Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee

In-Depth Scrutiny Review

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Effective communication and engagement arrangements are of vital importance to everything that the Council does.

1.2 In the current climate, it is important that our residents, local businesses, partners and other stakeholders are clear on the challenges that the Council faces and its plans to tackle them and, as councillors and officers we all have responsibility for the effectiveness of our communications. Effective communication is not just the role of any one team. Every member of staff and councillor has an important role to play. Each phone call, email or face to face interaction has the ability to shape the perception of the Council, communicate what it is trying to achieve and build relationships with our residents and stakeholders.

1.3 Successful communication helps to ensure local people understand the local services available to them, and provides a mechanism to engage, consult and ask for feedback on those services. Communications can also inform residents about local and national issues, shapes the way that people hear about the achievements of the Council, provides a vital role in warning and informing in emergency situations, and much more. Those who feel that they are well-informed about the Council tend to be more positive about the authority on a wide range of issues and are less likely to feel that the Council is remote and impersonal or out of touch with local people and are more likely to feel that the authority offers local people good value for money and provides a good quality of service overall. Good external communication can also have a positive impact on overall satisfaction levels.

1.4 Effective internal communication and engagement aims to ensure that the Council's staff are informed, involved, engaged and motivated to achieve its priorities and objectives. Employees are more likely to stay and succeed if they have a clear understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve and how they contribute to this.

1.5 We would like to thank all councillors and officers for their contribution to the in-depth scrutiny review.

In-Depth Scrutiny Review Project Team
Councillors M Davidson, S Habermel, C Walker, M Dent, I Shead and P Collins

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Communication is essential to the delivery of the Council's services. It helps keep people informed and supports service take-up, transformation programmes and reputation management, and the delivery of the Council's ambition and priorities. The stakeholders that the Council communicates with, include:

- Residents and service users
- Our employees
- Our elected councillors
- Partner bodies/organisations
- Our business community and potential investors
- Local groups and forums
- People who help inform and influence the opinion of others

2.2 Good communication arrangements enable the Council to:

- Better understand the needs of the community
- Raise resident satisfaction, trust and confidence
- Raise the profile of Southend-on-Sea
- Attract businesses and employment to the Borough

- Make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people
- Proactively challenge

2.3 The Council's communicates through a wide range of methods, including:

- Face-to-face*
- Email
- Telephone
- Letter
- Website and social media
- Local, regional and national media
- Service information
- Community engagement
- Consultation
- Councillors, though their role as ward representatives
- Staff briefings provided by Corporate Management Team
- Other mechanisms

  * Under current Covid-19 pandemic conditions, the ability to interact face-to-face has been significantly reduced.

2.4 Different forms of communication appeal to people of different ages, social groups, and demographics, so it is important that the Council ensures that all options for increasing and improving communication are considered in order to communicate effectively with everyone.

2.5 The Council and councillors value the role of the local media which scrutinises local decision making and services. It is an important communication channel that the council takes a positive and proactive approach too, as it is helpful to the effectiveness of the Council's communications activities and ensuring that residents and stakeholders are aware of the work, services and decisions of the council.

2.6 The Strategic Communications Team is responsible for making official statements to the press or media relating to the functions and business of the Council, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member or chief officer as appropriate, and for dealing with day-to-day press or media enquiries. Southend-on-Sea has an active local media, and will also frequently talk directly to councillors from across the political spectrum to ascertain their views on local matters and council policy for example.

2.7 This in-depth scrutiny project has sought to assess the overall effectiveness of current arrangements, particularly around how the authority and its councillors communicate with local people and stakeholders and facilitate engagement and participation, given the importance of resident engagement as a key priority for the Council.

3. FRAMEWORK OF THE REVIEW

3.1 At its meeting on 11 July 2019, the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee agreed (Minute 201 refers) that an in-depth scrutiny review be undertaken to consider how the Council and councillors communicate with local people and stakeholders, as part of its work programme for 2019/20.

