

# Communications peer review

## **Slough Borough Council**

23<sup>rd</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> November 2016

# 1. Background and scope of the peer challenge

On behalf of the team, I would like to say what a pleasure and privilege it was to be invited in to Slough to deliver the recent communications peer review and to thank all of those involved in the review. The team very much appreciated the participation of elected members, staff and partners as well as the support provided by colleagues whilst onsite.

Peer review forms part of sector led improvement and is delivered by experienced elected members and officer peers

# 2. The team

The peers who delivered the peer challenge for Slough Borough Council were:

Fran Collingham, recently Assistant Director – Communications, Coventry City Council
Councillor Jonathan McShane, Cabinet member, LB Hackney
Deborah Harries, Head of Public Affairs, Birmingham City Council
Matt Nicholls, Head of Local Government Communications Support, Local Government Association
Victoria Daly, Campaigns Manager, Local Government Association
Clare Hudson, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer reviews are improvement-orientated and tailored to meet individual councils’ needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council’s own performance and improvement focus. The peers used their experience and knowledge to reflect on the evidence presented to them by the people they met, the things they saw and material they read in advance of, and during the review.

# 3. The process

As you will recall, we undertook to write to you to confirm the team’s findings, building on the feedback provided to you on the final day of the review and, in particular, expanding upon those areas that we highlighted as likely to benefit from some further attention. This report sets out those findings and includes some approaches that we have identified from other councils that we feel might have specific interest for Slough.

The team spent a significant amount of time beforehand reading background materials provided to them in advance and spent three days onsite with the council, which involved a series of interviews, meetings and workshops. We had a number of discussions with a range of elected members, both Cabinet and non-Cabinet members, and councillors from

the administration and the opposition. We also spoke to a range of staff, both senior and operational, partners and local media. This follows on from some communications advice provided to the council earlier in 2016.

Our feedback, set out below, is based on what we have observed, heard and read and has been triangulated to ensure issues have been corroborated.

## 4. Scope of the review

The scope of the review, agreed by the council, covered the following specific questions:

- What is the overall communications strategy for the council and for the town, and how effective is it?
- How effective is the delivery of this strategy and the overall communications function?
- Recommendations for the future delivery of communications at Slough

## 5. Executive summary

Slough Borough Council has a population of around 145,000 people and is the most diverse borough in the South East outside of London. The borough has a relatively small boundary of 125 square miles, and faces approximately 40,000 people entering the borough for work on a daily basis who are heavily impacted by the council's work but are not residents. The Council had a change of leadership in June 2016 with a new Leader, Deputy Leader and Cabinet, many of whom are in a cabinet leadership role for the first time.

The council faces local media scrutiny from local print and online media, local radio and notable high profile national coverage on major issues such as immigration, community cohesion, housing and transport. This is partly a consequence of its highly diverse community but also a measure of the willingness of the council to facilitate media coverage both singularly and with partners.

We found a council that is ambitious for its community and partners and wants to deliver better outcomes for both. Like all councils, Slough must address significant budget cuts and is currently looking for opportunities to identify further savings. Alongside this the council continues to attract inward investment into the town as well as seeking out further opportunities to generate income directly to the council and into the broader local economy.

The council has faced particular challenges in its children's services, which were moved into a children's trust in October 2015. The council is now working closely with colleagues in the Slough Children's Trust to ensure that the improvement journey for Slough's children's services is clearly articulated and shared with the community.

The council was also keen to convey that it faces two key communications challenges; firstly **successfully managing the reputation of the council and its services** and secondly **improving the reputation of the town** – which has regularly been criticised in

the national media. In the view of the council overcoming this second challenge is critical to delivering on its vision for the future of Slough as an area of major growth and opportunity.

Communications is delivered largely through a corporate communications function located in the corporate core of the council. There is a strong emphasis on a centralised command and control approach to communications which tends to focus on traditional broadcast channels to communicate key operational messages. Throughout our discussions it was clear that the communications outputs were broadly appreciated by the council's partners but there was an overwhelming sense from partners, and many staff, that the council should move towards a more strategic, and less reactionary, approach to communications which focuses on outcomes, rather than outputs, to deliver a positive and exciting story shared by partners about Slough and its future.

