



**Review of Council's
Communications Response
to the First Wave of the
COVID19 Pandemic**

Communications Review

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The following is a synopsis of the proceedings and recommendations made by the Covid 19 Scrutiny – Communications Task and Finish Panel (“the Panel”) to consider the Council’s communications during the first wave of the Covid 19 pandemic.
- 1.2 In view of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, people’s health, lifestyles and livelihoods, there is perhaps nothing more important than the way a Council communicated.
- 1.3 The Purpose of this review was to:
- assess how successful the Council had been in communicating with residents and ensuring residents had received up to date, accurate and accessible information throughout the Covid 19 pandemic.
 - make recommendations to the Governance, Audit and Finance Board on improvements and future actions on communicating with the public and helping them find the information they need during the pandemic
- 1.4 To achieve this the Panel agreed to focus on the following areas:
- a) which channels of communication had the Council utilised during the Covid 19 pandemic?
 - b) How had the Council tried to communicate with residents who do not use the internet?
 - c) To what extent had the Council communicated with areas within the Borough where it is has proved difficult to encourage a response e.g. Leigh Park and Wecock?
 - d) What had the response been to date and what lessons had been learnt?
 - e) What problems had been experienced?

2.0 The Panel

- 2.1 The Review was undertaken by a Panel which included the following members:

Councillor Lloyd (Lead Councillor)
Councillor P Bains (part of the review)
Councillor Francis

Councillor Howard
Councillor Jenner
Councillor Milne
Councillor Raines
Councillor Scott
Councillor K Smith

- 2.2 The Panel would like to record its gratitude to the Members and Officers of Havant Borough Council for making themselves available to meet with the Panel. Full details of these members and officers may be found in the Background Papers.

3.0 Methodology

- 3.1 The Panel's activity was in 4 parts:

(a) Review of Background Information

Throughout the review the members of the Panel had access to the report on the Council's Covid 19 response submitted to Cabinet on 1 July 2020 and to the resource pack established by the Local Government Association, which included examples of how other Councils had reacted to the Covid 19 pandemic.

(b) Interviews with the relevant officers

(c) Results of a Councillor Survey

(d) Arriving at recommendations

The Evidence Considered

4 Who did the Council Target?

- 4.1 The Council targeted the following audiences:

- Residents – particularly vulnerable residents
- Businesses – particularly those needing support
- Staff
- Councillors
- Other stakeholders

5 What channels of communication did the Council use during the Covid 19 pandemic?

- 5.1 The Council used a wide range of communication methods to contact and keep residents and business informed throughout the first wave of the pandemic. These methods can be divided into digital and non digital.

5.2 Digital

Website

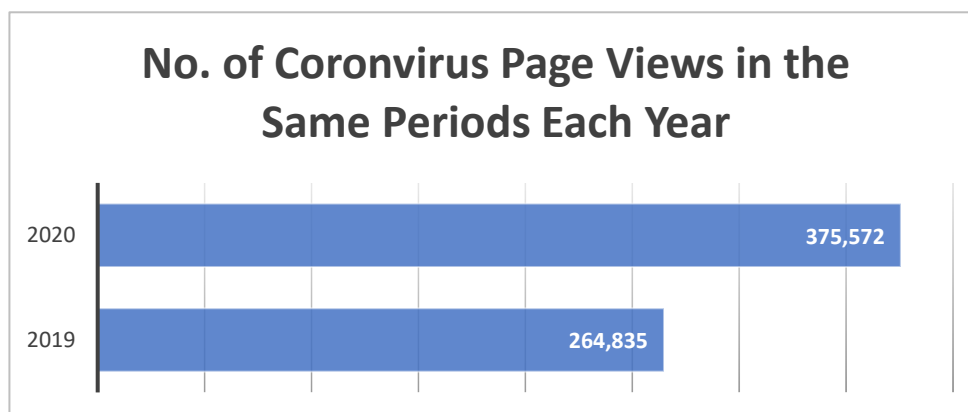
- 5.2.1 The Council's website was instrumental in providing information directly to residents and could be easily updated to reflect the constant changes in government advice and guidance. Therefore it was crucial that it was fully accessible to everyone during the first wave of the pandemic.

The main focus of the communications strategy was on the website which could be easily updated to reflect the constant changes in government advice and guidance. The Council created three main pages dedicated to coronavirus information all prominent on homepage

- Council service updates - <https://www.havant.gov.uk/coronavirus>
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- Support for businesses - <https://www.havant.gov.uk/coronavirus-business-support>
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- Support for vulnerable people - <https://www.havant.gov.uk/vulnerable-people>

- 5.2.2 The pages were updated in line with changes in government advice and changes to the services provided by the Council. For example, the service update page was revised every day to give updates on the status of HBC's services and some non-council services e.g. the page was used to update residents on the current status of schools and waste recycling tips in the Borough. When the list first started it included details of 10 services but by 19 August 2020 this had increased to 30 services. The website notice on the homepage was used to promote key messages.