3.2 There were a number of reasons for the identification of the in-depth scrutiny project. These included concern about performance and capacity around call-handling and the communication of relevant information to residents following the cessation of the publication of the former 'Outlook' magazine for residents.

3.3 The Committee agreed that the framework for the review should be:

"How the Council and councillors communicate with local people and stakeholders."

3.4 The review was subsequently extended to also consider how the Council and councillors facilitated engagement and participation. The scope of the review was to consider:

- How the Council and councillors communicate and engage with local people, stakeholders and each other, and where improvements or changes could be made, to ensure that wherever possible the Council is projecting a professional and consistent tone and message
- The emphasis on co-production, participation and engagement and moving towards becoming a participatory Council that truly listens and acts on the concerns of its residents
- How services are designed to maximise listening and learning
- Engagement and participation
- Effective communication
- Customer Services

3.5 The review was set within the context of the Council's 2050 ambition and priorities and the following proposed outcomes for the project were agreed:

- Advice and recommendations to support the development of a new engagement portal to replace the current consultation portal
- Development of a new Participation and Engagement Strategy
- Recommendations on how the Council/Councillors communicates in both a broadcast and two-way sense

3.6 Progress with regard to the review was achieved in the first half of the 2019-20 municipal year, including the development of an action plan, and the receipt of relevant presentations. However, the completion of the project was subsequently delayed from late-2019, as a result of a number of issues connected to capacity in key service areas.

3.7 From March 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic delayed activity with regard to the completion of the review, reflecting the Council's approach to the handling of the pandemic, including the necessary focus on the delivery of key communication and engagement activity in regard to the local response to the pandemic. In addition, the dedication or redeployment of officer capacity that would have supported the review and the adoption of ongoing remote working and meeting arrangements for councillors and the Council's employees further delayed progress with the project and, as a result, it was not possible for the in-depth review to be completed by the end of the municipal year.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 The review was undertaken on behalf of the Scrutiny Committee by a Project Team comprising Councillors M Davidson, S Habermel, C Walker, M Dent, I Shead and P Collins, and former councillors B Ayling and H McDonald. Former Councillor Ayling was appointed Chair of the Project Team in November 2020 and Councillor D Garston regularly attended meetings of the Project Team as chair of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

4.2 The Project Team was supported in its review by a team of relevant officers including S Meah-Sims (Head of Corporate Strategy), A Keating (Strategic Communications Manager), N Constantine (Service Design Manager), E Butler (Head of Customer Services), K Pachalko (Engagement and Participation Manager), B Nemeth (Community Capacity Advisor) and F Abbott/S Tautz (Principal Democratic Services Officers/Project Co-ordinators).

4.3   The Project Team met on four occasions between July 2019 and February 2021.

4.4   The project was undertaken using an evidence-based approach to the consideration of a range of options, through a mixture of desk top research and informative presentations that supported our understanding of the provision of current communication and engagement activities. As a result of the restrictions imposed by the national and local response, no witness sessions or site visits were held in respect of the project, although third party examples were presented to the group by officers.

5.   COVID-19 PANDEMIC

5.1   During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Council has communicated and engaged with local communities at an unprecedented level and pace across a wide range of issues. Effective prioritisation has been used throughout the period of the pandemic to plan all communications activity on a campaign-led approach, with the aim of safeguarding and protecting the health and wellbeing of residents, businesses and staff. Where other agencies and partners have led communications activity in support of the handling of the pandemic, the Council has sought to support their work through the sharing of key messages and content.

5.2   The Council's corporate communications team has ensured ongoing engagement and communication with citizens and stakeholders throughout the pandemic, on behalf of the Local Outbreak Control Oversight and Engagement Board established to provide oversight, assurance and scrutiny of plans to prevent, contain and manage local outbreaks of COVID-19. A dedicated Coronavirus advice and support page was added to the Council's website in March 2020 and has been maintained throughout the pandemic.

