

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7 September 2021 at 7.00 pm

- Present:** Councillors Susan Little (Chair), Adam Carter, Gary Collins (*substitute*), John Kent, Sara Muldowney (*substitute*), and Graham Snell (*substitute*)
- Councillor Shane Hebb, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance
- Apologies:** Councillors Colin Churchman (Vice-Chair), James Halden, and Bukky Okunade
- In attendance:** Mary Patricia Flynn, Strategic Lead Communications
Michele Lucas, Assistant Director Education and Skills
Karen Wheeler, Director Strategy, Engagement and Growth
Sarah Welton, Strategy & Performance Officer
Lucy Tricker, Senior Democratic Services Officer
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Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, and live-streamed onto the Council's website.

6. Minutes

The Chair noted that at the previous meeting Councillor Kent had felt concerned about the timescales of the Work Programme, and felt that this had not been addressed. Councillor Kent added that there had only been one meeting of the Shadow Investment Board, and felt the Board had not been formally established as suggested in the minutes. Councillor Hebb replied that the Board had met twice, once in September 2020 and once in December 2020. He clarified that the first meeting had simply been an introductory session for Members and consultants.

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 June 2021 were approved as a correct record.

7. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

8. Declaration of Interests

There were no interests declared.

9. Communications Strategy 2021-24

The Strategic Lead Communications introduced the report and stated that it outlined how the Council's communications would align over the next three years, and was designed to build on the work previously undertaken by the Communications Strategy 2017-20. She explained that the new strategy focussed on brand recognition that would enhance the Thurrock narrative, as well as providing a strategic approach that aligned with Thurrock's corporate priorities. She summarised and stated that the strategy would also provide a more modern communications service, including increased use of direct digital communications tools.

Councillor Kent thanked officers for their report and questioned if the Local Government Association health check recommendations had been included in the strategy. He gave the example of an external workshop between Members and officers; a new sign-off process to reduce the number of people and timeframes involved; new media briefings rather than press releases; and a priority triage system for communication enquiries. He also queried if the communications team had introduced a new system to cut out errors in press releases, as recommended by the Local Government Association. He summarised and asked if a system for including local faces in video content had also been rolled out.

The Strategic Lead Communications responded and stated that a workshop between Members, senior managers and members of the communications team had occurred in line with the Local Government Association recommendation. She added that other elements of work with local media, such as sign-off processes for queries, were operational aspects of the communications team and were therefore not included in the strategy. She explained that the team were looking into media briefings, for example utilising a hybrid briefing system, potentially both in person and online, that would allow local media to directly ask questions on key topics. She added that the communications team had also introduced a system of double proofing work to ensure errors in press releases did not occur. She mentioned that the communications team were also including residents in video content more, and gave the example of a local GP who participated in a recent COVID video, and local business owners who were currently filming for future content.

The Chair thanked the team for their hard work and felt that lots of reporting was being undertaken, but asked for more evidence and feedback on outcomes from the strategy. Councillor Collins highlighted page 25 of the agenda and questioned what positive behaviour change in the population would look like. He also queried the use of TikTok to spread the Council's messages. Councillor Collins then highlighted page 27 of the agenda and asked if the Council offices would be reopening, which would help boost the local economy in Grays. The Strategic Lead Communications replied that communications teams in a variety of sectors regularly used behavioural science to encourage good behaviour in local residents, for example by encouraging them to recycle or not drop cigarette butts. She stated that some Council's used footsteps leading to the nearest bins to encourage residents to dispose of waste properly, or by installing question bins for cigarette butts.

She then moved on and stated that Thurrock were looking at a variety of digital channels from across the world, and whilst that included the TikTok platform, no decisions had yet been made on which channels to pursue. The Chair questioned how much money Thurrock Council had spent on pursuing the use of TikTok as a media platform and the Strategic Lead Communications responded that so far no money had been spent.

Councillor Muldowney stated that approximately 10% of the adult population did not have access to the internet, and asked how they would be included and engaged within the strategy. She felt that people who did not have access to the internet tended to be more vulnerable, such as elderly people. The Strategic Lead Communications replied that additional options were available to those residents who were not online, and these options were built into the strategy. She explained that Thurrock were moving towards a more digital communications approach, and digital messages could be passed on through community forums to people who could not access the internet. She added the Council still produced leaflets and posters, for example for information regarding sheltered housing, and that easy-to-read posters in high footfall areas were useful for communicating with residents for whom English was a second language. The Strategic Lead Communications mentioned that the communications team also regularly liaised with community groups for their support on projects, which would help people who did not have access to the internet, engage with the Council. She added that using digital channels was also a more cost effective option than printing leaflets, but for large campaigns or the council tax leaflet, printed information was utilised.