This is reflected in our key recommendation – which we expand on in section 7 - that the Council should:

**Key Recommendation:**

**Clearly articulate, share and sell the vision for Slough**

In the following sections we provide our reflections on current strategy and approach and, further in the report, a broad set of recommendations for the future delivery of communications.

## **6. The Council's overall communications strategy for the council and for the town and its effectiveness**

The Council's communications team has a varied set of skills and approaches. The team is able to design and deliver appropriate marketing material for key events. **Crisis communications** works well, and was praised by the partners that we spoke to. The team is adept at working with councillors, colleagues and partners to develop a timely response to emerging issues. Emergency planning responses were particularly praised. The team uses a variety of channels to deliver its message including social media, media releases and comments and interviews with local media outlets and beyond. The channels adopted focus on the core elements of a traditional communications service which broadly seem to work well. In devoting the core of its communications capacity to this traditional press office approach the Council has not developed a sufficiently strategic approach to communications and is thus missing the opportunity to manage communications about the council and the town more proactively and positively.

The Council enjoys a solid relationship with the **local media** with local journalists regularly going to the council for comment and reaction to stories about key developments, such as the opening of The Curve, the council's new library and cultural centre. The council's media responses are regarded as credible and helpful, and people know where to go to find information. When facing negative coverage the council is usually quick to respond.

The **Communications team's role** is understood by most, but not all, within the council however it is not always clear who, within the team, leads on particular issues and therefore who colleagues should approach to co-design communications activities. Whilst communications sits in the corporate core of the council it is clear that communications colleagues are not always involved in key meetings and the development of strategy. We would suggest this is a consequence of the focus of the communications team on reactive low level activity resulting in the rest of the organisation not perceiving communications as fundamental to developing future strategy. In our opinion there may well be untapped resource within the communications team that is not realising it's potential because of the focus on reactive activities and a tendency to be 'overtaken by the day job'. Currently communications is seen as effective when something goes wrong, or an issue needs a reaction, but not when a new initiative or policy is being developed.

**Social media** is now a central channel for any modern approach to communications and the council makes use of a range of tools such as Facebook, Twitter and Streetlife. The corporate communications team have put measures in place to control of the council's social media outputs. We would question whether this desire to retain such a centralised control is allowing the council to achieve its maximum impact. We also came across many colleagues who were using elements of social media to reach their clients and audiences but were doing so 'under the radar' and without the overt support of the corporate communications team. The council should consider adopting a more facilitating approach to the use of social media, working with key colleagues in the organisation to train and enable them to use social media in a productive way. This would free up resource in the communications team and enable colleagues in service areas to gain a better understanding of how they can effectively use social media to engage with residents and the community. Social media is not currently being used to its best effect because of the difficulties in using video and images with the current IT setup.

#### **Leeds – using customer service centre to improve communications**

Leeds City Council aimed to increase customer satisfaction and engagement with Leeds' digital customer service, reducing telephone, email and face-to-face contact for enquiries where it isn't needed. They used data to analyse peaks in the contact centre and planned active communications around, using customer service advisers to pre-empt phone calls by posting on social media.

<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/8008856/social+media+case+study+template+Leeds+City+Council.pdf/543daf13-50b9-4822-9b8d-b9981d646908>

The LGA has a digital councils toolkit including developing social media strategies and maximising their impact:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/digital-councils>

#### **Internal communications**

The council is aware of the value and impact of good **internal communications** and there is a refreshed focus on **employee engagement**. Internal communications channels are considered by staff to be broadly solid and consistent. Staff know where to go for information and feel that internal communications tools are regular and honest. Internal communications is most effective in Slough where it is closely aligned to external messaging, and we heard several examples of this being the case. However, this is not managed consistently and this issue is something that senior colleagues are conscious of.

The council should continue to embed its approach to internal communications and ensure that staff and partners have a strong understanding of the council's ambitions, centred on the corporate plan.

Colleagues value the change in tone of communications from the political leadership in recent months, including efforts to 'walk the floor' and more visibility from leading members. This has helped to harness the clear energy in the organisation. The council should continue to invest in internal communications, including devoting more effort to evaluating its impact and understanding how staff want to receive communications from the council. It's clear that many council staff are keen and eager to act as advocates for the council and the work it does, but want a clear vision and better understanding of council initiatives and policies in order to share this with family, friends and Slough residents. We provide more detailed suggestions on this in our recommendations.

