

Communications and Democracy Portfolio Report (May to October 2023)

Councillor Sarah Jackson

The last 6 months have been an interesting time of transition following the last District Council elections in May. Along with a number of newly elected Councillors, we have welcomed two new, key officers to the authority: Melanie Wellman, our new Monitoring Officer who started shortly before the elections and Andrew Melhuish, the new Democratic Services Manager.

Our new membership has now largely completed the induction training programme, but member development continues to remain under review to ensure that knowledge gaps can be addressed to help members continue to be as confident and effective within their roles as possible.

Moving into 2024 our communications priorities will largely be governed by the Council Plan. The goal is to ensure that we effectively communicate the Council's key priorities and aims, and that the membership and the public remain properly informed in those areas.

That said, building stronger relationships between EDDC and Town and Parish Councils is an area we are looking to develop. I believe this would be to the advantage of all stakeholders and is something that has already begun through the Council Plan engagement sessions. In that vein, public consultation is another area I would like to see us build upon, and work is ongoing in this area.

With respect to governance and democratic engagement, I anticipate the Peer Challenge may well identify where we can make positive changes, which will further inform our direction moving ahead.

There are several other initiatives in their infant stages, some not covered in this brief report, which need to be fleshed out a little more before being progressed, but I will be looking to the wider membership for their thoughts and views on these as they come forward to help inform how we can deliver these to the maximum benefit of all.

Below is an overview of just a few areas within the Communications and Democracy portfolio where work is ongoing or planned.

Democracy

Governance

Since the Council passed a Motion in July 2023 agreeing to undertake a Peer Review and for the Centre for Public Scrutiny to review our scrutiny procedures, a number of positive steps have been taken:

Peer Challenge – The S151 and Monitoring Officer have had a number of meetings with the Local Government Association, and the Peer Review has been organised for the first week of February 2024. A Peer Review officer working group has been set up, and this group has prioritised the steps that will need to be taken in the lead-up to the Peer Review. The team are currently in the process of preparing a Position Statement, the document that authorities are asked to produce for the Peer Review team, which will include information on local priorities and outcomes, organisational and place leadership, governance and culture, financial planning and management and capacity for improvement.

Centre for Public Scrutiny – The Centre for Public Scrutiny is hoping to start its review towards the end of October 2023. They have issued a short survey of members and senior officers, which members are encouraged to respond to. The more responses we have, the more information we will have to feed into the review and to inform any changes moving forward. The Centre for Public

Scrutiny is also seeking to interview key members and officers between the 8th and 10th of November and to attend the Overview meeting on the 9th of November. Again, Members' input into this process will be greatly appreciated.

Skills audit of all Cabinet members and key councillors – This has been allocated to the new Democratic Services Manager, who started a few weeks ago. Proposals will be presented to the Cabinet on 29th November 2023.

Work to further align the Cabinet and Senior Management Team – this has already started, and Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team held a very positive first workshop on the 20th of September. Paul Clarke from the LGA attended part of that meeting. Regular Director meetings with the Leadership are also in place, and these are working well with a combined and collaborative approach to dealing with the business of the Council.

Constitutional Reform

The Monitoring Officer is due to start a review of the Constitution to ensure it is fit for purpose and up-to-date. This is a large piece of work and will take many months to complete. The Monitoring Officer and I would welcome member input into this process, and we will therefore be looking to set up a Constitution Working Group. A report will be presented to the next meeting of the Full Council, which will seek nominations for a politically balanced group.

Freedom of Information

The number of Freedom of information requests continues to rise. In 2021/22 we had 439. In 2022/23 we had 510. So far this financial year, we have had 306. This is not an unexpected trend, and one that I understand has been seen pretty consistently throughout the country. 98% of FOI's raised with EDDC have been responded to within the statutory deadline. The Information Commissioner assesses performance of less than 90% to be unsatisfactory, 90 to 95% as adequate and over 95% as good. The Council's performance therefore falls well within the parameters for the category of good performance.

