

## Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 4 September 2018 at 7.00 pm

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**Present:** Councillors Oliver Gerrish (Chair), Jack Duffin (Vice-Chair), Colin Churchman, Leslie Gamester and Andrew Jefferies, Steve Liddiard

**Apologies:** Councillor Mike Fletcher

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**In attendance:** Sean Clark, Director of Finance and IT  
Mary Patricia Flynn, Strategic Lead – Communications  
Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health  
Jackie Hinchliffe, Director of HR, OD and Transformation  
Sarah Welton, Strategy Manager  
Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services  
Matthew Boulter, Democratic and Governance Services Manager & Deputy Monitoring Officer  
Lucy Tricker, Democratic Services Officer

Michael Casey, Editor – Your Thurrock  
Gary Pearson, Editor – Thurrock Gazette  
Neil Speight, Editor – Thurrock Independent  
Ruth Swallow, Education & Recruitment Specialist, the Enquirer

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### **11. Minutes**

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 June 2018 were approved as a correct record. The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 4 July 2018 were approved as a correct record.

### **12. Items of Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

### **13. Declaration of Interests**

There were no interests declared.

### **14. Communications Strategy Update**

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services presented the report and explained that the current Communications Strategy had been agreed in October 2017 and centred on the principles of digital first, targeted messaging, and brand promotion. She went on to say that the report outlined the progress that had been made on implementing the strategy focused on

the last 6 months, including the increased use of social media such as a new Instagram account, and the success of specific campaigns such as recruiting new foster carers. The Chair opened the debate by asking about the changes to the size and structure of the Communications team. The Director explained that the team was led by the Strategic Lead for Communications, but that there were also three senior communications officers, as well as two communications officers and an apprentice that reported to them. In addition, there was now a new structure in place in which the team worked flexibly so everybody covered all aspects of communications including media and marketing. The Chair then asked a follow up question regarding how successful the flexible working had been. The Director answered that it was key to delivering success, as previously the team had been too reliant on individuals leading on one aspect of communication. She went on to state that in the new system everyone shared responsibility, which improves resilience and maximises skills as officers can apply a range of tools to different situations.

The discussion then turned to the Digital First approach as the Chair asked what measures were in place to ensure residents who did not have access to the internet, still had access to the council. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services replied that the council was using a wide range of tools for different messages including posters, libraries, the side of bin lorries, and posting information through letter boxes to keep every resident aware. She explained that every resident was encouraged to seek services online, but there were still non-digital channels. The Chair then asked if a methodical audit had been done on different services to see if they were as easily accessible non-digitally. The Director explained that lots of work had been carried out on the services provided both online and through more traditional methods as part of developing the Customer Services Strategy, and cited the example of the new self-scanning options in the council's reception so documents such as for parking permits could be scanned by residents if they could not do so online.

The debate was then opened to Member's and Councillor Duffin started by stating that he felt that over the past six months the content of social media posts had gotten much better as there were now a range of media including videos, and better targeted messaging. He felt that there were sometimes difficulties in communications between the council and the local media as response times could be quicker in some cases. He queried the processes of the sign-off channels as he felt there were relatively few media enquiries, and simple questions should have answers within 24 hours. The Strategic Lead for Communications answered by stating that the Communications team were introducing a new online newsroom which could be accessed by local media outlets which would contain photos, videos, and short snippets of news that would not need to go through sign-off channels. She also mentioned that every media request is different, and although some may seem simple they can be complicated as they can be inter-departmental. She additionally mentioned that the responses had to be accurate which can also take time. Councillor Duffin responded that he felt news stories should be shared through as many channels as possible, including both social and local media;

and that the digital element should be viewed as a part of the overall strategy. Councillor Liddiard also raised a point that the council can help get people online through libraries and hubs, and recommended that an 'idiot's guide' be produced to simplify processes and services offered online. The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services responded that there were already signposts and checklists in place regarding accessing services, but would look into producing a guide. She also continued by saying that volunteers in libraries and hubs received training in specific services which helps residents to access certain services.

The Chair then mentioned targeted messaging and the good work that had been undertaken by the Communications team regarding the recruitment of new foster carers. He asked a question regarding how metrics and KPIs (key performance indicators) focused the team when choosing which messages to target. The Strategic Lead for Communications explained that all campaigns have SMART objectives, which are linked to service objectives. She also stated that the Communications team have set targets too, for example the number of click-throughs on a page, which were evaluated quarterly.