The Chair questioned how the strategy would encourage people in rural areas to engage with the Council. She also queried how the team were working to improve engagement as a whole, as currently only 35% of Thurrock residents were actively engaging. The Strategic Lead Communications responded that people in rural areas would have access to digital campaigns. She added that the figure of 35% engagement related to Thurrock Council's newsletter, but engagement was higher for other elements of communications including campaigns. She stated that the communications team would never focus solely on digital channels, and the team would try to find the balance between digital channels and print media. Councillor Muldowney questioned what the balance currently was between digital and non-digital channels. The Strategic Lead Communications felt that the balance between digital and non-digital engagement differed from issue to issue. She stated as an example that if an issue disproportionately affected people aged over 80, the communications team would focus on print media.

Councillor Muldowney highlighted appendix two of the report and stated that although the Thurrock Thanks campaign had had a good digital reach, the proportion of those residents retweeting and clicking through the link was low. She questioned how the communications team was measuring the quality of engagement, and the proportion of people who were taking in the information. The Strategic Lead Communications replied that it was sometimes difficult to measure the level of engagement, particularly with awareness campaigns such as Thurrock Thanks. She stated that if the campaign set out a call to

action, such as campaigns regarding rent, then specific engagement targets would be set. She stated that this was monitored through the number of people calling the contact centre after a specific campaign, or the number of click throughs on a link. She stated that for Thurrock's fostering campaign, people that made enquiries were asked where they had heard about fostering and those answers were recorded. She commented that all campaigns were linked to service priorities, but there were lots of people simply passive scrolling on social media who would see content but not necessarily engage with it.

Councillor Carter asked if the recent fostering campaign had led to an increased number of fostering enquiries. The Strategic Lead Communications replied that she understood this would be discussed at the next Corporate Parenting Committee and she did not have the information to hand. She explained that the Council were currently beginning the second phase of the fostering campaign, which would highlight the need of local children, compared to the first phase which had focussed on the council tax rebate. The Chair added that it would be important for the Corporate Parenting Committee to see how many fostering enquiries had become accepted foster carers.

Councillor Snell thanked officers for their hard work on the report and felt that it would be difficult to increase active social media engagement, as the majority of social media users simply scrolled past posts. He felt that communications within Thurrock had recently improved, for example he was receiving more regular emails and saw more regular Facebook posts. He thanked officers for their work on utilising digital tools, as he felt this was the direction the world was moving in. Councillor Snell suggested that social media posts became more targeted towards certain users, and more entertaining to increase engagement. The Chair echoed Councillor Snell's comments and felt that the communications team did lots of good work. She felt there was room for improvement in some areas, and wished to see the good communications work that was started during the pandemic continued. She expressed her concern that the Civic Offices and some libraries and hubs were still not open, and felt that this restricted vulnerable or elderly people that could not access services online.

Councillor Kent questioned the differing social media engagement figures quoted on page 24 of the report, and within the report introduction, and queried which figure was correct. He also highlighted page 5 of the report and asked what the new Statement of Intent involved. He then highlighted the recommendation from the Local Government Association listed on page 40 of the report, stating that Members felt removed from the communications team, and asked what steps were in place to improve this. Councillor Kent also outlined page 42 of the report which stated that the time taken to answer local media questions needed to be improved, as only 50% of queries were answered in target time. He asked how the strategy responded to these issues. The Strategic Lead Communications replied that the figure on page 24 was different from the report introduction, as the first figure discussed which people received their information from the Council, and the second figure

related to the number of people who saw the Council's content. She explained that approximately 65,000 people saw Thurrock's post related to COVID and these included people who did not follow Thurrock on social media, due to the number of people sharing and commenting on the post. She added that Thurrock also used boosted posts, which ensured Thurrock Council posts appeared on people's timelines even if they did not follow the Council's page. She moved on and stated that the team would be introducing a monthly evaluation report for Members to ensure they were kept up to date on the work of the communications team. She explained that this would be uploaded to the Council's intranet page, but had not yet been started. Councillor Kent queried if Members could access the intranet from home, and the Strategic Lead Communications replied that she would look into this.

The Strategic Lead Communications added that new internal processes had been introduced to ensure good communication between Thurrock Council and the local media. She mentioned that local media often reported on Thurrock press releases and on positive news stories from the Council. She stated that the team worked hard to answer local media questions but some questions did not have an answer. The Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth added that the Statement of Intent was a new piece of work being started that would outline the tangible outcomes of investment and regeneration within the borough by 2030, including new job opportunities and upskilling. She explained that as this was a new piece of work, it was still in the development phase but would be brought back to Committee as part of the process. Councillor Kent expressed concern that Members had not heard of this piece of work until the meeting. He also queried if local media partners had been included in the development of the strategy. The Strategic Lead Communications replied that local media partners had been emailed inviting them to share and take part in the survey which informed the strategy development. The Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth added that as the recommendations from the Local Government Association health check had been operational, these had not been included in the Communications Strategy.

