brand.

There are also communications resources and skills in other parts of the organisation, such as in Regeneration, which can help to strengthen Stevenage's communications efforts. However, the lack of strategic oversight means these are not as well co-ordinated or effective as they could be. The approach to communications is insufficiently strategic, and strategic communications advice is often sought at a late stage in the decision making process, by which point its value may well be reduced.

An audit of all communications resources will allow the council to identify spend and resources and will deliver more effective communications and potentially the opportunity to make savings. Such an audit can inform consideration of how these resources are best deployed, which may include the option of bringing all these together in a central team.

Communications activity needs to be planned, more strategic and more clearly linked to the priorities in the Corporate Plan – Future Town, Future Council. Use of a forward planning communications grid may help to better align communications activities and campaigns to the Council's priorities. The team's view is that the Council's approach to planning campaigns is too complex and onerous and may be getting in the way of establishing a communications function that is both strategic and responsive. The team recommends the use of a simpler approach to campaigns planning based on the Government Communications Service 'O.A.S.I.S' or '**R.O.S.I.E**' model. In this approach, adequate research allows objectives to be established. The R.O.S.I.E model is based on **R**esearch, **O**bjectives, **S**trategy, **I**mplementation, and **E**valuation.

The approach to measurement and evaluation of communications activity needs to be strengthened, to give assurance that the Council is making the best use of its communications resources and its communications campaigns are having the desired impact. A large proportion of the Corporate Communications Team discretionary budget is spent on the resident's magazine and the community awards scheme. The Council needs to satisfy itself that this is best use of a limited resource. (We understand that the recent residents' survey indicates that *The Chronicle* is one of the most favoured ways for people to receive information about the Council. The Council should undertake additional research as necessary to determine the most effective communications channels).

The Council's approach to communications should be more confident. Currently it is too risk averse. There appears to be some confusion/misunderstanding about the role of Members when speaking on behalf of the Council or community and when they are undertaking party political activity, which it would not be appropriate for the Council's communications function to support. For example, Members are not quoted or featured in stories in the council residents' magazine, *The Chronicle.* The team see no problem in portfolio holders being quoted on behalf of the Council in items relevant to their area of responsibility, indeed this is the practice in many councils. Similarly, the communications function should support Members in vigorous and prompt rebuttal of inaccurate stories which are detrimental to the Council's reputation. In terms of developing the Council's communications capacity, it would now be opportune for other portfolio holders and senior officers to assume a higher profile in the media and take a greater role in communicating the Council's direction and priorities, both internally and externally. If the Council's plans for regenerating Stevenage are to be realised, both the Leader and Chief Executive will need to give greater time to promoting these nationally (and potentially internationally) and other members of the leadership teams (political and managerial) will need to step up to assist them.

The Corporate Communications Team was said by some people to be at times a blockage, to both external and internal communications – for example in the issue of 'all user' e-mails. It is legitimate to act as a control on the appropriate use of communications channels – both in terms of use of resources, time and maintaining the Council's reputation. However, decisions in this area need to be seen as consistent and reasonable or risk managers developing 'work around' solutions. Such considerations partly form our rationale for suggesting an editorial Board for both *The Chronicle* and *The Link.* The Communications team may need to better explain the appropriate communications channels in different circumstances and their effective use.

The team heard of an inconsistent approach to the use of corporate identity. This appears to derive from lack of robust processes for print and design and insufficient understanding of the corporate identity requirements, which can be wasteful of resources and dilute that corporate identity.

With a single digital communications officer, there is a risk of a 'single point of failure' in terms of updating content. This is one of the reasons why the team suggest consideration of an account manager model for the Corporate Communications Team. This would see each member of the Team being the point of contact and support across the full range of communications activity for a group of services, or a theme from the Corporate Plan (which would help to align communications activity to priorities). This would enable all team members to develop their skills and experience across the full range of communications activity and give greater resilience.

In terms of the website more generally, it should be reviewed from the end users' perspective to make it more intuitive and easier to use, particularly if residents are to be expected to undertake more self-service activities as part of channel shift and cost reduction. As Stevenage positions itself as a high-tech town, the Council's website should be mobile-enabled and support agile working. It could be used to more effectively promote the Council's ambitions for Stevenage, drawing on the developing place narrative.

7. Next steps and further support available

Further assistance and support, if required, and access to good practice examples, may be arranged by making contact with Matt Nicholls, the LGA's Head of Local Government Communications Support (matt.nicholls@local.gov.uk) or the LGA's Principal Advisers for the East of England – Rachel Litherland (rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk) or Gary Hughes (gary.hughes@local.gov.uk) .

The LGA provides on-line resources which may be relevant to your response to a number of the issues identified during the review and the recommendations included in this report. The following in particular may be helpful:

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

- Place branding toolkit - https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/communications-support/place-branding

- LGA Guide to more effective internal communication - https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/communications-support/internal-communications

Members of the peer team will be happy to further share their experience and understanding of good practice, to help you tackle the issues identified and enhance your approach to communications.