

**Meeting** OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
**Portfolio Area**  
**Date** 8 March 2018



## MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

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### 1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report is to agree any further recommendations that Scrutiny Members wish to make following the LGA Peer Review feedback on the recent review of SBC Communications carried out in November 2017, which was considered at its meeting on 7 February 2018.
- 1.2 At the 7 February meeting Members were invited to comment on the findings and recommendations of the LGA Peer Review and whether they wished to add any further recommendations of their own (which are detailed in this report at item 2.1 to 2.2.5) which would be incorporated into an action plan for Communications for the Council.

### 2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Assistant Director, Corporate Services and Transformation meet with the Leader as Executive Portfolio Holder for Media and Communications to consider the following recommendations of the Committee within two months of the publishing of the recommendations.
- 2.2 That the further recommendations that Members wish to add to those that the LGA Peer Team have made are to be incorporated into an action plan are as follows:

- 2.1.1 That the Council explores how best to better engage residents in developing its communications;
- 2.1.2 That the Stevenage Youth Council be invited to own a strand of the place brand and to promote this amongst the Town's young people.
- 2.1.3 That officers consider with the Leader as part of the resulting Communications Action Plan the community engagement response, where does the Council want to be on the (Arnstein) ladder of participation?
- 2.1.4 That there be a priority for informed rapid response to incidents and breaking news over planned 'ribbon cutting' events, etc., when necessary.
- 2.1.5 That the associated Communications Action Plan should also include reference to the issues that Members had previously highlighted as part of their review as areas of development, including:
  - The importance of intelligence to pre-empt issues and proactively engage with local press.
  - The benefit of positive news, especially with regard to any developing issues which might be of concern to Stevenage residents.
  - The need to build and maintain relationships with local media agencies.
  - The need for Members to exercise caution when using social media such as Twitter or Facebook but that training be provided to them to help build confidence.
  - The need to strengthen 'out of hours' coverage especially for social media comments.

### **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The Overview & Scrutiny Committee agreed Media and Communications as a scrutiny review item when it agreed its work programme at its meeting on the 16 March 2015.
- 3.2 Subsequently the Media and Communications Scoping document was considered and agreed by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee when it met on 19 October 2015 (see attached Appendix A).
- 3.3 At a meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 16 November 2015 Members received a presentation from the Assistant Director, Corporate Services and Transformation and the Communications Manager. Following this, Members raised a number of points about Communications at which included:
  - The importance of intelligence to pre-empt issues and proactively engage with local press.
  - The benefit of positive news, especially with regard to any developing issues which might be of concern to Stevenage residents.
  - The need to build and maintain relationships with local media agencies.
  - The need to exercise caution when using social media such as Twitter or Facebook.

- The need to strengthen 'out of hours' coverage especially for social media comments.
- 3.3.1 Based on Members comments at the presentation and in accordance with the stated aims of the scoping document, to engage with an expert external critical friend, the Assistant Director agreed to approach the LGA to carry out an independent Peer Review of the Council's communications and Members agreed to keep their review on hold pending the outcome of the Peer Review.
- 3.3.2 Members agreed to effectively put their review on hold while the LGA Peer Review Team were undertaking their work, as it was felt by Members and officers that this work would be to a greater capacity and more far reaching than the Committee's review could have achieved continuing with their own work.
- 3.3.3 On 8 February 2018 David Holdstock, Director of Communications at the Local Government Association presented to the Committee the findings of the independent Peer Review of the Council's Communications.

#### **4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS**

- 4.1 Members had previously identified areas of development for the Council in relation to Media and Communications as detailed at recommendation 2.1.5 and paragraph 3.3.
- 4.2 The Committee received the presentation and a copy of the final report and recommendation from the LGA Communications Peer Review, presented by David Holdstock, Director of Communications at the Local Government Association. This laid out the Review's agreed focus which was structure, capacity and capability; internal communications and place branding, which collectively aimed to identify whether the current model for delivering communications was the right one; how effective was the Council at communicating with, informing and engaging all staff members and how effective was the Council in promoting Stevenage as a place.
- 4.3 Achieving Good Communications
- 4.3.1 The Peer Review outlined the importance of good communications and how the Council could achieve this. The review provided challenge regarding leadership (clarity of purpose and commitment) which was crucial and has challenged the Council on this issue regarding its strategic planning around communications. To this end the Council should strive to achieve a fully-resourced communications plan, linked to the Council's corporate priorities that were owned by everyone.
- 4.4 Strong Leadership
- 4.4.1 The Peer Review had found that the areas for improvement were fairly typical of many other local authorities but it highlighted that Stevenage was a hugely ambitious Council, with a will at all levels to deliver change. The Peer Review found that in terms of corporate communications, the Council was strong or very strong in communications leadership from the Leader of the Council and clear staff leadership from the Chief Executive and showed a

strong commitment to improving communications. Also participation in the Modern Member Programme, which was a valued development opportunity, was a good step forward in terms of communications within the Council.