Councillor Kent thanked officers for their work on the report and stated that whilst he understood the Communications Strategy needed to work for a variety of people, on a variety of platforms, he had hoped to see more engagement with the local media. He stated that committee members had been contacted by one local media editor and he had sought the views of another. Both felt that the partnership between Thurrock Council and themselves could be improved, and a better balance could be struck. He felt that the Communications Strategy needed to look at local media outlets as partners, and be given the help to grow as local businesses. The Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth stated that local media had an important role to play in conveying information to local residents, and this had been supported by independent research outlining where residents received their news. She explained that day to day processes relating to the local media had not been included in the Communications Strategy, as this fell into the operational remit of the communications team. She added that the Council and local media outlets worked together on a daily basis, and new media

briefings would help to improve the relationship. She stated that the Local Government Association health check had been presented in full to the Committee, and the majority of comments had been positive, particularly surrounding Thurrock's COVID response. She acknowledged that there was still some work to do, but Thurrock worked well with local, national and trade newspapers on a regular basis.

Councillor Muldowney queried how the impact of the strategy would be measured. She felt that residents needed to have direct contact with the Council, and this could only be undertaken once the Civic Offices had been reopened. She also wished to see the monthly evaluation report emailed directly to Members for the feedback, rather than being posted on the intranet.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Commented on the proposed Communications Strategy 2021-24 as the principle policy document for communication with residents, businesses, stakeholders and staff.

10. Fair Debt Summit - Supporting Vulnerable Residents

The Assistant Director Education and Skills introduced the report and stated that it outlined the work undertaken in September 2018 on the Fair Debt Summit, which had been cross-party and cross-directorate. She stated that the Summit had considered how best to support residents, young people and schools with financial literacy, and a pilot scheme had been developed by Thurrock Adult Community College. She added that the work had now been embedded into Thurrock's Inspire programme, which worked with both young people not in education, employment or training and vulnerable adults. The Assistant Director Education and Skills mentioned that work on the project had been paused due to COVID and school closures, but was now being re-energised, and the team would be going back into schools to deliver the programme. She stated that the team would also be using the programme as a challenge for Thurrock's Next Top Boss, and felt it was particularly important to help young people understand financial resilience post-COVID.

Councillor Carter questioned if the programme would be available to the most vulnerable young people in Thurrock, including those in foster care. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that the scheme would be run for all young people to take part in, which included those Looked After Children. She added that care leavers also had separate money management schemes that had been working well. She explained that all young people could find it easy to get into debt, and the programme would help these people understand the wider financial economy and the skills they would need to remain debt free. She highlighted the appendix to the report that showed they had received positive feedback from schools that had run the pilot scheme, and this feedback would be developed into a programme by Thurrock Adult Community College.

Councillor Muldowney questioned if the scheme was being targeted correctly. She stated that the pilot scheme had been run for year 9 and 10 students, who would not necessarily have experience with debt at that age. She felt that although the current scheme would be a good preventative measure, it would be beneficial to target the scheme at older people who were already in debt, and would therefore reduce child poverty rates in the borough. The Chair also queried if the scheme was targeted correctly, and felt it should be targeted at younger children to enable them to understand money at an earlier age. The Assistant Director Education and Skills explained that although the scheme did target young people, it also targeted vulnerable groups through Inspire, such as young people not in education, employment or training, some of whom were already in debt. She added that the scheme would also work with vulnerable families, and could be adapted to work for adults on a wider scale. She stated that the work in schools was preventative and would help to embed the key principles of debt management from a young age. She summarised and stated that she would consider all feedback from the Committee, including the targeted age ranges.

Councillor Snell thanked the team and the director for their hard work on the report. He felt that early targeted intervention would help young people with their financial preparedness and stop people entering into debt later in life. He queried if the scheme would teach young people about the use of IT and money, as the UK moved toward a cashless society. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that the scheme would look into online banking and IT, as it became more easy to spend money online and on mobile phones. She explained that the Adult Community College had recognised the changes in money management and would work to develop this into the programme.

Councillor Hebb echoed comments made by Councillor Snell and thanked the team for their hard work. He stated that the paper had been designed to share the work so far and get more ideas from Members. He felt that the scheme would help to promote financial independence and would build financial capability at an early age, to ensure young people avoided debt. He stated that during the summit young people had seemed interested in the programme and had asked a variety of questions from mortgages to interest rates. He added that the scheme would also look at financial technology, as it became easier to spend money and be approved for loans online.

