

Update on outcomes of the Communications Panel

Report of the Head of Strategy and Innovation

Recommended:

That the progress made over the last year to deliver the recommendations of the Communications Review be noted.

SUMMARY:

This report provides an update twelve months on from the completion of the Communications panel as resolved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and sets out where the council has been able to progress many of the key issues identified by the committee.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report updates on the progress made following the Overview and Scrutiny review of communications that was reported to the Committee in March 2023.

2 Background

- 2.1 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. The panel was chaired by Cllr Brooks and included Cllr Parker, Cllr Bailey, Cllr Swain and past councillors, Cllr Hamilton and Cllr Baverstock.
- 2.2 The panel explored a range of different communications methods and approaches. The scope of the panel included a review of corporate communications, including the website, councillor communications, and communications direct from services, including letters to residents. A copy of the report can be accessed via the following link:
<https://democracy.testvalley.gov.uk/documents/s25009/OSCOM%20Communications%20Panel.pdf>
- 2.3 The report findings set out a series of proposals that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorsed. It was resolved that that the proposals should be considered as part of informing the strategic approach to communications and that the committee should receive an update on progress within twelve months.

2.4 The main areas that formed the proposals are as follows:

- Website and online services
- Digital communications
- Councillor and Officer Communications
- Communications via letters

2.5 This report updates the committee on the work undertaken across each of these areas.

3 Website and online services

3.1 Following the feedback as part of the review, officers have been investigating why the current website is not meeting expectations and to determine an appropriate course of action. Several factors have been investigated including the technology/platform used to deliver the site, the design and style of the site and also the features and functions it delivers.

3.2 The work to investigate the current website and consider alternative options has involved the following activities:

- In September 2023, an external organisation was engaged (Methods) to run a workshop with officers from across the council to explore the current site, technology platform and features to establish our future requirements and ultimately recommend a course of action.
- Brought together feedback from councillors gathered through various forums including OSCOM.
- Delivered a series of internal workshops across the organisation regarding our next Digital Strategy in January/February 2024.
- Delivered a deliberative event in January with residents focused on our communication methods of which the website formed part of the discussions.

3.3 The feedback was consistent across all activities around 3 themes:

- Search results not being returned as expected.
- Content relevance and accuracy
- Structure and navigation, not logical from a user perspective

3.4 **Search results** – Older (sometimes outdated) pages often appear to be returned higher in a search as they are deemed more popular as they would have been accessed more regularly over a longer period. To address this issue and to improve the quality of the search functionality, older pages will be deleted from the site if no longer relevant. When adding new content there will be greater focus on adding key words and promoting pages as appropriate via a key match facility (forcing the page to the top of search results). In February officers from the Strategy and Innovation service received training with our

current website supplier to understand the search function in more detail to enable web editors to use this feature more effectively which should result in an improved experience for users of the website.

- 3.5 **Content** – There is currently too much content on the website which requires a full content review to significantly reduce the number of pages on the site. Work has started on a first phase of this, and the project team are currently putting in place the resources and plans to broaden this package of work during 2024. The current website has over 3,000 pages which will be categorised, reviewed, and updated or deleted as appropriate. In this first phase, we aim to reduce the number of pages to under 2,000.
- 3.6 **Structure and navigation** – The current website was built a number of years ago mainly based around how the council's services are structured. Based on the best practice advice we have received and from user feedback, we will now look to move to a more function/task-based navigation which can be achieved within the current platform.
- 3.7 There are also opportunities to update the look and feel and overall design of the current website. The TVBC corporate brand guidelines are currently being refreshed which will include the option of using additional colours from our agreed palette which will help to promote and define different types of content on the website.
- 3.8 Following the OSCOM review, consideration was given to the options for how to best improve the website. The feedback gathered from multiple stakeholders, in conjunction with a full site analysis, has indicated that the current frustrations with the site would not be resolved by simply procuring a new website platform. Fundamentally the work outlined above regarding content management would need to be undertaken ahead of any new platform being introduced.
- 3.9 An officer project team has been formed from across the Strategy and Innovation Service and has been tasked with taking this forward as a priority. A full site map has been produced and a full site review is currently being put together. Following a review of internal resources, changes have also been put in place to build resilience and capacity within the Strategy and Innovation Service to maintain and update our website on an ongoing basis.
- 3.10 The key next steps are as follows:
- Web publishing guidelines, principles and checklist are being drafted to ensure future content is consistent by end of March 2024.
 - Full site content review to be completed (old pages removed, content updated) by end June 2024.
 - Options for a refreshed design and colour palette to be developed by end July 2024.
 - New site structure and navigation to be designed (research into best practice and other local authority sites currently underway) by end of July 2024.

