

9 March 2021		ITEM: 6
Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Communications Update		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non applicable information only	
Report of: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
Accountable Assistant Director: N/A		
Accountable Director: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

The Local Government Association (LGA) carried out a ‘communications health check’ in October 2020 at the council’s request and provided a report in December 2020 which made recommendations to support the development of strategic communications at Thurrock Council.

A response and action plan, at Appendix 2, has been developed which outlines the council’s plans to implement the recommendations from the LGA report and progress against each action. The council welcomes the report and recommendations. Many of the actions will help to inform the new communications strategy which is currently being developed. The action plan is a working document covering both strategic issues for implementation through the new strategy in 2021/22 onwards as well as more operational improvements that can be delivered immediately.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee are invited to comment on the action plan and provide any additional recommendations for consideration as part of developing the communications strategy.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 The committee is asked to comment on the LGA report and the progress made on implementing its recommendations through the response and action plan and make any additional recommendations to inform development of the new communications strategy.

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 This report provides an update on the LGA Peer Review of the council's communications which took place in October 2020.
- 2.2 It follows the verbal update given to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee by the Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services on in January 2021.
- 2.3.1 The council is in the process of reviewing its communication strategy with a view to having a refreshed strategy in the coming months which will be shared at Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to going to Cabinet for approval June 2021.
- 2.3.2 The Local Government Association (LGA) were invited to carry out a virtual peer review, referred to as a 'communications health check' in preparation for developing the communications strategy.
- 2.3.3 This was similar to the 'communications health check' undertaken in May 2017 which informed the current strategy. The most recent report recognises the progress made since the previous review.
- 2.3.4 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
- 2.3.5 The peer team spoke to 35 people including councillors across all parties, officers within and outside of the communications team, partners and the local media through sessions held on Microsoft Teams over two half days in October. This was followed by the report in December 2020.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1.1 The report provides detailed feedback and recommendations made by the LGA based on their discussions with councillors, officers, partners and the local media.
- 3.1.2 A plan, at Appendix 2, has been developed which outlines the council's response and action to address each of these recommendations. The recommendations focus on five key areas which include strategic issues linked to the emerging new strategy and wider approach to communications as well as practical more operational issues around the following themes:
- Communications strategy

- Local media
- Processes
- Enews (resident newsletter Thurrock News)
- Social media

3.1.3 All recommendations contained within the report have either been implemented or are underway. The action plan is a working document and will be updated over time.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to comment on the progress made on implementing the recommendations and to support the continuation of the work towards preparing the new communications strategy. Any comments or additional recommendations from the committee will be considered as part of developing the strategy.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 The LGA peer team spoke to councillors from all parties, officers in the communications team and across other services, partners and the local media in the preparation of their report.

5.2 The Portfolio Holder, Directors Board and Communications Team were consulted on the development of the action plan.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1 Communication of the priorities, policies and performance is key to the overall success and reputation of the council as well as the wellbeing of residents.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Laura Last**
Senior Management Accountant

There are no financial implications as a result of this report. Actions in response to the recommendations can be implemented within existing budgets.

The LGA communications health check is part of the wider improvement support offer included within the council's membership of the LGA.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Ian Hunt**
Assistant Director of Law and Governance & Monitoring Officer

There are no legal implications as a result of this report. The council follows the Recommended Code of Practice for Local Authority Publicity. The Code provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager - Community Development and Equalities

There are no direct diversity and equality implications as a result of this report, however, the council must ensure that a range of channels are used to communicate with residents so as not to exclude any particular group. This will be considered as part of the survey included within the recommendations and actions plans. The results will be used to inform the new communication strategy.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

There are no other specific implications, however, the council regularly develops communications approaches and materials in partnership with other public sector organisations, the voluntary sector and businesses as appropriate.

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- LGA Communications Health Check: Thurrock Council

9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1 - LGA Communications Health Check: Thurrock Council
- Appendix 2 - Communications Health Check Response and Action Plan

Report Author:

Mary Patricia Flynn
Strategic Lead Communications
Communications