

Cheshire East Council

Report to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting:	1 August 2017
Report of:	Kath O'Dwyer
Subject/Title:	Cheshire East Council Communications Peer Review
Portfolio Holder:	Cllr Peter Groves

1. Report Summary

- 1.1. This report considers the Local Government Association Peer Review of Communications, undertaken in September 2016, the recommendations of that review and progress against those recommendations.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. That the Committee be invited to consider the recommendations contained in the report and comment/make observations as it considers appropriate;
- 2.2. That the Committee be invited to comment on the progress made against the recommendations contained in the report;
- 2.3. That the Committee be invited to monitor the progress of work relating to the Action Plan as appropriate.

3. Other Options Considered

- 3.1. N/A

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1. The Communications Peer Review was commissioned by Mike Suarez, Chief Executive. The review was undertaken 27 – 29 September 2016.
- 4.2. The review team was asked to look at the structure and ways of working of the communications team (and other communications resources across the council) to see if these were 'fit for purpose' and that appropriate strategies were in place and aligned to council priorities; that members felt well supported and informed; that internal communications were effective; and that the reputation of the council was well managed.

- 4.3. The review team discussed Cheshire East Council's communications function with a range of key people from across the council and its partners and reviewed key documentation provided in advance of the review. People interviewed by the team included:
- Leading members from the administration and opposition groups and non-executive councillors from across CEC
 - Senior officers of CEC
 - Staff responsible for external communications, internal communications and consultation from the corporate Communications Team and across CEC.
 - Managers from the Corporate, People and Place Directorates and also staff from the council's alternative service delivery vehicles (ASDVs – wholly owned companies delivering services on behalf of the council) with responsibility for communications
 - Managers and staff from specialist support services such as HR / Organisational Development; customer services; web and digital
 - A front line staff focus group
 - Representatives of the local media
 - Representatives from some key partner agencies in Cheshire East
 - Local residents (a focus group of Citizen's Panel members).
- 4.4. The review team made a number of recommendations and shared these in summary with senior officers and members shortly after the completion of the review.
- 4.5. A full report was shared in the weeks after the review and has subsequently been published.
- 4.6. A project team was formed to ensure that the Council has internal and external communications functions that are fully aligned with the Council's strategy and priorities moving forwards and will deliver effective communications in the most cost-efficient and timely manner possible. Work within the project plan is informed by the peer review and directly addresses many of the specific recommendations.
- 4.7. A high level project plan, showing key products / outputs, is shown overleaf:

LGA Peer review recommendation	Products / actions	Status	Completion date
Strategic priorities			
7.1a) Undertake a fundamental review of communications and engagement across CEC, including ASDVs – this should give the council a full understanding of the scope of communications activity across the organisation and the different methods and resources currently employed.	A comprehensive survey of Heads of Service, Directors and representatives from ASDVs was designed and undertaken November 2016 - January 2017 to establish resources, priorities and activities.	Complete – findings used to inform Connected Communications – Corporate Communications Strategy 2017/18	Jan 2017
	A financial review of communications spending was commissioned and undertaken by finance colleagues	Complete - findings used to inform Connected Communications – Corporate Communications Strategy 2017/18	Jan 2017
	A review of communications commissioning was undertaken.	Complete - findings used to inform Connected Communications – Corporate Communications Strategy 2017/18	Jan 2017
7.1b) Undertake a full restructure of communications, bringing together in one place the functions that are essential to effective internal and external communications – this should provide the opportunity for a more coherent approach to communications, development of increased expertise and resilience and, allied to a full understanding of resources currently deployed, (a) above, lead to a more efficient use of resources.		On hold – recommendations and actions are being addressed within existing structures and job descriptions.	N/A
7.1c) As part of the re-structure, designate a senior officer to bring together all functions including communications, research and digital – this may be necessary to provide the capacity for strategic leadership across all the communications related functions. It may be possible to fund such an enhanced post through savings achieved in drawing together communications resources centrally.		On hold	N/A
7.1d) Develop a clearer narrative about what CEC wants to achieve for Cheshire East, which is understood and owned by the political and managerial leadership – a ‘top team’ workshop (with some external facilitation if necessary) may be helpful to produce this.	Facilitated workshop undertaken, December 2016	Complete	Dec 2016
	Corporate plan 2017/20	Complete	Feb 2017
7.1e) Ensure focus on the real drivers of a council’s reputation – i.e. delivery of consistently good services, and providing information about these, promoting the best interests of the area and avoiding being distracted by short term issues such as Twitter storms.	Connected Communications – Corporate Communications Strategy 2017/18	Complete	Jun 2017
7.1f) Undertake a review of corporate branding to ensure consistency, owned and enforced by the leadership of the organisation – to include ASDVs when delivering services on behalf of CEC. External expertise / resources may be required in undertaking this review.	Comprehensive branding review undertaken	Complete – will inform brand strategy and protocol	Feb 2017
	Visual Identity guide refresh	Ongoing	Jul 2017
	Brand Strategy and protocol – with specific focus on ASDV branding	Ongoing	Jul 2017
7.1g) Commission a communications survey to find out how residents receive their information and how well informed they are about council services – it is strongly recommended that the Citizen’s Panel is not used for this audience survey, as its members are already more aware of and engaged with the council than is the norm. Satisfaction with the council has improved to 58 per cent in 2016, but is still below the national average – which given that council services generally perform well may be explained by a lack of information about them.	Survey of residents commissioned of CEC Business Intelligence team. Survey is live ‘in the field’ now.	Ongoing – will inform future iterations of communications strategy	Aug 2017

