

# Communication Panel Final Report

Report of the Chairman of the panel, Cllr Zilliah Brooks

## Recommended:

1. **That the Committee feels that the proposals of the panel should be considered as part of the development of the Council's new Communications Strategy.**
2. **That the Committee reviews progress in twelve months.**

### Summary:

- The Overview and Scrutiny Committee appointed a member panel to review how the Council communicates information to residents, how effective this is and what opportunities there are to develop and strengthen our approach in the future based on new technology and changing habits.
- This report summarises the findings of the panel and provides proposals for how the Council can continue to develop its approach to communicating with residents.

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 In July 2021, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee appointed a member panel to review how the Council communicates information to residents, how effective this is and what opportunities there are to develop and strengthen our approach in the future based on new technology and changing habits.
- 1.2 The panel was chaired by Cllr Brooks and included Cllr Baverstock, Cllr Parker, Cllr Hamilton, Cllr Bailey and Cllr Swaine.

## 2 Background

- 2.1 Since setting up the panel in 2021, members have explored a range of different communications methods and approaches. The scope of the panel included a review of corporate communications, including social media, the website and press, member communications, and communications direct from services, including letters to residents. Given the scale and nature of work undertaken across the Council, it is not possible to review every type of communication, but the panel has instead focused on a broad selection of examples. A copy of the initial scope can be accessed via the following link: [Test Valley Borough Council Overview & Scrutiny Committee](#).
- 2.2 The Panel acknowledged the extensive range of work that the Council undertakes to engage and involve residents through community planning activities and through the cutting-edge work undertaken to develop our approach to the use of deliberative engagement. Although this is a form of communication, it was recognised that this was not within the scope of this panel, instead the focus would be more on the provision of and access to information through our communication channels.

### **3 Review findings**

#### **Website and online services**

- 3.1 The panel has explored how the Council communicates key information through its website and the user experience with a view to understanding any areas for improvement.
- 3.2 Data shows that the website is accessed by multiple groups of people (residents, partners, businesses, members, visitors etc) and its primary use is transactional. The website acts as a gateway to the Council's online services including bespoke services developed by third parties. People visit the website to find specific information. By making services and information easy to find and access online, ensures that we can meet the needs and expectations of those who want to transact with us digitally, whilst maintaining our other contact methods.
- 3.3 The panel heard from residents via two focus groups. Feedback overall matches the data outlined in 3.2 in that most people visit the website to find out key information or to do something such as request a service. Rarely do they visit the website to review general content. The focus groups indicated that they felt that the website should have the following characteristics:
- Be user friendly
  - Accessible
  - Informative/current
  - Engaging
  - Easy search function
  - Structured so there is a clear index on what you need to find
  - Mobile friendly
- 3.4 Both focus groups highlighted that the search function could be improved to help people to navigate the site easier to get to the information that they are looking for. Officers have confirmed with the panel that this is an area that does require improvement as part of the development of a new website. Other ideas raised by the focus groups included the importance of an easy to navigate layout, limiting the use of pop-ups and whether a more standardised approach to design similar to other public service websites would provide greater consistency and ease of access.
- 3.5 This first round of focus groups provided some valuable insight to support the review. However, the panel recognises these were quite small groups and broadly the same demographics. Therefore, the panel would encourage further consultation to ensure a broader range of perspectives and experiences can be gained to inform future development of our approach to communications.

3.6 The panel held a website session with officers and a third party who specialises in digital services. The panel heard that a new website should concentrate on a simplified navigation and structure based around subject areas and not be based on the Council's internal organisation structure. Home page structure should focus on a good and visible search along with buttons to access the top 6-8 user transactions and a section for news and marketing. The focus of this is about ensuring that the website is responsive to user needs and preferences.

3.7 The key messages from the session with the third-party supplier were:

The website is a hub that provides access to the Council's digital services. It is also a repository for the Council's information for the public, for officers and for members. Increasingly, people do not go to a website's home page and navigate from it but access the information or transaction they want directly via a search engine. That requires good indexing and publication of those entry points so that search engines can find them.

The transactional platforms that sit on the website should be built with the customer in mind. Regardless of how a customer communicates with the Council – self-service, email, letter, telephone or in person – customer information should be accessible to provide an integrated and seamless communication.

Many of the digital services will best be provided using third-party applications. However, as far as possible the customer access to the services should be consistent and present a common Test Valley user interface.

Not everyone will be able to use Test Valley's digital services. They may not have the skills or may be lacking equipment or connectivity. In planning for the delivery of digital services plans must be made to address the issue of digital exclusion. In the town areas facilities and support can be made available through libraries and community facilities but the problem is more challenging in the rural environment.