#### 4.5 Place Branding

4.5.1 In terms of Stevenage's branding, the Peer Review focused on the strengths and issues around place branding. Stevenage had all the elements required and a good basis to build upon, its strengths including a shared vision of priorities amongst Members, staff and residents. Stevenage held a strong basis for a place narrative given, amongst other things, its proud history and bright future. The Peer Review had found that Members were keen to be ambassadors for Stevenage. In terms of issues around place branding, there was a need for a place brand for Stevenage to be fully articulated and shared; to demonstrate that Stevenage was changing (e.g. clear timescales, milestones and tangible delivery of regeneration etc.) and for a co-ordinated approach to marketing Stevenage as a place. Stevenage needed to have a cohesive story, i.e. what did Stevenage want to be famous for?

#### 4.6 Internal Communications Team

4.6.1 The Peer Review found that the Council's current internal communications had a number of strengths and had shown a big improvement over the last 18 months, with visible leadership and staff recognising the difference. There had been improved staff engagement and some innovative approaches to internal communications. There had also been some improvement in Member communications. However, in terms of the current internal communications there were inconsistencies in approach to internal communication and there was a need to improve current communications channels (e.g. intranet, frequency of communication and networks for managers at all levels).

#### 4.7 Structure, Capacity and Capability of the Communications Team

4.7.1 With regard to the structure, capacity and capability the Communications Team was relatively well resourced for a Borough Council and it had "City" ambitions. The Communications Team was delivering a high volume of communications and possessed some good skills and showed a commitment to continued development. Members received good briefings ahead of media interviews and had a good relationship with the Press. This evidence was in line with the original work that Scrutiny Members found when they interviewed the team, who offered a very comprehensive service. However, in terms of structure, capacity and capability, the Peer Review found that the Council lacked a central, strategic oversight and that communications was not consistently part of the Council's decision-making processes.

#### 4.8 Strategic Planning and Priority Setting

4.8.1 The Peer Review also found that Communications, as a service, was reactive and its approach was not sufficiently strategic with a lack of strategic planning or link to strategic priorities. Communications needed to improve measurement and evaluation and that its communications competencies were a little out of date. The communications plans were too complex and that the Team was sometimes seen as a "blocker." There was an inconsistent approach to corporate identity and a lack of robust process for

design and print. The Council's website content, insofar as the way it was structured, was a risk of a single point of failure.

- 4.9 On key issues to be addressed, the Peer Review Team's findings were that:
- 4.10 There was a need for the whole of the Council to step-up its communications effort to match the ambition of the Council;
- 4.11 The Council to agree place and corporate narrative (that everybody could use);
- 4.12 The Council's communications resources to be strategically aligned with the Council's agreed priorities and to co-ordinate activity.
- 4.13 The Council to take a more confident, less risk-averse approach to communications;
- 4.14 The Council to make more effective use of communications resources, targeted at agreed priorities (both politically and managerially)
- 4.15 There was a need to evidence the impact of communications (what did success look like?);
- 4.16 Time and space be created for shared Senior Leadership Team and Executive Board sessions; and
- 4.17 Following through to delivery, issues are seen through to the end both internally and externally.
- 4.18 Peer Review Recommendations
- 4.18.1 Within the Peer Review report the team made a series of Strategic recommendations, Council wide recommendations and Operational recommendations which refer to the issues outlined above, which the Overview and Scrutiny Committee supported.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **Financial Implications**

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications to this report.

### **Legal Implications**

- 5.2 There are no direct legal implications to this report.

### **Equalities and Diversity Implications**

- 5.3 There are no direct Equalities and Diversity Implications to this report.

## **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

BD1 LGA Communications Peer Review Report and Recommendations

## **APPENDICES**

A O&S Committee Media & Communications Scoping Document