### **Articulating the vision for Slough**

As the regular focus of negative national media attention the council is highly conscious of the reputation of the town. The communications team undertakes significant effort to promote positive events and achievements within the town to try to mitigate this, often with key partners. There is a refreshed appetite within senior officers and leaders to seek to improve the town's reputation. The window of opportunity to do so is currently open as a result of recent announcements about investment in the town centre and the future plans for nearby Heathrow airport expansion.

For these highly credible ambitions to be realised the council must develop a greater clarity about the overall vision for Slough, as highlighted in our key recommendation. The council then needs to consider how to nuance the messages about that vision in order to engage more successfully with its different stakeholders. The council also needs to develop a more systematic and planned approach to engaging with its stakeholders, and evaluating the success of engagement. We will explore this more in section 7.

Luton has adopted a clear brand to attract inward investment, highlighting its connectivity and variety of sites for development. The brand '**Think Luton**' has created a range of enterprise clusters and promoted the brand internationally as well as regionally. <https://www.thinkluton.co.uk/>

The Britain's Ocean City place narrative and branding was introduced in September 2013, with the aim of presenting a consistent and compelling story about **Plymouth** to the rest of the world. <http://web.plymouth.gov.uk/britainsoceancity>

## **7. How effective is the delivery of this strategy and the overall communications function?**

### **Communications delivery**

The council uses tools such as Streetlife and Twitter to engage with residents alongside written material such as media releases and the council newspaper, 'The Citizen'. These channels are adopted to broadcast the council's messages and to gain feedback from residents and service users. Residents use social media tools to report missed bin collections, concerns with traffic works and other matters which in other councils tend to be

directed at, or diverted to, a customer service centre. Responding to these queries takes a significant amount of time and effort, much of which is undertaken by the communications team itself. The tone of these responses is sometimes too defensive and can detract from the council's ambition to promote a positive image of the town.

### **Community engagement**

The council has not invested in formal resident engagement led by the corporate centre in recent years. This is not to say that engagement is not happening, we heard about community forums, user groups and many other examples of good practice in understanding local communities. However this is not being effectively harnessed due to the lack of a corporate led approach to resident and partner engagement. Currently the council does not know how residents and partners want to be communicated with, because they are not asked directly and no resources are directed at analysing which channels have had the most outreach and been most effective. There are a variety of tools available, without significant cost, that can help to do this and we reflect on these in the recommendations section.

Effective community and partner engagement can be conducted using a variety of communications tools, briefings and face to face meetings led by councillors and staff. The council has a vibrant and energetic political leadership and workforce that is well placed to do this but the passion and enthusiasm for the work the council is doing is sometimes lost because the council has found itself on the back foot when major announcements are made. We would encourage the development of a more methodical approach to engagement developing the role of members, officers and partners as advocates for the council and its vision, with targeted communications for different audiences and more opportunities for the council to have honest and positive conversations with residents and partners through structured events and initiatives. We will expand on this in section 8.

The **London Borough of Hackney** has developed its Corporate Plan centred around the concept of 'A Place for Everyone', aiming to ensure that the borough is a great place to grow up, live, enjoy, succeed wherever you live in the borough.  
<http://www.hackney.gov.uk/Assets/Documents/Hackney-A-Place-for-Everyone-Corporate-Plan.pdf>

### **Campaigns and marketing**

The team heard an almost universal message that Slough is vibrant, changing, and eager to maximise growth opportunities for the future. This message was not clear in the communications outputs that we saw. Whilst the communications team are adept at communicating operational matters (and reacting to media coverage of initiatives and issues) this more strategic message is not defined clearly enough, and not actively communicated. Too much of the team's time is devoted to reactive responses to the media and public comments rather than driving forward messages on agreed corporate priorities and as a consequence, they are lacking the vision and skills to deliver a more strategic communications function.

There are some instances of a more focused campaign style approach to communications and we saw some good examples of marketing work being developed, but these appear fragmented and lacking an overall strategy and approach to marketing the council and the town, and associated branding. The council has a good story to tell but is not adopting a

proactive campaign and marketing approach to tell it. As one colleague put it 'We do communications, but we don't do PR'.