**3.8 The panel proposes that the opportunity to undertake user-led testing of the new Council website and online services should be incorporated into the project. This will ensure it is developed in a way that reflects how people will use the facilities with an important focus on the use of accessible language and navigation.**

3.9 Officers have confirmed that future delivery models for the website and online services are currently being explored. For example, there are a range of alternative options to procuring a purpose-built content management system (as is currently the case) with new simple to build and use and low-cost options available which give greater control and flexibility. An example of this is the local government Drupal platform, which has been created by councils, for councils. Officers are currently learning more about and engaging with users of the platform to see what opportunities this could bring for the future development of our website.

3.10 The panel has expressed its keenness to see the development of the Council's new website and online services hub to commence as soon as possible and was disappointed to have not seen the project progress sooner. Officers have acknowledged that the original timeline for development has been delayed because of needing to reassess the Council's requirements from a new site. The panel recognises that the development will be iterative as needs and expectations develop. However, officers are confident that this project will now move forward during 2023 with renewed momentum.

**3.11 The panel proposes that work to develop a new Council website and access point for digital services with enhanced search functionality, greater accessibility, and the ability to stream videos more easily be taken forward at the earliest opportunity.**

### **Social media and digital communications**

3.12 The panel received a briefing on the various digital channels that the Council uses to communicate including social media. The Council currently uses the following social media platforms

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram (launched mid 2022)
- LinkedIn

3.13 Facebook remains our main social media channel, with around 7000 followers, and an average engagement rate of 10.8% in 2022 (up 8% from 2.8% in 2021) and more than 1 million impressions for 2022. The channel continues to grow steadily, with a noticeable increase in online interaction since the pandemic. We have also seen an increase in expectation to appear in or reply to group community pages and have increased our presence here.

3.14 Residents use our Facebook page to find out about what the Council has been doing, report issues, offer feedback/praise, and to engage in general conversation or ask questions. The tone of this channel has evolved in the last year to become a more informal, fun, friendly space, whilst still offering news and updates on serious topics. This less corporate tone is perfect for social media and appeals to followers and invites further conversation and interaction.

3.15 Instagram is our newest platform, launched in late summer 2022 which is a photo and video sharing platform and is a great way in which to bring the Council to life through the use of images. Over the coming months the plan is to increase focus on this channel and invest resource into creating more captivating reels (videos) and imagery to promote the Council's services and activity. This involves closer work with our front line teams and services and sharing the impact of what they do in a more visual way.

- 3.16 Twitter continues to be a platform focused on short, snappy updates and quick customer service response. It often acts as a pointer to more in-depth content on Facebook or on the Council's website. Follower growth and engagement rate remain steady. The content for Twitter is scheduled by the corporate communications team, with the Customer Service Unit providing help with customer enquiries.
- 3.17 LinkedIn is a channel that we are starting to use more, focusing on recruitment and job opportunities. Our LinkedIn will become a place that promotes TVBC as an employer as well as listing job opportunities.
- 3.18 Separate to our main TVBC accounts, the Council also runs Visit Test Valley tourism pages on Facebook and Instagram and has recently taken over social media promotion for the Second Sundays market (Andover) on Facebook and Instagram.
- 3.19 In addition to social media, the Council has invested in other ways to engage people via digital channels. GovDelivery is our new email newsletter which is sent directly to people who have subscribed to topics. We have two main topics currently, which are News and Updates, and Events. They are proving to be a real success and are steadily growing with around 13,350 subscribers across both. We send out the latest information from the Council and across Test Valley and include details on how recipients can contact us directly if they have any questions. The majority of subscriptions comes from our website overlay, where we have seen more than 450 additional subscribers in the last 4 months.
- 3.20 **The panel proposes that further work is undertaken to build upon the reach and work of the Council's digital newsletter through GOVDelivery to communicate and engage residents on a variety of hot topics.**

### **Member and officer communications**

- 3.21 The panel has considered how the Council is modernising its approach to member and officer communications in the context of New Ways of Working, where people are working in a more agile way in a range of locations. The panel has looked at the Members' Information Bulletin and Members' Area of the website linking with the work of the cross-party Member and Community Development working group. The panel considered changes to enhance the bulletin and looked at the opportunity to transfer the information currently on the Members' Area to the Modern.Gov platform which hosts all of the committee papers and agendas.
- 3.22 As a result of this work by the panel and the Member and Community Development Group, a new Members' Information Bulletin was launched in early 2022. The new bulletin has a much more accessible style and new content has been developed including the work of councillors within their communities. The panel encourages members to continue to provide feedback to officers so that the bulletin continues to develop and become a key information tool for councillors.