The discussion was then opened to members of the local media, who were given three minutes each to speak on the report. The debate was started by Michael Casey, the Editor for Your Thurrock. He began by stating that Thurrock Council had a good online presence, particularly on Twitter, which spread the good work the council was doing. He said that there were sometimes delays in responses to media enquiries, and cited the example of Blackshots tyre fire over the summer, during which he waited nine days for a reply. He went on to say that he felt the press were dealt with using 'rules of engagement' first, rather than a true partnership and that this had become a pattern of behaviour. He summarised by stating that he wanted a symbiotic partnership with the council and wanted to promote good things happening in the borough, without feeling like Your Thurrock was in competition with the council.

Neil Speight, the Editor of the Thurrock Independent spoke next and started by emphasizing the importance of a good relationship between the council and local media. He also felt that response times from the Communications team could be quicker and that responses for simple requests should be received within 24 hours as stated in the Communications Strategy. He went on to say that the communications team received less than 200 media enquiries in the last few months, which equated to less than two per day for a staff of four people. He felt that he was ignored by the council as he had repeatedly asked for the contact details of the communications team, which he had not received. He also felt that the relationship between the council and local media should be open and transparent for the benefit of everyone.

Gary Pearson, the Editor of the Thurrock Gazette started by discussing the reactivity of news outlets in the digital age, and also felt that the council's reactivity to the Gazette's requests could be quicker. He felt that simple requests should be answered within 24 hours, but could understand that more complex questions and Freedom of Information requests can take longer. He

then asked a question regarding why some responses took longer than is usually expected at other councils. He went on to say that he would like the local media to be included in the use of social media and they should work together for the benefit of everyone.

Ruth Swallow, Education and Recruitment Specialist for the Enquirer began by stating that she was filling in for a reporter, but had collected viewpoints from around the newsroom to represent the newspaper. She began by saying that the Enquirer focused on good news stories and promoted local communities. She also stated that the Enquirer had a different readership to other local media as they were distributed in health centres and libraries so tended to have an older readership. Based on comments from the Enquirer's newsroom, she felt that the council and her newspaper had a good relationship and received press releases and enquiries on time. She also felt that there was a good relationship with the Strategic Lead for Communications, and together they covered a whole range of stories and events going on across the borough.

The Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Service responded that the feedback was helpful and meetings regularly take place between the Communications team and some editors. The Director stated that the council did recognise the important role the media play and felt that they were not in competition. She also replied that there was balance to be made between direct messages to residents from council channels online and local media, but that only immediate incident or operational service issues were released online before the local media were notified. She also informed the Committee that the council aimed to answer all media enquiries within 24 hours and that during the past six the majority had been responded to between 48 hours and 3 days. She stated that the council were not required to respond to all media enquiries, in the same way that the media do not have to cover a council press release, but that she would look into specific points mentioned separately. The Director also commented that all media outlets were provided with the generic email and phone numbers for the Communications team so the council were available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, which she hoped had been useful.

A discussion then took place regarding typical response times and the move towards digital media. The Editor of Your Thurrock stated that as the internet is 24/7, the council should be promoting its message 24/7, but felt that the Communications team do give some immediate responses to enquiries. The Strategic Lead for Communications replied that a member of the Communications team was on call 24/7, other officers weren't which meant that it was not appropriate to contact them at weekends with service related questions. The Editor of the Thurrock Independent asked if acknowledgement emails could be sent once enquiries had been received, with an estimated response time. Councillor Duffin then asked about the process of answering media questions. The Director of Strategy, Communications, and Customer Services replied that the first stage was fact-finding and fact-checking, and then it goes through sign-off with senior officers, the CEO, and Members especially where they are quoted. The Director went on to say that 83% of

questions had been answered within 3 days, but that sometimes Members or Officers cannot respond quickly; or responses included site visits or contact with external providers.