5.3   The Project Team was advised that a wide range of communication had been issued during the pandemic, including messages that reinforced the 'Stay at Home' and social distancing approach to COVID-19 taken by the Government, the communication of local service changes and the 'Don't Visit Southend' initiative, alongside regular public health related communication in liaison with the Director of Public Health. Members were reminded that a regular 'councillor briefing' approach had been launched alongside the new Member Support Hub, together with an ongoing programme of business support communications and targeted social media campaigns. Methods of communications have been across the board, ranging from media work and multi-channels campaigns, through to direct communications and engagement in the form of virtual briefings with specific community groups and stakeholders, leaflets delivered directly to residents and the recruitment of 'community connectors' to act as champions and a point of contact in the community.

5.4   Although options for the live streaming of more Council meetings to encourage participation in local democracy was already being considered, the response to the pandemic has seen a significant increase in the number of meetings that are webcast through the internet and the Council's website.

6.   ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION - 'YOUR SAY SOUTHEND'

6.1   It can be easy for the Council to issue communication messages without engaging with stakeholders or listening to what they have to say and involving them in service planning. By offering opportunities for conversation and feedback, the Council can gain better insight into what matters to residents, businesses and partners and develop its services accordingly.

6.2   One of the proposed outcomes from the in-depth scrutiny project was to support the development of a new engagement portal to replace the current consultation portal and the

development of a new Participation and Engagement Strategy. At the commencement of our project, we received a number of case studies relating to the implementation of engagement portals by other local authorities, including the 'Bang the Table' platform that has been implemented locally by the Council as 'Your Say Southend'.

6.3 During the period of the scrutiny project, the 'Your Say Southend' engagement and consultation platform was launched in November 2020 to provide local residents with an opportunity to participate in discussions and consultations that are ongoing in the Borough. The platform offers residents a way to provide feedback, share ideas and influence decisions that matter to them and to facilitate engagement with individuals that might otherwise be hard to reach and will be used to complement, but not replace, traditional face-to-face methods of engagement and consultation activity. The platform is designed to support the outcomes of engagement and consultation based on the following objectives:

- Informing decisions, providing opportunities for the community to contribute to decision-making processes
- Building capacity, educating the community on a specific theme or issue to increase knowledge or change behaviours
- Strengthening relationships, building new relationships and/or improving relationships with the community.

6.4 A presentation on the 'Your Say Southend' platform was provided for all councillors in November 2020. The platform can be used to facilitate any form of local engagement, not just formal types of consultation exercise, through the use of tools to gather ideas, create forums and mapping. The platform has been used to gather stories of neighbour to neighbour and volunteer support during the COVID-19 pandemic and these stories have been reflected back to the public through the Council's social media channels, to nurture confidence and pride among the residents. It is important that local residents tell the Council about the issues, the positives and negatives on the subjects that it consults on, to help formulate inclusive improvements, projects and policies for the Borough.

6.5 The 'Your Say Southend' platform requires minimum data (username, password, email address) to be provided by residents in order for them to register for the submission of consultation responses etc, which allows the tracking of demographic data to ensure that responses to consultations etc. are representative of the local population and that conversations are kept respectful. Support is available to assist members of the public in this regard and the 'guestbook' functionality of the website enables residents to submit comments without having to formally register.

6.6 The 'Your Say Southend' engagement and consultation platform also helps the Council to:

- Establish and share good practice
- Use resources effectively
- Maximise the use of consultation findings
- Co-ordinate effort
- Avoid duplication

6.7 The 'Good Neighbours' project has also shown how the Council can encourage and facilitate citizen participation by sharing best practice ideas without unnecessary bureaucracy or the formalising of helping activity. A 'Community Connectors' programme has also been developed in conjunction with Southend Association of Voluntary Services and other partner organisations, to help communicate or signpost local people to facts and support about the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we have also recognised the importance of local councillors as community leaders.