- 3.23 The panel received a briefing from the Head of Strategy and Innovation on the work being undertaken as part of the new ways of working programme. This provides the focus for how the Council will work in the future, embracing new technologies and adapting to changes in how people access services. The panel were keen to understand how this could enhance communications but also drew attention to feedback they had received where communication could be improved when contacting the Council. As a result of this feedback, further training and guidance has been rolled out across services to ensure that the use of contact channels such as telephones remains consistent and accessible.
- 3.24 The panel proposes that a briefing note is provided to the committee within twelve months, to give an update on the new ways of working and how much improvement there has been on communication between members, officers and residents. In addition, work is to be undertaken to ensure that contact details of officers and councillors are readily available through an appropriate database.
- 3.25 The panel reflected throughout the review the impact that COVID-19 had on working practices and the way in which people changed how they communicated and interacted within and outside of organisations. The panel felt that it is important to learn lessons from this period as there were examples where communication had not met expectations as working practices had changed. The panel would like to see more training on systems such as telephones and a renewed focus on maintaining excellent communication.
- 3.26 The panel received an update on the work being undertaken regarding our future requirements of our telephone system as people begin to communicate with the Council in different ways. The panel felt that it would be important for members to be briefed on any changes to the telephone system in the future.
- 3.27 **The panel proposes that if a new telephone system is adopted, that a member/officer workshop should be arranged so that a full understanding of its functionality is gained.**

#### **Letter communications**

- 3.28 The panel has reviewed several letter templates from a range of services and have given feedback on how they could be improved. While the panel reflected that the tone of the Council's letters will vary depending on their purpose and message, they did suggest some changes to letters sent out in a regulatory or enforcement capacity. The purpose being to ensure that our letters are accessible, written clearly with the appropriate tone and that residents can understand what is being asked of them. Officers from the relevant services have been working with the Communications Manager to take this work forward and changes are to be made to the letters set out in the paragraph below.

3.29 The panel recommended that care should be taken to communicate in normal and simple language rather than more specialist Council speak. It was suggested that material should be subject to readability tests using facilities such as The Flesch-Kincaid readability assessment built into Word.

**3.30 The panel proposes that amendments to the Council tax reminder letter, housing benefit letter and private hire licensing letter are considered in line with the feedback given by members and shared with the committee at its meeting in April.**

#### **4 Commentary (Panel Chair)**

4.1 As the Chairman of the panel, I have included the following commentary to reflect upon the wide-ranging work that the panel has undertaken on this important topic of how the Council communicates.

4.2 Communication is an important interface with our residents and officers that makes change effective and responsive. The panel members and I believe it is important that the Council encourages residents to engage with the work of the Council and that we continue to listen and learn from the experience our residents have when communicating with us. This should then inform our future communication plans and strategies.

4.3 As a panel we have explored a variety of ways in which the Council communicates with residents. It is important that the Council continues to offer a range of communication methods, including digital and face to face to ensure fair access to our services. The panel is keen to see the ongoing development of digital channels such as our social media platforms. These form an important part of our public image and are a valuable communication channel to reach new people and importantly connect the Council with residents and stakeholders. This includes the development of a new website as set out earlier in the report. In addition, the panel is clear that it is important the Council demonstrates how it is communicating in an inclusive way that is accessible to all, including those who are unable to engage digitally and the most vulnerable within our communities.

4.4 It is therefore important that all of our communications are working well including more formal communication such as letters which should be in plain-English and free of jargon so that people can understand them. For those residents who require information through alternative formats such as large print, braille, and tapes, it is important that information is given concisely so that they are accessible.

4.5 As a panel we recognise that one of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the changing landscape for the way people work, access services, and communicate. It is important that as the Council continues to modernise its working practices and communication channels, that the lines of communication remain accessible and that members are supported to know how best they can reach officers if they are working in different locations through email, phone and in person.

4.6 As the new corporate plan is developed the panel are keen to ensure that how we communicate our priorities and the work we do is an important part of this. Both councillors and officers have a key role to play in recognising that we are a borough of many different communities, so it is important to tailor our approach where possible so that our communication is meaningful, relevant, and appropriate to the people and community we are trying to reach.

## 5 Consultations/Communications

5.1 The panel has met on several occasions including hosting two workshops with residents to gain their views and experiences of communicating with the Council to help develop the panel's understanding of the issues and future opportunities.

5.2 In addition, the panel also met with an organisation who specialises in supporting councils in developing their digital communications channels to gain their professional insight and experiences of what others are doing within the public sector.

## 6 Conclusion

6.1 This report brings together the work of the Communications Panel. It sets out the findings of the panel and proposals that should be considered as the Council develops its onward approach to communications.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	None		
Author:	James Moody / Kathryn Binfield	Ext:	8130
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