The consistent focus on operational communications means that the impact of the activity that on positive stories and projects is not maximised, partly because audiences are not expecting it. Slough clearly has the energy and ambition to ensure that its ambition is widely shared, heard and understood in the community and with trade, local and national press. We suggest you now review and refocus your capacity, skills and activity to make this a reality.

With the council about embark on town centre regeneration there is an opportunity to put in place analytical tools to understand which communications tools and approaches will be most effective. A **perceptions survey** for residents and business would allow the council to establish a clear baseline of how the council is perceived and enable ongoing measurement of these perceptions, allowing communications activity to be targeted and evaluated. This will also allow a more flexible and pro-active approach, ensuring scarce resources are focused on the communications activity that delivers the best results. Once this is put in place senior officers should invest greater resources (particularly time and visibility) in evaluating results and gaining traction for any changes that need to be made.

#### **Coventry and Warwickshire Place Board**

Leading organisations, including Coventry City Council, Coventry University, Warwick University and Jaguar LandRover (which has its headquarters in the city) came together to form the Coventry and Warwickshire Place Board, and to develop a new place narrative in March 2012. The council also recognised that 'place shaping' was key for building confidence, boosting inward investment and giving partners a story to tell about their area. The narrative has been promoted through the introduction of the Coventry and Warwickshire Champions Scheme. The scheme unites businesses, organisations and individuals across the area to help advance Coventry and Warwickshire and raise its profile. <http://www.coventry-warwickshire.co.uk/champions/>

The LGA has a range of resources on **placed based branding**:

[http://www.local.gov.uk/communications-support/-/journal\\_content/56/10180/7877539?\\_56\\_INSTANCE\\_0000\\_templateId=ARTICLE](http://www.local.gov.uk/communications-support/-/journal_content/56/10180/7877539?_56_INSTANCE_0000_templateId=ARTICLE)

#### **Digital communications and infrastructure**

The delivery of internal and external communications is hampered by the council's IT infrastructure. The provision of mobile devices is limited and heavily restricted to certain colleagues and many staff expressed frustration with the inability of the current technology they were provided with to do an effective job. There are instances of colleagues not receiving the minimal amount of IT provision necessary to do the job well. This technology deficit means that the council is not able to develop and maximise its digital offer to residents or business, or allow its staff to design future service delivery around a stable and efficient digital infrastructure. There is an emerging digital transformation strategy, but it is neither widely understood, nor communicated.

The team were told that work on the digital transformation strategy should address some of these issues; an understanding of the communications needs across the organisation

(including the ability to access social media sites and use video and images to broadcast messages) will be vital in delivering an effective digital transformation strategy.

### **Distinct messages for distinct audiences**

One of our most striking impressions of the council during our visit was of an organisation full of energy and enthusiasm. This was most notable in service areas, which continue to face some of the council's biggest challenges. This energy was palpable in both officers and political leadership. There was an almost universal appreciation for the sense of refreshed enthusiasm that the new cabinet has provided and the subsequent change in tone and openness. The council must now capitalise on this and ensure that momentum is not lost in dealing with the day to day challenges of running a busy borough council.

In doing so the council needs to use evaluation and insight, grounded in analytical tools, to develop nuanced messages for the different elements of the community. Residents will need differently crafted messages and approaches to businesses and investors. Equally, communications with partners must adopt a tone that is appropriate and engaging. The council must be agile and flexible enough in its communications to develop different voices in its work while retaining a golden thread – the story for Slough – running consistently through all its communications.