6.8   Project owners are also encouraged to use other interactive tools as to gather ideas and stories and a number of small-scale engagement groups have been developed in liaison with the Public Health Team.

6.9   We consider that the continued development of the 'Your Say Southend' engagement and consultation platform should be supported.

7.   MEMBER SUPPORT HUB & COUNCILLOR QUERIES

7.1   The primary role of our elected councillors is to represent their ward and its residents to provide a bridge between the community and the Council. As well as being an advocate for local residents and signposting them to the right people at the Council, councillors need to keep them informed about the issues that affect them, respond to queries and investigate concerns. The Member Support Hub was established as a step towards strengthening this area.

7.2   The Hub was introduced in 2020 following a review of the existing provision of member support services within the Democratic Services and Corporate Strategy Teams, in advance of a review of business support services and functions across the authority that is to be undertaken during 2021.

7.3   The services and responsibilities of the Member Support Hub currently include:

- Contributing towards the co-ordination of general councillor queries and casework
- The provision of diary management for the Leader and Cabinet Members and the handling of Leader's mail
- The handling of enquiries and queries from Members of Parliament
- Member briefings
- Contributing towards Member's communication
- The co-ordination of Member training and development
- Co-ordination of business for the Executive Briefing with CMT

7.4   The intention for the Hub was to start it with a focus on a small range of areas, but ultimately offering support to all councillors. This has been gradually progressing with communications and co-ordination around Member training and development, and the general coordination for Councillor Queries

7.5   As part of the Councillor Queries work, we have learned that multiple routes to raise queries have created some confusion and frustration amongst councillors and officers alike, who want the system to clear, simple, respectful and speedy for everyone concerned. The current experiences are connected to 'legacy' systems and processes associated with previous structures and teams.

7.6   Work is ongoing to improve the 'Councillor Queries' process, taking onboard the current feedback from all councillors and officers. There is a need to ensure that the experience that councillors have through this process, right now, has signs of improvement, whilst a longer term, sustainable solution if found, that works with the resources available.

7.7   We consider that the ongoing work to further develop the 'Councillor Queries' facility should be supported.

8.   SELF-SERVICE - 'MY SOUTHEND'

8.1   Self-service facilities offer residents a convenient way of managing their Council services, reporting issues and contacting the authority with service requests or comments, without

having to wait in a phone queue or navigate websites. The Council has introduced the 'My Southend' platform as its interactive self-service portal for residents.

8.2 We have been advised that feedback in respect of the 'My Southend' platform indicates that the facility is generally working well. A specification for the letting of a new contract for the platform is currently being developed and will incorporate experience and learning from the use of the system to date. We understand that there will be member involvement in this process going forward.

8.3 The Project Team considers that it would be helpful if there were greater levels of 'status' indicators applied to issues reported through 'My Southend', to give increased transparency to the progress of issues raised by residents and service users. We understand that this approach will be dependent upon the integration of the platform with service-based management systems but that this will be considered as part of the development of the specification for the letting of a new contract for the platform.

9. CUSTOMER SERVICES

9.1 One of the reasons for the identification of the in-depth scrutiny project was concern about performance and capacity around call-handling. We have received and reviewed relevant call-handling performance data as part of the in-depth scrutiny project, for the key areas of:

- General Enquiries.
- Council Tax.
- Benefits.
- Switchboard.

9.2 The most recent performance information that we reviewed as part of the project was for the three-month period from November 2020 to January 2021.

