

Appendix 1

Communications health check

Thurrock Council

October 2020

Summary of findings

1. Executive summary

Thurrock Council has a positive story to tell about both its achievements as an authority and ambitions for the local area.

This is a council which is well regarded by its partners and is seen as having shown strong local leadership during very difficult times. The response to the deaths of 39 people in a lorry container in 2019, and more recently the handling of COVID-19, are examples of where the organisation's communications have been severely tested but have risen to the challenge.

Thurrock Council has a visible and committed political and managerial leadership which is passionate about the local area. It also possesses a communications team which is seen as hard working, approachable and creative.

Since the last LGA communications health check in 2017, progress has been made in many areas. The team has been restructured and is now more flexible and responsive, and has made strides to modernise its overall approach to communications.

There is an increased focus on campaigns – and less of a reliance on the issuing of press releases – albeit with progress still required. Internal communications is also seen as having improved, leading to significantly higher levels of engagement.

The crisis situations the team has had to respond to mean it has built strong and effective relationships with its public service partners.

However, despite the many positive developments we were able to identify, there remains some dissatisfaction with Thurrock's communications. In particular, there is disconnect between the experience members have with how the council communicates and with other people we spoke to.

There is a strong sense amongst members that the council's reputation amongst the local media needs to be improved. This has resulted in a situation where portfolio holders often feel unprotected, frustrated and not fully supported. Despite a seemingly large amount of organisational resource going into managing press enquiries, the local media is also disappointed with the service it often receives.

Everybody we spoke to within the council was frustrated with the amount of time taken to sign off press releases and statements. Ultimately, the current situation serves nobody's interests – whether it is the communications team, senior officers, members or indeed the local media. The system as it stands is not working as well as it could do, and we would urge the council to adopt a streamlined and less resource intensive approach.

There are differing views about the importance of the local media in the current climate, and a strong sense amongst some people that the time spent issuing press releases would be better spent growing and developing the council's own communications channels. It is true that the local media in Thurrock is less prominent than it once was – even since the last health check in 2017. However, the council's ability to determine the best approach is hampered by it not having insight

into the way local people consume news, or prefer to. It will be difficult for the council to develop a truly effective communications strategy going forward without this information.

In many respects, the council does already have a model for its future approach to communications – and that is the response to the container deaths and the pandemic. These incidents have shown what can be achieved through clear messaging, strong local leadership, clarity of purpose and good communications. The challenge now is to apply those positive lessons to everyday working.

2. Recommendations

These recommendations outline a series of practical actions and activities which will support the development of strategic communications at Thurrock Council, putting it in a better position to deliver the council's ambitions for its people and the place:

- Commission a 'who reads what?' survey to establish how Thurrock residents consume news and prefer to.
- Ensure the refreshed communications strategy includes measurable objectives and an annual campaign plan.
- Use the new strategy to set out how the Thurrock story will be communicated.
- Consider commissioning an externally facilitated workshop involving members and officers to help develop the new strategy.
- Replace the current sign off process for media statements with a simpler system which reduces the number of people involved and includes timeframes for both officers and members to agree lines.
- Consider more productive ways of engaging the local media (e.g. briefings) rather than relying on press releases.
- Establish a priority system for triaging queries, keep media updated on progress of queries and explain when a query will be answered or why no response is to be issued if that needs to be the case.
- Agree a strategy for how the council engages with online news outlets and stick to it.
- Involve the communications team in the council's decision-making process at an earlier stage to improve relationships and trust with members.
- Introduce a more outcome focussed approach to evaluating communications activity (e.g. the impact of a campaign rather than the number of 'likes').
- Focus more on the council's own communications channels which are read by more people (e.g. e-newsletters).
- Consider if customer services can support more with social media responsibilities by managing day to day enquiries received on that platform – and whether other departments can also play a greater role in creating content.
- Try and cut out the little errors (i.e. mistakes in draft press releases) which have an impact on the communications team's reputation.

- Get to know your social media platforms and audiences better, and avoid posting the same content across all channels.
- Introduce more local faces to social media and video content.
- Set ambitious targets for increasing the number of subscribers to the council's Thurrock News e-newsletter and develop a plan for achieving this.

3. Background and scope of the health check

It was a pleasure to speak with colleagues virtually from Thurrock Council on 6 and 9 October 2020. We appreciated the participation of everyone during the process and the people who gave up their time to share their views with us.