## **8. Recommendations**

### **Key Recommendation:**

**Clearly articulate, share and sell the vision for Slough**

Taking the following measures to do this:

- Undertake a perceptions survey to find out how residents and partners view the council, how they access information about the council and its priorities and how they want to
- Develop a strategic communications strategy which tells the Slough story with honesty and passion – leading the council, community and partners in delivering the vision and priorities of the leadership
- Develop a stronger and wider sense of ownership of the strategy – political, officer and throughout service areas, alongside partners and key stakeholders
- Establish traction so that delivery does not slip – developing individual campaign plans that articulate the separate priority themes while telling the Slough story in a consistent way
- Focus on quality, proactive content and two-way communications rather than broadcast channels

Alongside our key recommendation we have set out below some 'quick wins' which, if implemented by the council, would make a big difference quickly and demonstrate to

members, staff and others that the council's leadership is responding quickly to the peer review findings

## **Recommendations – quick wins**

- Improve the visibility of SLT in internal communications – for instance introducing principles of 'listening leadership'; lunchtime Q&A sessions with senior leaders, presence of SLT at team meetings and awaydays.
- Adopt a more engaging tone on social media – be publicly helpful whilst focusing on proactive communications, not reactive responses. Ensure that all major announcements, policy changes, initiatives and issues are communicated on social media at the same time as the media are reporting the announcement, with links to background documents and context from the council to ensure that the council spends less time defending decisions on social media once the issue has been covered by traditional media.
- Develop with Cabinet and directorates annual campaigns plan for 17/18 linked to corporate plan. These could focus on monthly themes communicating outcomes and celebrating success on council priorities.
- Review the skills and capacity of the current communications team to understand if you are maximising the skills you do hold, and identify those that need more capacity
- Undertake an internal audit of currently available evaluation channels, such as media monitoring. From this develop a framework for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting internal and external activity and outcomes.
- Use the results of the recent staff survey to baseline and further develop the internal communications strategy – maintain and grow momentum, the current outputs are valued. Ensure that all internal communications activity is aligned to external communications (for instance, making sure all key new initiatives, policies and issues are communicated to staff at the same time as the media).
- Introduce a perceptions survey to find out how residents access information – and prefer to (the LGA can help with this).
- Continue to 'walk the floor' and be visible – staff really value it. Consider how to deepen this engagement, e.g. staff conference, Q&A for senior leaders – in person and online, videos on intranet, internal blogs.
- Focus on the importance of listening and encouraging two way conversations with staff, partners and residents through all communications activity to move away from a largely broadcast model of communications activity by introducing clear feedback mechanisms, including "you said, we did" initiatives internally and externally.
- Create an action plan led by a task and finish group consisting of senior councillors and officers that report back to the Employee Engagement Forum and other appropriate channels/forums.

The recommendations set out below could build on the quick wins and we believe could be delivered within the next 3-6 months.

### **Recommendations – short term**

- Clarify who does what within the communications team – allocating named communications leads for each of the core themes of the 5 Year Plan. This account manager approach will allow communications colleagues to maintain robust relationships with their lead member and director to develop a clear and strategic vision for communicating the council's priorities.
- Ensure senior communication attendance at key strategic officer and member meetings beyond attending for any specific items perceived as being communications issues. Strategic communications is usually most valuable when communications professionals can intervene or advise at an early stage on policy initiatives or issues.
- Refresh and strengthen social media policy, including providing training and ongoing support for staff in directorates so they can use social media in a positive way. Adopt best practice and provide a comprehensive set of guidelines for all staff and introduce basic guidance on using social media in an engaging and publicly helpful way. Training should be delivered on a rolling programme and regularly refreshed.
- Develop social media champions – both officers and councillors. Identify rising stars with strong social media skills and adopt a 'train the trainer' approach through an internal social media network.
- Use data and insight to target and focus engagement with all audiences, and evaluate what works. Consider using trusted tools such as e-bulletins and monitor their use.
- Create a more consistent and vibrant approach to branding – some promising activity is already underway, but this needs to be distilled into a simple, striking, brand allied to council priorities. Branding targeted towards business should have a clear relationship to the council.
- Celebrate success internally and externally using existing channels and identifying new ones. Slough has a great story to tell, consider identifying opportunities to get out there and tell including speaking at conferences, placing articles in trade, national and local press. Invite journalists in for briefings. Use the Annual Report and the Citizen to showcase success externally and internally use methods such as blogs, videos etc.