9.3 Depending on the nature of an enquiry, the Council has set response targets for staff to achieve. These focus on how quickly calls are answered and how many customers end their call before it is connected (abandoned calls). A current measure of success is how many calls are answered, which shows how consistently Customer Services perform. For November and December 2020, the percentage of answered calls in each of the service areas identified in Paragraph 9.2 above was better than the current target of 80%. Unfortunately, for January 2021 the percentage of answered calls in the General Enquiries, Council Tax and Benefits service areas was below target, as a result of significant capacity issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

9.4 A second measure of customer experience is assessed by the percentage of 'abandoned' calls (where the caller hung up while in the waiting queue) made to the Council. For November and December 2020, the percentage of abandoned calls in each of the service areas identified in Paragraph 9.2 was better than the target of 10%. Unfortunately, for January 2021 the percentage of abandoned calls in the General Enquiries service area was below target, also as a result of the capacity issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

9.5 The highest call volumes during the period from November 2021 to January 2021 were for General Enquires. On average, customers waited less than five minutes for calls to the Benefits service area to be answered during January 2021, and less than four minutes for calls to the General Enquiries and Council Tax service areas and the average wait time for Switchboard calls to be answered during this period was less than one minute. We have been advised that steps have been taken to increase current officer capacity in the service areas where performance was below target in January 2021.

9.6   We believe that arrangements for the management of call queues and the length of wait time should be investigated, alongside the identification of 'repeat' calls where a previous call has been abandoned by the customer, as the telephony system does not currently provide such data.

9.7   The Project Team has considered whether further steps should be taken to improve call handling performance and reduce abandoned calls through the review of current performance targets. However, we understand that high levels of customer satisfaction are currently regarded as a better measure of success in this area and that the speed of answer of calls made to the Council, is regarded an outdated measure of performance.

9.8   Current call handling performance has generally been above target during the period of the project and is considered to be acceptable, as no complaints have been received in this regard. The further improvement of current call handling performance would require the identification of dedicated resources and we believe that it would therefore be preferable to continue the Council's channel-shift focus on moving contact away from the telephone towards online activity wherever possible, in response to changing customer demands and expectations, and to free up resources to give staff time to deal with more complex enquiries.

9.9   As part of our project, some members have identified the importance of the internal telephone directory as a means of identifying contact information for officers of the Council. Improvements to the internal telephone directory were most recently implemented in advance of an upgrade of the telephony system, alongside the introduction of a facility for officers to 'self-update' their respective directory data. The directory is also updated when officers join, leave or move within the authority. ICT also conduct a quarterly comparison with data held in Microsoft Outlook to either update or provide the detail for telephone directory updates where discrepancies are identified. Although any internal directory entry that appears to be incorrect or does not have the information that members require, can also be reported to worklife@southend.gov.uk so that the entry can be updated as required, we consider that steps should also be taken to ensure that the contact telephone numbers and email addresses of all employees, especially new employees, are entered into the internal directory as soon as employment commences.

9.10   The Project Team has been advised that contact details for officers are also available through the Microsoft Teams platform that the Council has utilised widely throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand that Teams can be easily used to contact officers and that support in the use of the platform is available for members.

9.11   The Project Team was advised that call-handling technology proved problematic during the initial COVID-19 lockdown period, particularly around remote working, where domestic broadband capability had proved to be slower than at the Civic Centre. We have noted that, whilst such issues have generally now been resolved, real-time call handling data is currently only available for officers working from the Civic Centre and that an analysis of call traffic is to be undertaken.

9.12   The COVID-19 pandemic placed significant challenges on the Registration Service, as some services could not be provided remotely. Although some customer service staff are now working from the Civic Centre once again, the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the number of birth registration appointments had to be limited, although in situations where birth registration was urgent or was nearing the legal timescale for completion, arrangements were in place for this to be undertaken.

9.13   The Project Team suggested that it was not always easy to find information on the Council's website or intranet using the respective search facilities, particularly in respect of details relating to meetings of committees etc., although it is already possible to search for information using generic search criteria related to services. As a result of this feedback, a

number of improvements to the search function on the website have now been implemented by ensuring that a search for 'meetings' for example takes a user straight to the Modern.Gov democracy system, which manages publicly available information related to democratic functions (councillors, committees and meetings etc.).