LGA Peer review recommendation	Products / actions	Status	Completion date
7.1h) Review of communications channels – what are the most effective ways of reaching residents in Cheshire East? – this should be linked to the findings of (f) above. The team believe that there may be a lack of basic communications channels to residents.	A comprehensive survey of Heads of Service, Directors and representatives from ASDVs was designed and undertaken November 2016 - January 2017 to establish resources, priorities and activities.	Complete – findings used to inform Connected Communications – Corporate Communications Strategy 2017/18	Jan 2017
	Survey of residents commissioned of CEC Business Intelligence team. Survey is live 'in the field' now.	Ongoing – will inform future iterations of communications strategy	Aug 2017
7.1i) Consider the re-introduction of a print residents' newsletter to ensure all residents have access to information – a business case will be required for this. Over 25 per cent of the residents of Cheshire East are over 65 and may be less likely to want information digitally. The audience survey referred to in (f) above may provide further evidence as to how a print newsletter will extend the reach of information about council services.	While there is evidence to suggest that Cheshire East's 65+ population are actually relatively digitally active, a print residents' newsletter has in the past and in other local authority areas proven to be a valued communication method across a range of demographic groups. We will create a residents' newsletter and evaluate its effectiveness and value as part of our organisation communications strategy.	Ongoing – first edition planned for September 2017	Sep 2017
7.1j) Improve the provision of information to members, including a strengthened induction programme; member briefing on key issues and a member's e-newsletter – both members and officers showed an appetite for this. Members find the 'Team Talk' staff e-newsletter useful, but would welcome something more focused on their requirements. This could be produced by re-purposing existing content to a large extent. This could address service and personnel changes in CEC and wider public affairs and policy developments. Access to more and better information will make members, in particular non-executive members, better able to contribute to the development of policy and scrutiny of delivery, and give them more confidence in communications as a service for the whole council.	Member briefings on key issues (this is not a specific communications team responsibility).	Ongoing	Ongoing
	Member e-newsletter – will include feedback mechanism to establish members' preferences re content and delivery. First edition July 2017	Ongoing	Jul 2017
	This will be addressed as part of a review of Media Relations Protocol	Pending	Sep 2017
Operational priorities			
7.2a) Establish a daily communications meeting within the communications team – to share information, issues, support and advice within and across the team.	Daily update meeting held to identify key issues, opportunities and activity	Complete	Oct 2016
7.2b) Ensure communications attendance at key strategic officer and member meetings – such as key project boards in addition to Cabinet meetings to enable communications activity to be better aligned to and support the priorities of the organisation.	Communications representation and attendance is regular / standing item at a range of key meetings including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate Leadership Team Directorate management teams Key projects and programmes In addition there is a weekly communications update meeting with Leader, Cabinet Member for Democratic and Public Engagement, Assurance and ICT, Chief Executive and Head of Communications	Complete	Nov 2016
7.2c) Arrange a programme of meetings with the media – to develop working relationships and provide background briefings. Media representatives expressed a wish to work with CEC to promote the local area and regeneration projects. They do not want to be perceived as 'the enemy'.	Media briefings are held around key issues / key moments in the democratic year, for example the budget setting process. Relationships are also being developed with national public sector media.	Complete	Feb 2017

