

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Report of Executive Director (Legal & Democratic Services)

to

Cabinet

on

27 July 2021

Agenda
Item No.

Report prepared by: S. Tautz (Principal Democratic Services Officer)

In-Depth Scrutiny Project - 'How the Council and Councillors Communicate with Local People and Stakeholders.'

**Relevant Scrutiny Committee(s): Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member: Councillor P Collins
Part 1 (Public Agenda Item)**

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To present the final report of the In-Depth Scrutiny Project – 'How the Council and Councillors Communicate with Local People and Stakeholders.'

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 **That Cabinet approve the report and recommendations arising from the in-depth scrutiny project, detailed at Paragraph 14 of the attached report.**

3. Background

- 3.1 At its meeting held on 11 July 2019, the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee agreed that an in-depth scrutiny project be undertaken to consider how the Council and councillors communicate with local people and stakeholders (Minute 201 refers). The project plan for the in-depth scrutiny project was agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 10 October 2019 (Minute 411 refers).
- 3.2 The project was led by a member Project Team for which appointments were agreed by the Council at its meeting on 16 May 2019. The Project Team comprised the following members: 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 attended meetings of the Project Team as Chair of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.
- 3.3 Officer support for the project was provided by Stephen Meah-Sims (Head of Corporate Strategy), Adam Keating (Strategic Communications Manager), Nick Constantine (Service Design Manager), Ellen Butler (Head of Customer Services), Kamil Pachalko (Engagement and Participation Manager), Boglarka

Nemeth (Community Capacity Advisor) and Fiona Abbott/Steve Tautz (Project Co-ordinators).

- 3.4 Progress with regard to the review was achieved in the first half of the 2019/20 municipal year, including the development of the project plan and the receipt of relevant presentations. However, the completion of the projects was subsequently delayed from late-2019 as a result of a number of issues including reduced officer capacity in key service areas.
- 3.5 From March 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic also further delayed activity with regard to the completion of the review, reflecting the Council's response to the pandemic, including the necessary focus on priority activities and the delivery of key services to local residents. As a result, it was not possible for the in-depth review to be completed by the end of the municipal year and the Committee agreed that it be carried forward into the 2020/21 municipal year.
- 3.6 The draft final report and recommendations arising from the in-depth scrutiny project was agreed by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 8 July 2021 (Minute 133 refers). An overview of the evidence considered by the Project Team is set out in the report.
- 3.7 The scrutiny committees have agreed that a joint approach be taken to in-depth scrutiny activity for 2021/22 around the theme of 'Enabling Councillors to be Effective' and the scoping of such project will incorporate appropriate matters of importance to councillors within this theme, including the improvement of the 'Councillor Queries' process. It is intended that this joint project will complement work currently being carried out around councillor development and the separate review to be undertaken of the Council's Constitution, to which all members will have an opportunity to contribute

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 In accordance with Scrutiny Procedure Rule 10 (Part 4 (e) of the Constitution), the report of the in-depth scrutiny report is attached at Appendix 1 for approval by the Cabinet.
- 4.2 The recommendations from the review are set out in Section 14 of the report. There are no recommendations arising from the review that have budget implications that require consideration as part of future years' budget processes prior to implementation.
- 4.3 The overarching recommendations from the review are as follows:

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.

- (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.

4.4 The Cabinet is requested to endorse the recommendations arising from the in-depth scrutiny project.

5. Other Options

5.1 To note the report but not progress any of the recommendations.

6. Reasons for Recommendations

6.1 Not applicable

7. Corporate Implications

7.1 Contribution to the Southend 2050 Road Map

In the context of the Southend 2050 ambition and priorities, the following proposed outcomes were set for the project:

- To support the development of a new engagement portal to replace the current consultation portal.
- The development of a new Participation and Engagement Strategy.
- Ensuring that the Council and councillors communicate in both a broadcast and two-way sense.

7.2 Financial Implications

A number of the recommendations arising from the in-depth scrutiny project have financial implications that will require consideration as part of future years' budget processes prior to implementation. The financial implications of these recommendations will be identified as proposals for their implementation are developed.

7.3 Legal Implications

None

7.4 People Implications

None

7.5 Property Implications

None

7.6 Consultation

As described in the report

7.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications

None

7.8 Risk Assessment

None

7.9 Value for Money

None

7.10 Community Safety Implications

None

7.11 Environmental Impact

None

8. Background Papers

None

9. Appendices

Final report of the In-Depth Scrutiny Project (Appendix 1)