9.14 The Council welcomes petitions and recognises that they are a way in which residents can let the authority know their concerns. Anyone who lives, works or studies in the Borough (including under 18's) can sign or organise a petition. We have considered whether there is any reluctance on the part of the public to use the Council's on-line petition system, as anecdotal evidence appears to suggest that people are sometimes reluctant to 'register' on the Council's website to start a new petition or to provide a 'signature' in support of an existing petition. We have been reminded however that it is important that safeguards are in place to protect against any abuse of petitions through the uncontrolled acceptance of 'signatures'.

10. SOCIAL NETWORKS

10.1 The way we communicate as a society has continued to change as the media landscape shifts from traditional media to social and digital media, and the Council needs to ensure that its communications adapt to reach stakeholders. This includes supporting residents to do things digitally, as well as continuing to reach those who aren't online

10.2 Social media is a quick and easy way to get in touch or stay up to date and most local authorities have comprehensive cover across social media channels. The use of social media in local government has increased rapidly over recent years as organisations have seen the benefits of engaging with residents and customers through social media channels.

10.3 The Council uses Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and other social media networks to reach out to local communities. Several of the Council's service areas such as culture and tourism also have their own social media (Facebook and Twitter) accounts. The Council's main corporate social media channels are monitored by the Corporate Communications Team. The corporate Twitter and Facebook accounts comprise of:

- Council news and events.
- Updates and promotions of the Council's services, decisions and policies.

10.4 These feeds will also often share information from relevant partner organisations or other council accounts run by other teams.

10.5 Social media networks can be very useful in communicating information about councillors' activities well as providing links to sources of information or signposting to other organisations. We consider that it is important that members of the Council should be able to use social media as a tool to share information with people and groups in their communities and to engage residents in productive two-way conversation.

10.6 Social media can be a useful way of finding out what people are talking about locally, and their concerns and interests. It can also be useful for finding out about breaking news and news from the Council and is a good way of making residents more aware of the work that their councillors do. Councillors are an advocate for local residents and signposting them to the right people and services at the Council and its partners, councillors also need to keep them informed about decisions and issues that affect them.

11. RESIDENT INFORMATION

11.1 Another of the reasons for the identification of the in-depth scrutiny project included concern about the ongoing communication of relevant information to residents following the previous

cessation of the publication of the 'Outlook' magazine for residents that was produced on a quarterly basis and distributed to all households in the borough, as well as being available at libraries etc.

11.2 As a result of budget pressures, the publication and distribution of 'Outlook' was ceased from 2016/17 in favour of other forms of targeted communication including on-line and other forms of social media already available to the Council, to keep residents informed about services.

11.3 We understand that it is not intended that the publication of 'Outlook' magazine be reinstated but have been advised that some relevant Council information that was previously contained in the publication, would be included as a separate information booklet insert with the Council Tax bills for 2021/22. The booklet features an introduction from the Chief Executive and includes information about the following:

- Councillor information (link to the Council's website).
- Service information (contact details for specific service areas).
- Recycling and waste services.
- 'My Southend' (for reporting local issues.
- Southend Adult Community College.
- Southend Pass.

11.4 The booklet for 2021/22 necessarily also includes a significant amount of information about the COVID-19 advice and support that is available from the Council and its partners, including:

- Southend Coronavirus Action (for help whilst self-isolating).
- How to treat coronavirus symptoms at home.
- COVID-19 testing.
- Mental health support (contact details for specific service providers).
- Financial hardship (information on specific support services).

11.5 We have been very impressed with the form and content of the information booklet produced for inclusion with the Council Tax bills for 2021/22 and consider that this approach to the provision of a range of relevant information from the authority and its partners should be continued for 2022/23 and future years. We recognise however that there are limitations on the amount of information that can be included in the booklet, in order to keep this within the budget for the distribution of the Council Tax bills and that the timeframe for the compilation of the booklet needs to meet the demands of the annual Council Tax billing process.