Health checks are part of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer and are delivered by communications peers. The peers who delivered the health check were:

Cllr Gareth Barnard, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning, Bracknell Forest Council
Alix Macfarlane, Deputy Head of Communications, Brighton and Hove Council, and Chair of LGCommunications
Matt Nicholls, Head of Communications Support and Improvement, LGA

Health checks are improvement-orientated and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are a 'snapshot', 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 people they met and material that they read. It is important to point out there will be aspects of your approach to communications that were either outside our remit or we did not have sufficient time to explore.

This health check was commissioned by Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services, with support from the political and officer leadership.

An LGA communications health check was delivered for Thurrock Council in May 2017. Following a restructure of the communications function and with the council's communications strategy about to be refreshed, it was felt now was an opportune time to assess progress made since the last health check. We were also asked to provide feedback on:

- The council's relationship with the local media
- Initial thinking on the communications strategy refresh
- Effectiveness of communications resources to deliver the strategy and priorities
- The council's digital communications

During the health check we spoke to:

Cllr Rob Gledhill	Leader of the Council
Lyn Carpenter	Chief Executive
Karen Wheeler	Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services
Cllr Deborah Huelin Cllr James Halden Cllr Aaron Watkins Cllr Barry Johnson	Portfolio Holders
Cllr John Kent Cllr Fraser Massey Cllr John Allen Cllr Gary Byrne	Group Leaders
Mary Patricia Flynn Scott Morrow Rebecca Horne Laura Keens Lewis Jones Cindy Walker Faye Gregory Kirsty Kerr James Stitson	Communications team members
Louise Banks (CCG) Perry Glading (Thurrock Business Board)	Partners
Julie Rogers Ian Wake Natalie Smith Anna Eastgate Stephen Taylor Cheryl Wells Tina Dempsey Daniel Jones Naintara Khosla Malcolm Taylor	Directors and Assistant Directors/ Strategic Leads
Neil Speight (Thurrock Nub News) Claire Sawyer (BBC Essex) Steve Shaw (former Local Democracy Reporter)	Local media

We undertook to write to you to confirm our findings, building on the feedback provided to you on the last day of the health check and expanding upon those areas that we highlighted as likely to benefit from some further attention. This summary report sets out those findings.

4. Context – the importance of strategic communications

Good communications supports the delivery of everyday services that people need and value and can play an increasingly crucial role in transforming and saving lives. A healthy local democracy is built upon councillors campaigning for and representing their communities; they need to be kept informed in order to fulfil that role. To fulfil their statutory responsibilities and to protect the public, councils need to ensure residents, staff, businesses and partners are communicated with effectively.

Effective communications relies on a mix of communications channels, including **media relations** (producing media releases and statements for distribution to local, regional, national and specialist media and responding to queries from the media), **direct communications** to residents (leaflets, publications, social media) and **internal and partner communications** (working with employees, Members and stakeholders to ensure everyone gets consistent, timely information about the organisation to help them do their jobs effectively and advocate on behalf of the organisation). Successful communications campaigns use a mix of all these communications channels, delivered to identified target audiences and robustly evaluated.

Building trust and confidence, and through that, strengthening relationships with citizens, stakeholders and staff, should be the starting point for any successful organisation. To succeed it requires recognition of the importance of strong strategic communications to act as a trusted advisor, navigator and leader.

Local authorities that do not adequately recognise the importance of strategic communications in terms of resources, skills and its place in the structure, are likely to be the ones that struggle the most to connect with their residents, staff and stakeholders.

Good communications should:

- Articulate the ambition for your area
- Improve corporate and personal reputation
- Support good political leadership
- Help engagement – residents, partners and staff
- Build trust
- Rally advocates
- Drive change and deliver savings
- Attract investment (and good people)
- Be used to manage performance
- Strengthen public support and understanding

It is delivered through:

- **Leadership** – clarity of purpose and commitment
- **A distinctive brand** – what you stand for, values and trust
- **A clear vision**
- Being **authentic** to your local area
- Adopting a **strategic approach to communications** - communication without strategy does not work
- Developing a corporately agreed, fully evaluated **annual communications plan** - not just sending out ad hoc stuff
- Making sure all communications activity is based on **research and insight** and that campaigns are linked to corporate priorities and resourced accordingly
- Investing in **evaluation**
- Ensuring communications is **owned by everyone**

5. Detailed feedback

Following the last LGA communications health check in 2017, the communications team was restructured to reflect the recommendation that it should be ‘campaign focussed and multidisciplinary’. The size of the team was also increased, which reflects the importance attached to communications by the council.