### **Recommendations – for councillors**

The councillors that we spoke to were clear in their ambition for Slough. We have developed the following recommendations that we feel will help councillors to work closely with the communications team to realise this ambition:

- Provide regular training opportunities for members on developing comprehensive communications and engagement skills (LGA can help with this).
- Consider how to brief out key cabinet decisions – brief the media under embargo and continue this on a regular basis so that stories appear in the media in a positive way rather than the council responding to or correcting media stories. Actively brief out 'bad' news as well as good to help mitigate negative impact. Prepare internal

communications messages to match this so staff do not hear news in the press first. Align communications to partners and stakeholders so they hear major announcements and issues directly from the council (through face to face briefings or targeted e-newsletters), not from the media.

- Maintain the narrative and continue to actively brief on ongoing projects and decisions, e.g. fact sheets, Q&A scripts – both public and private versions.
- Develop clearer protocols and briefing processes for communications activity. Clarify exactly what the communications team are leading on, e.g. media relations, and what service areas are leading on, e.g. resident engagement. Use protocols to make it clear when councillors should be responding to communications queries, and when they shouldn't. When dealing with the media ensure clear processes for briefing councillors.
- Use existing channels to share the energy of the organisation, e.g. 'you said, we did', 'New Year message'. Consider monthly messages from the Leader and Interim CEx, induction meetings for new starters and informal engagement sessions for existing employees. Identify opportunities for Cabinet members to speak at business forums, chamber of commerce events etc.

This series of recommendations can be actioned relatively quickly but we do recognise that there are other areas that can enhance your communications capacity that may take longer to act upon. These include:

### **Recommendations – medium term**

- Tackle the IT deficit – it needs to be fit for purpose – digital should be at the heart of the strategic communications plan. Communications requirements should be a key part of this to ensure that equipment is fully enabled to maximise social media channels. Consider the needs of remote workers, and how they need to receive information and communicate with teams.
- Future proof communications by understanding and developing the communications skills needed in a 21<sup>st</sup> century council. This includes a knowledge and understanding of social marketing (including behaviour change) and staff adept at embracing social and digital media developments (possibly through apprenticeships) 'Town hall' meetings – consider providing structure and purpose to resident and stakeholder engagement. These could focus on a particular issue, e.g. sustainable transport, chaired by an independent expert. Consider web/twitter chats/online magazines as well as face to face public meetings.

Through the peer review we have sought to highlight the positive aspects of the council's approach to communications but we have also outlined some challenges. It has been our aim to provide some detail on them through this report to help the council understand and consider them. The council's senior managerial and political leadership will therefore undoubtedly want to reflect further on the findings before determining how they wish to take things forward.

We have discussed the option of returning to the council to spend more time with you exploring our findings and reflections as well as providing you with some insights from other councils. We would be very happy to work with you going forward. Members of the team would be happy to contribute to any further improvement activity in the future and/or to return to the authority in due course to undertake a short progress review. Mona Sehgal,

as the Local Government Association's Principal Adviser for the region within which the council sits, will continue to act as the main contact between the council and the Local Government Association, particularly in relation to improvement and access to the LGA's resources and packages of support going forward.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish Slough, both as a council and a place, every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Clare Hudson  
Programme Manager  
Local Government Association

## **Appendix: What does good communications look like?**

We thought it would be helpful to the council, as it seeks to move forward in terms of its communications, to summarise what is seen to represent good practice in this area – to provide a clear focus for its improvement efforts. This is based on The Local Government Association's work with other councils and organisations.

At the heart of this is the importance of placing strategic communications at the heart of the organisation to support the delivery of a council's strategic objectives and priorities – achieving what is contained in the corporate plan.

### **Why is good communications important?**

Good communications can help to:

- Articulate the ambition for your area
- Improve corporate and place reputation
- Support good political and managerial leadership
- Help engagement – residents, partners and staff
- Build trust
- Rally advocates
- Drive change and deliver savings
- Attract investment (and good people) into Slough
- Manage performance

### **The approach to good communications**

The following summarises the most effective approach to delivering effective, cost-effective communications:

- Leadership – clarity of purpose and commitment
- Brand (values and trust) – what does Slough stand for?
- A clear vision for Slough
- The narrative and vision must be authentic
- Strategic approach to communications with a clear corporate communications strategy
- A corporately agreed, fully evaluated annual communications plan
- All communications activity based on research and insight
- All campaigns to be linked to corporate priorities and resourced accordingly
- Evaluation in place for all communications activity
- Ensure communications is owned by everyone in the organisation