11.6 We have considered whether the information booklet included with the Council Tax bills this year could also incorporate a brief a single statement from each of the political and non-political groups that comprise the Council. However, we understand that the Recommended Code of Practice for Local Authority Publicity, which provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity, does not generally permit the use of public funds for the promotion of political parties.

11.7 An e-communication system was launched in 2019 to enable local residents and anyone else to sign-up to receive news updates from the Council by email. This system currently has nearly 16,000 subscribers who are signed up for a range of bulletins ranging from general news to weekly planning applications. The council's Communications Team is working with various service areas to maximise the use of this system, with a number of teams such as early years and South Essex Homes using it to communicate with their key stakeholders.

12. COUNCILLOR-OFFICER COMMUNICATIONS

12.1 Effective communication between councillors and officers is essential if the partnership necessary for the effective running of the Council is to be successful. Councillors and officers are indispensable to one another and respect and communication between both is essential for good local government. Together, they bring the critical skills, experience and knowledge required to manage an effective council. Mutual respect, trust and good communication are key to establishing good councillor and officer relations, and councillors and officers must be able to communicate clearly and openly, avoiding ambiguity and the risk of misunderstanding.

12.2 A new Protocol on Councillor/Officer Relations was adopted by the Council in December 2020, to improve the effective working relations between councillors and officers. An action plan to help embed the new Protocol and enhance positive working relations was also agreed as part of the new Protocol.

12.3 The Project Team considers that it is important that councillors should always feel able to identify any areas in which they could help to improve the Council's communications activities, or how officers can support councillors to communicate and engage with residents effectively and suggest that improved councillor-officer communication arrangements should be linked to the delivery of the action plan for the new Protocol on Councillor/Officer Relations. We also consider that the appropriate use of Facebook and other social media platforms by councillors as a means of engaging successfully with their communities, should be part of this work.

13. PROFESSIONAL AND CONSISTENT TONE AND MESSAGE

13.1 We believe that the Council should communicate in a simple, straightforward and consistent way, to project a positive, engaging and professional image to local residents and partners though a consistent style, although we recognise that the tone of communications will often need to be adapted for relevant situations.

13.2 We appreciate for example that legal communications or committee etc. reports must often take a formal tone and structure but consider that use of the 'wrong' tone or jargon, can have a negative effect on how well communication is received, as the recipient may react negatively. We feel that there have been some examples of correspondence issued by the Council that could be construed as being threatening in tone and consider that, where it is necessary to issue 'negative' correspondence (i.e., relating to the refusal of something), this should be gracious and understanding in tone, rather than imposing. Additionally, we believe that correspondence should express sympathy and be caring and friendly where relevant, without being patronising to the recipient. We want to make sure that the tone of communications and correspondence is positive, whilst avoiding being officious or over-authoritative. A consistent tone is also important to ensure that internal and external stakeholders have the right perception of the Council.

13.3 However, we do recognise that some types 'standard' correspondence (particularly some of that used by the Council Tax Section) currently in use across service areas needs to set out a factual position which unfortunately residents and councillors do not always like to hear. We have been reminded that the Council has a duty to collect Council Tax and must comply with the law in terms of collection and recovery action and how this is communicated to residents.

13.4 We consider that greater use should be made by the Council of the Plain English Campaign's 'Crystal Mark' accreditation for the clarity of documents, which we believe is the only internationally recognised accreditation for organisations that want to provide the clearest possible information. Although the Council is listed on the website of the Plain English

Campaign as an organisation that currently has a Crystal Mark on one or more of its documents, no information appears to be available to indicate the number of the Council's documents that currently have Crystal Mark accreditation. We consider that it would therefore be appropriate for a full review to be made of 'standard' letter and email type correspondence currently in use across service areas.