Councillor Kent welcomed the idea of a Fair Debt Summit and financial inclusion education. He felt that this would be a long term programme, the benefits of which would not be seen until the young people currently at school reached adulthood. He added that some banks offered financial advice and activities in schools currently, and asked if the Council could link up and utilise some of these services. He echoed the points raised by Councillor Muldowney and felt that adult poverty and debt management also needed to be addressed, particularly as the government's furlough scheme drew to a close and tax rates increased. He felt that these people needed to be considered as part of the scheme, as they could be at risk from debt or financial mismanagement. Councillor Hebb explained that a report would be

coming to the Committee in November which would focus on debt collection by the Council, and had involved the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Councillor Collins felt the report was positive, and asked what other vulnerable groups the scheme would be considering. The Assistant Director Education and Skills replied that the scheme would focus on those in school; young people not in education, employment or training; and young people on benefits, who would be picked up by the Inspire team. She explained that the scheme would also look into problems associated with online gaming and gambling, which often led people into financial difficulty. She stated that a piece of work could also be undertaken that would focus on money management for those young adults over the age of 25 who were not included in Inspire. The Chair asked if young people and adults with learning difficulties could be included in the scheme. Councillor Collins added that it would be useful if young people leaving for university could also receive a bespoke course regarding money management at university.

Councillor Muldowney stated that one third of young people currently lived in poverty, and asked what could be included in the strategy to help them directly. Councillor Hebb stated that the scheme had been divided into three sections, which included: education; people who could pay debts but refused; and people who could not pay debts but wanted to. He explained that the report coming to the Committee in November would cover compassionate collections, and would go into detail regarding poverty and how to tackle the issue.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Reviewed the approach, and provided any relevant feedback, with a view of supporting a joint working approach between Finance and Education to provide holistic opportunities to address debt management/avoidance in schools.

2. Recommended to Cabinet the continuing support for financial literacy to remain a key focus of the curriculum offer across schools and colleges.

3. Recommended that the debt management activities continue to be delivered across directorates, as well as making use of external agencies/services to support this programme of activity.

11. Quarter 1 (April-September) Corporate Performance Report 2021/22 and Corporate Performance Framework

The Strategy Manager introduced the report and stated that it covered the first quarter of the 2021-22 municipal year. She explained that each Key Performance Indicator was either red or green, and those that were currently red included detail commentary as well as a 'route to green'. She stated that COVID restrictions had only been stepped down in July 2021, so this quarter

had still been effected by COVID regulations, and this had been outlined in the report where relevant.

Councillor Kent highlighted point 3.8 on page 54 of the agenda and the Key Performance Indicator relating to the average full time wage in Thurrock. He queried whether this was the wage for Thurrock residents or for Thurrock jobs. He also highlighted the Key Performance Indicator relating to the business rate base, and questioned why this would fall by £6million. He also outlined the number of homes permitted through planning, which only equalled 195, and queried if this year's target of 950 homes permitted through planning was achievable. He also drew the Committee's attention to the Key Performance Indicator relating to families presenting at risk of homelessness. He stated that 1836 families had presented themselves to the Council as being at risk of homelessness, but only 211 had been accepted, which equated to 11.5% of those presenting. He sought clarification that the families not accepted as being at risk of homelessness had been helped in other ways, for example had been able to keep their homes.

The Strategy Manager explained that she would need to seek clarification on the more detailed Key Performance Indicator questions. She added that the number of homes permitted through planning last year was correct at 195. Councillor Hebb stated that the Key Performance Indicator relating to business rate base currently included some post-COVID assumptions, such as in the hospitality and retail sectors, as some markets had not yet been re-established. He explained that the most recent Cabinet report showed the funding gap had been closed by £2million, but the Council did not yet know how the end of the furlough scheme would impact upon residents and businesses. He stated that the Council would continue to monitor employment levels across the borough, and had already seen some positive improvement over the past three months. He summarised and stated that only £1million of council tax had not been collected, compared to £70million of council tax that had been collected post-COVID.

The Chair queried how Key Performance Indicators were measured, and asked if queries made over the phone and online were cross-referenced. The Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth replied that all resident queries were logged as part of the Key Performance Indicator. She explained that if a Member or MP logged a query, this would be cross-referenced to ensure it had not already been reported by a resident. She stated that this would ensure queries were not double counted as part of the KPI. The Chair also questioned how online system maintenance occurred, as she had received some resident concerns regarding maintenance during the day. The Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth replied that maintenance during the day was limited to essential maintenance only, and tried to avoid peak hours. She explained that where possible advance notice was given to residents of maintenance, through digital channels, and the contact centre were also made aware.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

1. Noted and commented upon the performance of the key corporate performance indicators, in particular those areas which are off target and the impact of COVID-19.

2. Identified any areas which required additional consideration.

3. Commented on the areas of focus for 2021/22 that will support delivery of the overall vision and priorities.

12. Work Programme

The Chair stated that there were numerous reports scheduled for November's meeting, and she would therefore look into an extraordinary meeting if required.

Members did not have any items to add to the Work Programme.

The meeting finished at 8.48 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**