Headed by a Director who has a wider portfolio of responsibilities, the team is broadly made up of general communications officers who work across different channels, as well as separate web and design functions.

Excluding the Director, the team is comprised of 10 FTE posts. This also includes a web manager (web responsibility varies across councils, sometimes sitting within communications but often in IT or customer services). According to the LGA’s [annual heads of communication survey](#) the average size of a unitary council communications team is 9.8 FTE.

Broadly speaking, we believe the size and structure of the function is about right. There will always be a multitude of demands placed on a local authority communications team – particularly in the current climate – but Thurrock has a reasonable amount of resource and sufficient flexibility in its structure. Having a director level post which reports into the Chief Executive also means it is plugged into the leadership of the council and is strategically positioned.

The team is enthusiastic and committed to the organisation. They are bright, hard-working and seen as being creative. Many departments we spoke to were highly complimentary about the service they receive. The team is seen as proactive and good at promoting both the council’s achievements and those of the area.

The council’s communications handling of the coronavirus pandemic so far has been widely praised. It is felt there was an effective strategy in place and excellent work with partners, which is felt to have contributed to Thurrock having a relatively lower infection rate at the time of our interviews.

There are two particular strengths the team possesses which shone through our discussions – partnership working and crisis communications. The best example of both of these is the response to the lorry container deaths in 2019. Such an incident would have tested any communications team, so it is to the credit of Thurrock's that it is seen as having responded so strongly and effectively.

Communications is more outward focussed than was the case in 2017, when the amount of firefighting and long hours that resulted from it meant that people rarely had time to get out of the office. The team attends LGA events, the weekly Essex Communications Group meetings and the annual Public Services Communications Academy.

The council has adopted a more campaign led approach to its communications in the last three years and placed a greater emphasis on being proactive. However, whilst this was appreciated by many services we spoke to, members did not feel this was the case and often felt in the dark about campaign activity.

Monthly communications evaluation reports are produced, although knowledge of their existence was patchy. The team would benefit from presenting the information every month to senior management and members in order to raise their profile in the organisation.

Examples of evaluation we saw – for campaigns and the monthly reports – was very much focussed on communications outcomes directly related to social media activity. For example, the number of likes and posts which received highest levels of engagement. This data is useful and important, but there needs to be a greater focus on actual service-based outcomes deriving from communications activity.

Evaluation is a key component of a modern, strategic communications function and will allow the council to assess the impact of its communications. It also provides communications teams the data and evidence needed to improve their work, refine their channel use and use limited resources more effectively.

Although the team does agree SMART objectives with services at the beginning of a campaign, we would encourage them to make use of the [Government Communications Services' OASIS campaign planning model](#). This approach is considered best practice across public service communications and will help ensure the impact of campaign work is better understood across the council.

There was a sense from some people we spoke to that whilst the team is very good in a crisis situation, there could be a more proactive approach to some reputational issues.

While departments across the council value the service they receive from the communications team, there is frustration about the inability to sometimes get the basics right. We were told on several occasions that press releases are often drafted with spelling errors and other inaccuracies. Whilst these issues might seem minor, for the reputation of a communications team they really do matter. People will be less likely to listen to advice, and otherwise high-quality work is tarnished. We would encourage the team to make some small changes to their processes, perhaps just

by having an extra pair of eyes looking at something before it goes for sign off, to help prevent any errors.

Internal communications is an area which is seen as having substantially improved. A review was undertaken in 2018, and new channels were introduced including a regular blog from the Chief Executive and a refreshed #TeamThurrock weekly e-newsletter. Content is felt to be far more engaging, which is evidenced by the high open rates for the staff e-newsletter. A new intranet has been launched which is significantly better. Some concerns were expressed about the ability of staff without a computer to access information, although work is done to engage with non-office based staff. There was also a sense that internal communications could be more robustly linked to the council's People Strategy, although we had limited time to assess this.

Digital communications

We were asked to provide a perspective on the council's digital communications. Again, there have been improvements. A forward plan is now in place, whilst in 2017 there was little or no planning in place for posting content.

The communications team has improved its use of video. This is now a key channel for campaigns, public health information and also for messages from cabinet members. We would encourage the council to think more about how residents can play a greater role – authentic local voices are potentially powerful ways of conveying important messages and telling the Thurrock story. To illustrate this point, virtually all of the content on the council's YouTube channel is footage of council meetings.