LGA Peer review recommendation	Products / actions	Status	Completion date
7.2d) Introduce formal monthly cascade briefings to ensure corporate messages reach all frontline staff – a number of people referred to learning about developments which would affect them in their work from the local media first, often following publication of Cabinet reports, rather than from the council. Not all staff are on e-mail and alternative means of disseminating information are required.	This will be addressed as part of a more comprehensive employee and engagement strategy.	Pending	Sep 2017
7.2e) Train and allow communications staff to publish directly to the website – this facility exists and would allow for more timely publication.	This is being addressed as part of the work to develop a range of digital and social media platforms to support strategic communications objectives. This work must be integrated with that of the Digital Customer Services Programme.	Ongoing	Sep 2017
7.2f) Urgent attention should be given to communications and engagement requirements around the budget process – CEC will need to begin consultation around its budget proposals for 2017-18 and beyond soon. The team understand that the financial position of CEC has been relatively healthy, but that some more difficult decisions may become necessary as austerity continues. Effective communications around budget proposals helps to put these in the context of delivering the council's priorities, the outcomes to be achieved and alternative choices. It may be necessary to bring in additional support to provide the necessary experience and expertise.	A comprehensive communications and engagement plan was developed and executed to support the 2017/18 budget setting process. This resulted in relatively high levels of engagement with content and the budget consultation and a good level of advocacy for the key publication - the Council Tax Booklet.	Complete	Feb 2017
7.2g) Streamline sign-off process to enable a speedier response to media enquiries – the team understand that as many as six senior officers and members may be involved in signing off a press release. This will inevitably delay things and makes reaching agreement on the content more difficult. More trust should be placed in communications and other staff to develop the necessary and appropriate relationships with the key member(s) for different service areas.	Officer-side responsibilities for approvals for media enquiries and statements were reviewed and a guidance document 'Protocol into Practice' was developed to clarify officer responsibilities.	Complete	Mar 2017
	This will be addressed as part of a review of Media Relations Protocol	Pending	Sep 2017
Further actions			
a) Consider investing in a full time communications resource for internal communications – currently a post is shared between HR/OD and Communications. The team have identified the need to strengthen a number of aspects of internal communications and a dedicated post will provide additional capacity to do so. The review of the communications structure and function recommended above provides the opportunity to identify the resource for this.		On hold	N/A
b) Investigate the purchase of an on-line newsroom system – to enable communications staff to upload news and other items to the website remotely.	This is being addressed as part of the work to develop a range of digital and social media platforms to support strategic communications objectives. This work must be integrated with that of the Digital Customer Services Programme.	Ongoing	Sep 2017

- 4.8. As shown above, progress has been made in a number of key areas and work is underway and plans are in place to deliver further improvements.

5. Background/Chronology

- 5.1. September 2016 – Local Government Association Peer review of communications
- 5.2. October 2016 – Communications review project begins.
- 5.3. November / December 2016 – Communications survey of heads of service and directors
- 5.4. January 2017 – Options appraisal for draft operating model
- 5.5. February 2017 – Cheshire East Council corporate plan 2017/20
- 5.6. March 2017 – [Cheshire East Council communications peer review September 2016](#) published
- 5.7. June 2017 – Cheshire East Council communications and marketing services framework pre-tender engagement day

6. Wards Affected and Local Ward Members

- 6.1. The review and work to deliver recommendations apply at an organisation-wide level and apply equally across Cheshire East's geography.

7. Implications of Recommendation

7.1. Policy Implications

- 7.1.1. This workplan will require a review of a number of communications-specific policies and protocols including:

- Media relations protocol
- Visual identity guide
- Brand protocol

7.2. Legal Implications

- 7.2.1. The recommendations in the review report and actions to deliver those recommendations will have an impact across all communications activity for Cheshire East Council. The Council has a duty to comply with the

following areas of legislation and codes of practice in relation to communications activity:

- Code of recommended practice for Local Government publicity
- Defamation law
- Software licensing
- Intellectual property rights
- Copyright / trademarking
- Civil contingencies act 2014

7.3. Financial Implications

7.3.1. The recommendations of the peer review include a number of actions that could (or will) require funding that is outside of current (2017/18) corporate communications budget and spending plans. These include:

- (7.1b) Undertake a full restructure of communications
- (7.1i) Consider the reintroduction of a print residents' newsletter
- (FAb) Investigate purchase of an on-line newsroom system
- (FAd) Investigate an emailer system

7.4. Equality Implications

7.4.1. As identified in the review report, resident insight is key to delivering effective outcome-based, audience-focussed communications activity – equality and diversity factors are a key part of understanding our audiences.

7.5. Rural Community Implications

7.6. The review and work to deliver recommendations apply at an organisation-wide level and apply equally across Cheshire East's geography.

7.7. Human Resources Implications

7.7.1. While the peer review does include recommendations that could have HR implications, they do not form part of the current scope of the communications review project.

7.8. Public Health Implications

7.8.1. There are no specific public health implications

7.9. Implications for Children and Young People

7.9.1. There are no specific public health implications

7.10. Other Implications (Please Specify)

7.10.1. None

8. Risk Management

- 8.1. Appropriate improvements to the communications function will have a beneficial impact on delivery of council outcomes and the reputation of the organisation.
- 8.2. Each recommendation from the peer review needs to be considered in the context of Cheshire East Council as an organisation, the environment in which the council operates and the ambitions of the organisation.
- 8.3. Investment may be required in order to maximise the value that the communications function can offer. Any investment should be considered through a robust business case process.

9. Access to Information/Bibliography

- 9.1. [Cheshire East Council communications peer review September 2016](#)
- 9.2. Connected Communications – Corporate Communications Strategy 2017/18, available from the acting head of communications.

10. Contact Information

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