- 5.2.4 As at 18 August 2020, the coronavirus information on the website had 83,126 page views with 43,717 page views within the first three weeks on the coronavirus information going live on the website. The following graph shows how this number of views compared with view in the same periods in 2019 and 2020.



Social media

- 5.2.5 The greatest value of social media was the ability to foster and engage with a community not usually reached. Therefore, in addition to using the website, the Council sought to engage residents and business using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn.
- 5.2.6 Since the start of the coronavirus outbreak, there has been a sharp increase in engagement and reach on the Council's social media accounts. The Council's Facebook account had received 558 new followers in March/April 2020 with a total of 4,406 likes. The Panel was advised that the Council's twitter account had a similar trend.

Facebook daily averages ¹				
Period	Posts per day	Reach	Impressions	Number of followers
Before 1/3/2020	1.3	2,407	3,172	3,848
After 1/3/2020	2.7	6,387	7,582	4,406
Twitter daily averages ²				
Period	Tweets per day	Impressions	Engagements	Number of followers
Before 1/3/2020	1.4	991	13	3,303
After 1/3/2020	2.7	1,344	38	3,650

E- Newsletters

- 5.2.7 E-newsletters are another valuable method of keeping residents/business informed of the ever changing situations and advise of grants/help available. E-newsletters could be tailored to the untended audience's needs. During the pandemic Councillor and business e-newsletters had been produced.

Virtual Meetings

- 5.2.8 Virtual briefings were held with staff and councillors to impart information to a wide audience and at the same time make the audience feel engaged in the Council's response.

¹ Correct as at 19 August 2020

² ibid

5.3 Non Digital

Printed communications

- 5.3.1 The Panel noted that the Council recognised that not all residents or businesses had access to the internet and had therefore resorted to using printed leaflets and flyers to impart information:

Telephone

- 5.3.2 The Panel noted that the Council also used the telephone system as shown in paragraph 8.1.7 below.

Visits

- 5.3.3 The Panel received evidence that in some cases officers visited vulnerable residents who the Council failed to reach by other methods (see 8.1.7 below).

6 How Well did the Council Communicate with the Target Audiences?

6.1 Residents

- 6.1.1 Although the Council used a wide range of communication methods to inform and contact residents, its main focus was on digital communications methods as these could be easily updated to reflect the constant changes in government advice and guidance. Digital channels of communication were also favoured above printed material as printed leaflets were:

- a) most likely be discarded after being read or discarded because they were assumed to be junk mail, and
- b) most likely to be out of date by the time they were distributed.

- 6.1.2 Although it was difficult to estimate how many of the page views and social media followers reported in 7.1.3 above were residents, it was felt safe to assume that these figures did not relate to businesses alone.

- 6.1.3 The Panel noted that, in light of information provided by Insight that a large part of the population of Borough did not have access to the internet, the Council printed and distributed 55,500 leaflets at a cost of £5,500. The Panel acknowledged that this leaflet was delayed in order to enable Hampshire County Council to set up and supply details of the helpline for vulnerable residents.

- 6.1.4 The Panel considered that the design of the leaflet was incorrect, that it lacked essential messages relevant to neighbourhoods, lacked a sense of urgency and emergency, and was too late in getting to residents. An opportunity had been missed to ensure an early flyer with key information – albeit to watch for

announcements or giving an emergency number to call locally – had reached every household as soon as lockdown occurred. The Panel was also disappointed that the helpline telephone number was not more prominent in the leaflet.

- 6.1.5 The Panel acknowledged that in addition to the problems associated with leaflets as set out above, leaflets were costly. However, in the light of evidence received from the Chairman of the Panel on the effectiveness of leaflets distributed by her voluntary group, the Panel felt that instead of producing one leaflet, the Council should have distributed a series tailored to meet specific issues. The Panel welcomed the acknowledgement by the Leader that perhaps the Council had been too ambitious in trying to cover too much information within one document.
- 6.1.6 The Panel felt that more use should have been made of flyers or the radio to reach vulnerable residents.
- 6.1.7 The Panel was pleased to note that evidence submitted to the Covid 19 – Scrutiny of the Councils Community Task and Finish Panel revealed that officers working in the Council's helpline contacted vulnerable residents by telephone to ascertain what help was required. This scrutiny had also revealed that officers from this Council also visited vulnerable residents who could not be reached by any other means
- 6.1.8 It was difficult for the Panel to gauge how effectively the Council communicated with residents without evidence. However, the respondents to a survey of Councillors revealed that as residents they felt that the most effective channels of communication were volunteer Facebook pages, customer services, daily government press conferences, radio, HBC emails, Serving You and the council's website. In the event of a second wave only 11% of the respondents to the Councillors' survey were not confident that residents would receive appropriate and timely communication from the Council.
- 8.1.9 A majority of the respondents to the Councillors' Survey suggested that the following improvements should be introduced in the event of a second wave:
- a quicker response
 - all messages from the council during the lockdown should focus on delivering contact details rather than being used as a promotional tool.