The council has a presence on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Content is posted regularly, and good use is made of clear imagery. However, the tone is very broadcast and corporate. Engagement levels with most posts are low, and there does not appear to be any attempts to develop two-way conversations on the council's channels.

Although it is welcome that the council is investing less time in online 'firefighting' than was previously the case – and not responding to every single criticism – there is a balance to be struck. With appropriate training, it is worth exploring whether some services could be allowed to post on the council's social media accounts. Although we did not have sufficient time to explore this in detail, allowing the customer services team to respond to more routine resident enquiries online would also be beneficial.

It is worth noting that content across the council's Twitter and Facebook accounts is broadly the same. Different platforms attract a different type of user and they would in turn usually be interested in different types of content – and be active during different hours of the day. All of this should inform what is posted, where, and when. A basic example would be that Twitter is better for 'breaking news' and Facebook works more effectively for community type and hyperlocal content. Essex County Council has done some very good work to engage with community groups on

Facebook, and so there is potential learning to be explored via the Essex Communications Group.

A definite success story for the council's digital communications is the Thurrock News e-newsletters during the pandemic. A decision was taken to send the newsletter to all email addresses the council possessed via My Account sign up – more than 100,000 – due to the public health emergency. Up to 50,000 residents opened the weekly email, which is a very high level of engagement. Whilst this is undoubtedly related to the unique circumstances of coronavirus, it does demonstrate the council has the ability to reach out and communicate with large parts of the community using its own channels. We would recommend ambitious targets are set to grow the number of subscribers to Thurrock News, with an accompanying strategy for doing so.

The council also has a dedicated housing e-newsletter, which has achieved some strong levels of engagement. Business Buzz, a communication for businesses in Thurrock, is produced by the economic development team with communications support.

More broadly, we were told the council enjoys a strong reputation amongst the business community. To reiterate the earlier point about effective partnership working, Thurrock is seen as an open, approachable authority and the communication flow is seen by businesses – of all sizes – as working well.

Local media

The relationship between the council and its local media is widely viewed as requiring improvement.

Journalists feel that the time it takes for enquiries to be answered is too long, and also complained that sometimes these are unanswered and not even acknowledged. The communications team is also not seen as being as approachable as some of their counterparts in Essex, which has resulted in journalists approaching councillors directly for comment or interview.

It is important to stress that not every single query from the media requires the council to respond, but it would be better to ensure this is always explained from the outset. A priority system for triaging enquiries, and keeping the media updated on the progress of them, would also be beneficial.

Some frustration was raised with us about Thurrock's lack of engagement with the media – compared to other councils – at the beginning of the pandemic. This could have led to some missed opportunities to reassure residents, and there is value in the council looking at how other local authorities responded in order to inform its approach over the coming months.

A lot of the problems in the relationship stem from the length of time it takes for media enquiries to be answered. The council's evaluation report for September 2020 shows that of 26 media enquiries received, only 50 per cent were answered within 24 hours.

We were told that it can sometimes take days for statements to be agreed. There was palpable frustration amongst everybody we spoke to about this – including the communications team, senior officers, members and the local media. Clearly the current system is not working. A disproportionate amount of organisational time and resource is being spent on agreeing responses to enquiries, and then having limited impact due to that delay.

The sign-off process has been slightly streamlined since the last health check, and the Chief Executive no longer has sight of all releases. However, there do still appear to be a large number of people involved in agreeing statements, which should only be the case when responding to issues of reputational risk.

We heard differing views on the cause of sign-off bottlenecks, including people taking too much time to read draft statements to others being overly cautious. It is not our role to apportion any kind of fault, but we would stress that it is a shared responsibility for all officers and members to ensure the council responds to enquiries in a timely and effective way. A more streamlined sign-off system, with defined times for people to respond, would be a useful first step. However, some of the issues are cultural as much as about process.

As we set out earlier in the report, members do not feel sufficiently supported. Many spoke highly about the relationship they have with individuals in the team, but overall, there is a sense of frustration. Mostly this can be attributed to the issues with the sign-off process detailed above. But it is also a result of members seeing criticism of the council in the local media and online, and not having confidence that there is a plan to address it. Portfolio holders do not seem to feel there is a proactive strategy in place to promote good news, which has resulted in them feeling unprotected.

The council could look to think differently to the standard issuing of press releases, such as setting up briefings between lead members and the local media as a way of generating news.