Member Development

With the new Democratic Services Manager recently joining the Council, the opportunity is being taken to review the current member development programme, including ensuring that Members who have not had an opportunity to undertake all of their key training, have had the opportunity to do so. The member skills audit will also feed into this process, so this is a live piece of work that I expect will evolve over time. I will look to convene the Member Development Working Group to provide feedback or to consider any reports where appropriate. Members from outside of the Working Group are, of course, welcome to participate.

Communications and Engagement

Team update

The communications team has been a somewhat of a state of flux since it was restructured in August 2021 with some staff changes, but the team currently stands as listed below. The team is working hard to form a more strategic approach to our communication and engagement activities. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the fine – more project-specific – marketing and communications work which is also being undertaken by EDDC's officers based in other service areas.

The permanent post of 'Corporate Lead: Communications, Digital Services and Engagement' has recently been recruited for, and I hope to be able to report back to the membership very soon once this post has been filled. The corporate lead sits on the Executive Leadership Team providing advice to the interim CEOs on external communications and reputational management. This is in addition to the postholder attending Senior Leadership Team meetings. In the interim, this function continues to be performed by Andrew Hopkins who has been managing the communications team in the absence of a permanent staff member. Andrew remains the primary contact for any press or communications enquiries that you might have.

Patrick Lowe has just been appointed as the full-time Digital Communications Officer.

Beth Sharp will return from maternity leave early next year to join Patrick, in the meantime a graduate from the Exeter University Business Graduate scheme will be recruited on a short-term contract to provide communications support until Beth's return.

Victoria Williams has returned on a short-term contract as the full-time Community Engagement Officer and will be embedding a corporate consultation policy into the authority, using the Commonplace engagement tool. A permanent long-term appointment to this post will be made in early 2024.

Work update

In addition to producing press releases and responding to press statements, the team are responsible for all social media content posted through the East Devon social media channels, the production of digital content, the weekly residents' e-newsletter update, East Devon app and website.

The team are actively supporting the emerging council plan and the peer review taking place next year. Corporate standards for communications and engagement are also currently being refreshed and the team give the corporate sign-off on all printed publications produced by the design service operated by Strata who they client manage.

The intention is to increase the amount of digital content (namely videos) over the next few months to encourage more engagement on our various platforms. Members feedback on how else we can improve our engagement with local residents' is most welcome.

A new weekly e-newsletter is planned to be produced next month for Councillors in conjunction with the Democratic Services team, this e-newsletter will provide relevant information to members on council business and other key pieces of information.

As well as providing media advice to managers in the council, the team are happy to provide this support to all members too and I would encourage any member who is contacted by the local media or has a query about the service to contact Andrew Hopkins for advice.

Communications and Engagement statistics:

Press releases issued since April 2023: 70

Press statements issued since April 2023: 72

EDDC Facebook page: 9,500 followers

EDDC Instagram page: 2,135 followers

EDDC LinkedIn page: 2,400 followers

EDDC X/Twitter: 9,600 followers

EDDC You-Tube channel: 715 subscribers

App and Web statistics:

East Devon app installs: 89,000

East Devon app notification subscriptions: 60,000

Website visits (April to end of September 2023): 797,461

Page views: 2,379,050

Unique visitors: 437,045

E-newsletters:

Total number of e-newsletters issued since April 2023: 221

Open rates: 55%

Resident's update total subscribers: 14,501 recipients

Consultations:

Total number of consultations held since April 2023: 18 surveys (9 public and 9 private).

Total number of people subscribed for consultation updates: 465 subscribers.

Council hybrid meeting project

Finally, this is an area which sits between both democratic engagement and communication. The new MVI solution has been procured, and new cameras installed in the Council Chamber in Blackdown House. The new system has been programmed for use with the existing microphones.

Familiarisation training with the new system will take place over the next couple of months and members will be invited to attend some training meetings to get used to the new kit and learn more on how to use it.

Once fully installed members (or other speakers) will be able to attend meetings and speak remotely in the future, bearing in mind the requirement of the Local Government Act (1972) that they will still need to be in the Chamber for their vote to count! That said, the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill which is currently going through the Houses of Parliament includes proposals to enable Council's to hold remote meetings. It remains to be seen as to whether this proposal will be supported. The outcome should be known in November.