13.5 The Project Team considers that the Council does not always bring together all the information that it holds about residents or service users to deliver seamless services, and that residents are too often requested to re-supply information that has already been provided to another service area. We consider that, particularly in the case of the local elderly population, that this can often be confusing for people.

13.6 Although we fully recognise and support the principles of current data protection legislation to protect the processing of the personal data of our residents and service users, we believe that thorough investigation should be made of opportunities for increased data sharing across the authority, to change and improve how we work with people to better reflect the 'bigger picture' and the emotional intelligence that might be possessed by the Council to help meet customer needs and expectations. We fully understand that this work would not be able to be undertaken on a purely service-specific basis and that a corporate commitment would be required in view of the significant number of different systems and process in use across the Council.

13.7 We believe that increased data sharing wherever possible, would also go some way towards addressing our concerns with regard to the use of a professional and consistent tone as part of the Council's communications and have been advised that appropriate benchmarking by the Corporate Strategy Group with other similar local authorities, could be an appropriate first stage in this process.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

14.1 We consider that the review was undertaken within the context of the Council's 2050 ambition and priorities and that, whilst allowing for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the proposed outcomes for the project have been achieved, albeit in a different context to that originally established in July 2019 when the scope of the project was determined.

14.2 We recommend the following:

COVID-19 Pandemic

(a)   That the efforts of the Council in engaging with local communities across a wide range of issues during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, be recognised.

Engagement & Consultation – 'Your Say Southend'

(b)   That the continued development of the 'Your Say Southend' engagement and consultation platform that provides local residents with an opportunity to participate in discussions and consultation exercises, be supported.

Member Support Hub & Councillor Queries

(c)   That the establishment of the Member Support Hub to provide dedicated support for councillors to communicate and engage with residents effectively be welcomed, and that the continued development of the facilities offered by the Hub be supported.

(d)   That work to further develop the 'Councillor Queries' facility, that provides a direct contact route for councillors to raise queries with regard to their community casework

activities, be supported. This includes a recommendation to put Councillor Queries forward as a future In-Depth Scrutiny Project, to be developed rapidly as a co-designed councillor/officer improvement project.

Customer Services

(e)   That appropriate steps be taken to ensure that the contact telephone numbers and email addresses of all officers of the Council, especially new employees, are added to the internal telephone directory as soon as possible.

(f)   That councillors be encouraged to provide details of any specific search enquiries that have proved problematic in terms of identifying information on the Council's website or intranet.

Social Networks

(g)   That an approach be developed for the use of social media by councillors as a tool to share information with people and groups in their communities and to engage residents in productive two-way conversation.

(h)   That councillors identify any areas in which they could help to improve the Council's communications activities, or how officers can support councillors to communicate and engage with residents effectively, particularly through the appropriate use of Facebook groups and other social media platforms by councillors as a means of engaging successfully with their communities.

Resident Information

(i)   That the information booklet produced for inclusion with the Council Tax bills for 2021/22 be welcomed and that this approach to the provision of relevant Council and partner information be continued for 2022/23 and future years.

(j)   That the Corporate Communications Team continue to work with service areas to expand the number of e-newsletters to help those service areas communicate effectively with their target audiences.

Councillor-Officer Communications

(k)   That the enhancement of councillor-officer communications be included as part of the action plan for the new Protocol on Councillor/Officer Relations that was adopted in December 2020.

Professional and Consistent Tone and Message

(l)   That investigation be made of opportunities for increased data sharing across the authority to support the provision of seamless services, including appropriate benchmarking with other similar local authorities.

(m)   That a review be undertaken of relevant 'standard' correspondence currently in use across the Council's service areas to ensure the consistent use of a clear and concise style and tone that demonstrates respect for residents and other stakeholders.

(n)   That consideration be given to the identification of opportunities to increase the number of the Council's documents that currently have Crystal Mark accreditation, to ensure that the authority communicates clearly in all relevant situations.

  [ENDS] 1.0