6.2 Businesses

- 6.2.1 The Council had a critical role in supporting business in the short term and re-building the economy in the medium to long term. It was essential that communications from the Council sustained businesses through this period

6.2.3 As at 30 June:

- 17 bulletins sent to those signed-up to receive business news with 86% engagement
- Facebook - 39 posts - 101,292 reach – 5,450 engagements
- Twitter - 40 tweets - 19,320 reach - 466 engagements

6.2.4 To keep local businesses up to date on the fast-changing situation and reopening of businesses the Council produced business e-newsletters, which were sent on an almost weekly basis to highlight grants and other significant issues for local businesses. As at 19 August 6,300 people were receiving these e-newsletters.

6.2.5 Posters were also displayed on sites around the borough. These posters had been revised to comply with changes in government guidance.

6.2.6 The above forms of communication were reinforced with email bulletins and social media posts and a dedicated webpage for customers on how to keep safe outside in the borough.

6.2.7 Although a survey of Councillors indicated that the respondents considered that there should be better communication with businesses, a survey commissioned by the Covid 19 Scrutiny – Business Support Response Task and Finish Panel found that 79% of the respondents found it easy to find the information and forms to apply for a business support grant.

6.3 Councillors

“A councillor’s primary role is to represent their ward or division and the people who live in it. Councillors provide a bridge between the community and the council. As well as being an advocate for your local residents and signposting them to the right people at the council, you will need to keep them informed about the issues that affect them”³

6.3.1 The Panel was eager to ensure that the Council also sought to keep Councillors up to date with developments during the first wave of the pandemic to enable them to fulfil their community role.

6.3.2 The main communication methods utilized were

- 23 editions of Serving Councillors
- Virtual Councillor briefings
- Video of Leader and shared on social media

6.3.3 These methods were used to update the Councillors on the Council’s response to the pandemic with Serving You including weekly key statistics. The peak opening rate of Serving You was 76%.

³ Local Government Association - Councillors’ Guide

- 6.3.4 The Panel welcomed the innovative way the officers communicated with Councillors. However, it felt that Councillors should have had a briefing as soon as lockdown occurred, albeit through a chain of communication such as County Councillors being informed, who in turn could have telephoned their HBC councillors or similar.
- 6.3.5 The Councillors' survey indicated that the channels of communications from the Council that proved most effective were general communications from the Council and briefings with the Leader. Overall other comments made for this question included a desire for a Question and Answer function to have taken place in order for Councillors to be briefed but also be able to receive answers to outstanding questions.
- 6.3.6 Councillors who responded to the survey also found the following forms of communication most effective when fulfilling their role as a Councillor during the pandemic:
- direct contact with the volunteer groups
 - Facebook pages offering information for the groups
 - frequent updates from the Leader (LGA)
 - comms trickled down from HCC
 - radio
 - daily news updates broadcast on the BBC
 - conversations between Councillors directly, other council's websites
- 6.3.7 Although 61% of the respondents to the Councillors' survey did not agree that the communications received from the Council exceeded their expectations, 61% of the respondents considered that the information received was relevant.
- 6.3.8 The respondents to the survey and the Panel identified the following improvements
- communications were timely given the rapidly changing situation
 - communications should be more easily understood
 - communications should be more inclusive for Councillors and have the same focus on Councillor welfare as provided for staff (see 6.4 below)
 - more information provided to Councillors should be given

6.4 **Staff**

- 6.4.1 Throughout the pandemic, a majority of the staff worked from home which posed challenges in providing the same level of service and maintaining staff welfare.

- 6.4.2 The Panel was pleased to see that regular all-staff emails had been sent to keep staff informed. As the situation had evolved these communications focused on matters such as working from home, staff welfare and support for managers. In addition, regular corporate communication tools such as Kneller's News and TeamTalk had been held with over 200 staff participating in each of these sessions when held.
- 6.4.3 The Panel was pleased to note that in a staff survey 93% of respondents indicated that they strongly agreed that they were kept informed on how the council was responding to the coronavirus pandemic through staff communication channels such as the weekly email, Kneller's News and Team Talk.

7.0 What Were the challenges and problems?

- 7.1 The main challenges and problems faced by the Council was
- having to respond to government messages, guidance and legislation which change rapidly
 - a reliance on other partners e.g. HCC for vulnerable resident helpline number
 - trying to communicate with businesses which had closed during the pandemic and were not operating from their business address
 - trying to reach residents, who had no or limited access to the internet

9.0 How Ready was the Council to Respond Another Local or national lockdown?

- 9.1 The Panel was advised that Council was working on identifying roles and responsibilities with the Local Resilience Forum in the event of another lockdown and that the Officers were investigating using other forms of communication such as radio to reach vulnerable people.