We were also told that a significant amount of time can be spent debating how best to handle criticism of the council which appears on some online outlets. There is a balance to be struck between responding to legitimate issues of concern and feeding online arguments. The key is to agree a strategy and then stick to it. This is where continuing to grow the council's channels is so important – countering criticism or misinformation is best achieved on your own terms.

It should be said that members, like officers and partners, think the communications response to COVID-19 has been very good. It is an example of where the council's communications has been joined-up and well planned. Detailed briefings for members were produced. Portfolio holders also see the council's partnership working at a communications level as working well and praised the response to the container deaths.

Key to members feeling more supported by the communications team is to move the relationship beyond signing off a press release. At the moment, it appears the issues

the team is tasked to communicate are landed on them – there is limited ability to have influence earlier in the process.

Many cabinets/executives involve their communications team further upstream in the process – for example in pre-meetings to discuss which items will go into agendas. This affords the opportunity for a strategic discussion about how subjects will be handled and communicated. It allows communicators to offer professional advice, and for members to have the confidence that issues are being effectively handled.

It is for the council to determine the best way of doing this, but we believe the wider communications team needs to have more exposure to members and to build stronger relations. Currently, this contact primarily occurs with senior officers, which can lead to other people in the team not gaining enough profile. The new ways of working which have emerged during the pandemic, and the growth of virtual meetings, offer enhanced opportunities for closer and better relations.

Members need to gain a better understanding of how the communications team can support them. There sometimes appears to be confusion about what constitutes a political or an organisational message – when the council should respond corporately, or councillors should do so individually or as a party.

Key council decisions are communicated by press release, but there are opportunities for members to play a greater role in amplifying them. For example, a briefing could be prepared by the communications team for all councillors containing key messages and social media assets that could be used on their own channels.

Refreshed communications strategy

The development of a new communications strategy provides a real opportunity for both officers and members to work together and chart a course for how the council will communicate in future.

We would recommend members are closely involved in co-designing the strategy. The council may wish to consider an externally facilitated workshop for portfolio holders and officers to help with this. The LGA has run similar sessions for other councils, using member and officer peers, and we would be happy to help.

As set out earlier in the report, a significant problem with the current approach to communications is a lack of insight into how local residents access information about the council. We heard many different opinions about the value of concentrating resources on the local media versus the council's own channels, but without evidence they are just individual opinions.

The council has discontinued its resident survey, but at the very least we would strongly encourage it to commission research into how local people wish to be communicated with. This kind of evidence is particularly important as we combat coronavirus, as different messages need to be tailored to different audiences and demographics. Knowing the most effective ways of communicating with these groups is vital.

Resident insight should form the basis of the council's refreshed strategy. The LGA has published [guidance on carrying out a 'who reads what?' survey](#) and would be happy to help with the commissioning of research.

The 2017-20 strategy has been effective at setting out the direction of travel and principles to guide the council's communications. However, it lacks measurable targets and objectives to establish the success of this activity. To use digital communications as an example, these could include 'grow audiences by X% within the next 12 months', increase overall engagement levels with X% over the next 12 months' and/or 'increase newsletter signups from social media with X% compared to previous year'.

We also believe the new strategy should include the annual campaign plan, which was introduced in 2018 and which is considered best practice in local government. This annual plan allows the council to set out its priority areas for communications activity, with agreed budgets. It would of course need to be flexible to respond to events – as 2020 has shown – but an annual plan helps everyone across the organisation understand the council's campaign priorities for the year.

The strategy can also be a platform for the council to set out how it will articulate its vision, both for the organisation and the place. There was a sense from people we spoke to – both within the council and outside it – that although Thurrock has a very strong story to tell, it is not always being heard. The organisation was shortlisted for the MJ council of the year award twice, and there are many exciting developments afoot in the area. There are real opportunities to shape a more positive narrative around these achievements.

6. Conclusion

Through this review we have sought to highlight the positive aspects of the organisation's approach to communications, as well as outlining the challenges. We have drawn on our experience of working with councils across the country to review Thurrock's communications in the context of best practice in the sector.

The LGA's [#FutureComms resource](#) sets out how a more integrated, innovative and strategic approach to communications can help councils engage with residents, change behaviours and meet the challenges of the future. It also details what good looks like in modern public sector communication, and has been designed to support leaders, senior managers and communications teams.

Gary Hughes, as the Principal Adviser for the region, 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. Gary's contact details are gary.hughes@local.gov.uk