4 Digital Communications

- 4.1 The Council has continued to invest in the development of its email newsletter which people are able to subscribe to a range of topics. At the time of the review, there were two topics and since then the range of topics has increased. The panel concluded that it wished to see further work be undertaken to build upon the reach and content of the email newsletter.
- 4.2 Work is underway increase the reach and quality of the newsletter, as part of a review of all our communications channels. The development of new newsletter topics has been undertaken to make sure that we are providing thematic updates that relate to specific areas of residents' interest. This now includes Green Test Valley, Landlords, Regeneration and Business Matters topics as well as Events and News
- 4.3 The Communications Team is continuously making ongoing improvements to the design and layout of the family of newsletters now produced. We are being data-led in our approach with interrogation of open rates and click-through rates so that we build on content that interests residents most, as well as testing the frequency/day/time of sending the newsletters to maximise on the above.
- 4.4 Further opportunities to promote the newsletters are being developed. For example, there is a now a sign-up to the newsletter on every page of our website, we ran a #ChristmasCheer campaign on social media to promote the newsletter, we're updating corporate email signatures as part of our brand refresh and this will include a newsletter sign-up; we're flagging the sign-up in offline publications, posters, Test Valley News, at events etc.
- 4.5 There has been a steady growth in subscribers of the newsletter. For both News and Updates and Events there has been around a 2,000 subscriber increase from this time last year. A summary of current subscriber numbers are below:
- Regeneration – 186
 - Business Matters – 1,988
 - Green Test Valley – 1,488
 - News and Updates – 10,418
 - Landlords – 260
 - Events – 7,048
- 4.6 As part of the recent deliberative event held with residents, it was clear that for most people, information received by direct email (such as the newsletter) is a preferred way in which to receive information from organisations such as the council. We will continue to look for opportunities to find out what information residents want from to take an insight-led approach to further strengthening our digital communications.

5 Councillor and officer communications

- 5.1 As part of its review, the communications panel explored how the council was maintaining and improving effective councillor and officer communications both through how information is shared, and ensuring clear internal channels for communication are in place. The report set out steps that had already been taken such as modernising the Councillors Information Bulletin which has received positive feedback.
- 5.2 Following the elections in 2023, the Democratic Services Manager and the Innovation and Business Change Manager held meetings with councillors individually to discuss their needs regarding support within the role, communications and IT equipment. As a result of this, new IT equipment is being rolled out to councillors this month, feedback regarding officer and councillor communications has informed the work of the member and community development group, and there is a renewed focus on ensuring the highest standards of communication are maintained.
- 5.3 This has also included creating more opportunities for councillors and officers to come together to build networks and learn about the work taking place across communities and through services. The recent place-based workshops that have been held across communities, following the adoption of the new corporate plan, have provided an excellent opportunity for officers and councillors to work together with local communities on developing their local priorities. In addition, the recent “Councillor Marketplace” event provided an excellent opportunity for councillors to meet with a range of officers from across all of the council services.
- 5.4 The review did highlight concerns that councillors were at times experiencing some challenges in being able to contact officers with telephone issues being highlighted. Since the review, work has been undertaken internally to explore this issue with the Customer Services Team providing valuable insight. There continues to be some issues in regard to telephones and the Council’s Management Team are working collectively to address these issues where they remain.
- 5.5 This will include an internal communication ‘behaviour change’ campaign which will be rolled out in March 2024, reminding staff to log into and use the telephone system in the way in which it is designed to ensure that calls are not missed. This will include reminding people how to use the system and a series of drop-in sessions will be held alongside a more tailored approach where a specific training need is identified.

6 Communications via letters

- 6.1 The Communications review outlined several areas in which written communications namely licensing and council tax letters could be improved. The premise of this was to ensure that residents received communication that was accessible and clear. Since the review, officers from these respective services have sought to address these concerns whilst continuing to operate within the regulations.

- 6.2 **Licensing** - The three main letters for private hire licensing have all been revised. Letters are now no more than one side of A4 and use bullet points to highlight the documentation/information required for successful renewal of the licence. Where appropriate the letters are tailored to the individual and bullet points removed where we already have or don't need a specific item. The new style letters were introduced based on feedback from applicants that it was unclear what was required resulting in incomplete applications. General feedback from applicants is that the new style letters have (in most cases) completely removed these issues.
- 6.3 **Council Tax** - The Revenues & Welfare team have made some small changes to the letter templates as a result of feedback from the communications review. However, the legislative requirements of what must be included on the letters, including, for the Council Tax reminder, the potential for additional costs and court summons, means that there is limited scope to radically change the content. However, this will be kept under review. We continue to seek other ways to contact customers that reduces the need for reminders to be issued, such as SMS text message reminders when payments are missed.
- 6.4 Other options have been considered such as re-introducing an initial soft reminder before more formal recovery begins. However, on balance, it is felt that the cost (both in actual terms such as postage and the impact of delays in recovering amounts owed) outweigh any benefits in the messages that are conveyed.
- 6.5 The outcome of the Council Tax Support review may lead to an opportunity to simplify the Council Tax Support notification letters that we know from feedback some find more difficult to understand. This is something that will likely be considered by the overview and scrutiny panel that has been recently formed that will help officers develop a new Council Tax Support scheme for 2025/26.

7 Consultations/Communications

- 7.1 To support officers in taking forward the proposals of the communications panel, experts and third parties have been engaged to provide feedback on key areas such as the website.
- 7.2 In January 2024, a deliberative event was held bringing together a cross-section of residents to consider the following question: *What is the best way to reach you as an individual with our council communications?* A series of recommendations came from this event which is informing our onward strategic approach to communications. This includes:
- Improving accessibility and usability of the website
 - Utilise existing / established publications such as parish newsletters.
 - Tailor messages to specific audiences
 - Email is the most effective way of sending out focused information.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 This report provides an update twelve months on from the completion of the Communications panel as resolved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It sets out where the council has been able to progress many of the key issues identified by the committee, whilst recognising there is still more to be done and that continuous improvement will be at the forefront of the councils ongoing strategic approach to communications.

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| <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 | | |
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| File Ref: | N/A | | |
| Report to: | Overview and Scrutiny Committee | Date: | 6 March 2024 |