Councillor Duffin then raised the suggestion of a KPI of 90% of media enquiries being answered within 24 hours on working days, excluding Freedom of Information or detailed requests. A discussion then began on relationships between the Council and local media outlets; and the importance of promoting good news across the borough. The Strategic Lead for Communications stated that she had met with all the editors of local newspapers when she started, and that although the majority of the Communications team were new, any one of them could pick up the phone to local media and vice versa. The representative from the Enquirer responded that relationships between the two were good. The Editor for the Thurrock Independent felt he had not met with members of the Communications team enough. Councillor Duffin then added that more good news stories needed to be promoted across the borough, as he felt there was a trend towards focusing on negative issues. The Strategic Lead for Communications responded that the council were always seeking good news stories and cited the example of the Discover Thurrock campaign which had run over the summer, showing residents fun activities that were happening across the borough. The discussion finished with a debate on the changing nature of relationships between the council and local media since 2016 and the potential reasons for this which were not attributable to one cause or change. The Chair then summarised the comments made into the following points:

1. The Committee recognised the importance of ensuring access to online services were available to non-online users
2. The Committee recommended that Cabinet explore the option of a 90% KPI target for responses to media enquiries within 24 hours on working days, not including Freedom of Information or complex requests
3. The Committee recommended that the communications team work with the local media to ensure a good partnership and working relationship
4. The Committee recommended that consideration be given to ensuring the right approach to encourage 'proactive openness' with the media

**RESOLVED: That:**

- 1. The Committee commented on the progress made on implementing the communications strategy**

**15. Quarter 1 Corporate Performance Report**

The Strategy Manager opened the report and stated that this was the first corporate performance monitoring report for 2018/19. The report detailed the

statistical evidence the council uses to monitor its progress and performance against the council's priorities. The report provided a progress update in relation to the performance of those KPIs. She also stated that there were no longer any amber KPIs, and that targets had either been achieved (green) or had not (red). The Chair opened discussions by pointing out the KPI on page 41 regarding the proportion of bins emptied on the correct day, as this target had also not been met during the previous winter period. The Director of HR, OD and Transformation replied that this quarter, the lower collection rate coincided with the strike ballot, which had restricted the council's ability to access agency staff, and therefore there were reduced staffing levels. The Chair then queried the large missed target regarding the satisfaction of housing tenants as the target was 75% satisfaction, and only 65% had been achieved. The Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health responded that if 'fair' answers had been recorded the satisfaction rate would have been 88%, but he felt it was disappointing the target had not been hit. He went on to say that the survey was run by an external provider, and chose people at random. He stated that he had seen the figures for July & August which had been almost 70% satisfaction rates, so an improvement had been made. He also said that there had been an issue this quarter with how operatives and housing staff communicate with tenants, and that the service were looking to improve this to ensure the council explain processes better to tenants.

The Chair then raised the failed KPI of timeliness to the response of complaints as the target had been 95%, but only 86% had been reached. The Director of HR, OD, and Transformation responded that the team were constantly working with services that they had already seen a positive direction of travel. She mentioned that complaints were escalated to senior managers more quickly if they did not hit deadlines. The Director confirmed that the target had remained the same at 95% despite reducing the deadline to 7 days. She went on to say this is now very ambitious, and whilst services strive to respond as quickly as possible, the nature and complexity of some complaints means that longer is required, and that the appropriateness of the overall target will need to be kept under review.

Councillor Duffin stated that he was happy to see the KPI regarding apprenticeships was now green, but asked a question regarding how many apprentices stayed on once their apprenticeship had finished. The Director of HR, OD and Transformation replied that it had been a positive change as 2017 was the first year of the apprentice levy and strategy. She stated that the council had run an apprentice recruitment day in which all the services had been represented, and had galvanized children in school to consider apprenticeships with the council. The Director informed the Committee that retaining apprentices was something the council was working on by making more junior posts available and approaching apprentices in different ways.

The Chair then discussed the KPI regarding staff sickness, as this was moving in the right direction. The Director of HR, OD and Transformation replied that it was good to see a positive direction of travel, and that this follows a national trend although absence levels remain higher than national comparators. She observed that a targeted project is assessing any further

interventions that could improve health and attendance. She also underlined the council's staff health and wellbeing package that was available.

**RESOLVED: That:**

- 1. The Committee noted and commented upon the performance of the key corporate performance indicators in particular those areas which are off target**
- 2. The Committee identified any areas which required additional consideration**

**16. Work Programme**

Members had no updates on the Work Programme.

**The meeting finished at 8.40pm**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIR**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact Democratic Services at [Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk)**