

**MINUTES
OF THE MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY GROUP
THURSDAY, 6 OCTOBER 2022**

Held at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, Rushcliffe Arena, Rugby Road, West
Bridgford

PRESENT:

Councillors G Williams (Chairman), J Murray (Vice-Chairman), L Healy,
Mrs C Jeffreys, R Jones, R Mallender, F Purdue-Horan and R Walker

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

D Burch
E Palmer

Service Manager - Neighbourhoods
Communications and Customer
Services Manager
Democratic Services Officer

E Richardson

27 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

28 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

29 Minutes of the meeting held on 21 July 2022

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 July 2022 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

30 Council's External Communications Strategy

The Communications and Customer Services Manager presented the Council's External Communications Strategy to the Group.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that the Council would usually develop five to ten year strategies but that this was a three year strategy to allow for further adaptation in line with resident and Councillor behaviour and expectation. He explained that this was in some part due to adaptation to a post covid-19 era and also due to the rapid nature of change in the communications and customer services arena, impacted by the wider financial landscape.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that there were a variety of channels through which residents could feed back to the Council, one of which being the Residents' Survey which would take place in 2025, before the Strategy expired which meant that it could be taken into

account.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that external communications needed to be timely and engaging, clear, accurate, inclusive and informative, and to utilise a variety of channels and mediums to ensure that as many residents as possible were informed. The Group was informed that whilst there was an ever growing digital audience who were engaged with the Council, there was also a large percentage of residents who didn't engage, perhaps who were digitally active but chose not to, or perhaps who were not digitally engaged at all.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that external communications were critical to strengthening the Council's relationship with residents and communities in delivering the Council's vision for the Borough and in communicating the Council's priorities and activities which had been designed to meet the needs of the community.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that the internal communications strategy focussed on internal stakeholders such as Councillors and staff and was particularly important during and post covid-19. He explained that it required continual review to ensure that the methods remained effective in keeping internal parties feeling integrated and connected to the Council's internal objectives.

In relation to the Action Plan, the Communications and Customer Services Manager said that education about Council services was important, including the ways in which this could be done. The Group was informed that social media development, adapting to new channels and new trends in channels and advocacy and behaviour change would be important. The Group was informed that the Council's email subscription service which was sent out on Sunday mornings had circa four thousand subscribers and the Council was committed to developing this as a means of reaching residents in a convenient way. The Group was also informed of the importance of aligning both digital and non-digital communications, with Rushcliffe Reports circulated three times a year to every household in the Borough, as potentially the main direct communication that the non-digitally engaged had with the Council.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager added that the team would look at conducting a skills survey to assess who read what survey to ensure communications were reaching the desired audience and having the desired effect. Activity would also include looking at external partner development and working with partners to relay messages, notably a renewed partnership with health colleagues.

The Group was informed that an annual Communications Planner would be developed to provide an outline of activities, including the anticipated launch of a new website next year.

In relation to the Internal Action Plan, the Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that this would include surveys, annual assessment of content, identification of new ways of engagement, reflection and recognition of achievement, Smarter Ways of Working, addressing health

and wellbeing and ongoing engagement with staff groups and Councillors.

Councillor Jeffreys suggested holding a yearly conference for older pupils aged sixteen and above, similar to the Town and Parish Forum, as she thought it important for teenagers to be able to ask questions and receive answers in a non-political format, to prepare them with information before they left school and took up jobs.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager highlighted the Council's existing partnership working with education for annual learning about the election process and also with the YouNG scheme and said that he would explore the possibility of holding a youth conference event. The Service Manager Neighbourhoods added that a report on potential establishment of a Youth Council was on the agenda for the January meeting of this Group.

Councillor Jones echoed Councillor Jeffreys' suggestion and added that it could be widened to include Duke of Edinburgh participants and their parents. Regarding the Strategy, Councillor Jones said that he had been looking for it to be higher profile and include information about benefits, personal finance, energy saving and scam warning type information. The Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that the reason the Strategy did not cover such details was because information and environments would likely change over the three year lifespan of the document, that what would be relevant now may not be in two years' time, and that more timely content would instead be included in Rushcliffe Reports.

Councillor Jones said that whilst he thought that the Council was good at acknowledging praise, there was benefit in equally reflecting complaints to give balance and credence, as not everyone would be happy with everything. In relation to the videos and guides about the Council's services, he noted that the Council's communications were inevitably geared towards White, English speaking residents and asked about reaching minorities and people who were deaf, blind and disabled and whether there was option to interpret the information into other languages.

In relation to complaints, the Communications and Customer Services Manager said that this was perhaps not so prevalent on social media channels as the Council recognised that people were very busy and only had limited time to engage and so the Council wanted to focus on putting out helpful and useful information and hoped that complaints could be addressed via other means.

In relation to minorities, the Communications and Customer Services Manager said that information was included on the inside cover of Rushcliffe Reports about options to receive it in CD format and that it may be possible to extend this to offering to provide it in other languages. The Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that most Council videos were subtitled and it was hoped that in the future there would be facility for someone to choose the language of their subtitles.

Councillor Jeffreys referred to religious turmoil in the world and suggested holding an annual event bringing together representatives from different religions.

Councillor R Walker referred to previously expressed concern about some relatively poor scores in the last residents' survey in relation to residents not feeling that their views were taken into account or that they felt unable to influence decisions. He asked whether the Action Plan addressed those two points strongly enough and thought that it was a question of balance between highlighting what the Council was doing well against having broad enough shoulders to demonstrate recognition of areas where it could improve. Councillor R Walker asked whether the Council's social media content was balanced between showing and telling versus asking. He also noted that the most popular post of Rushcliffe's Facebook recently had been about helping to find a lost dog.

Councillor R Walker asked whether the Council was brave enough to take on some of the more contentious areas, such as issues around what the County and the Borough Councils did, why road works were timed in the way that there were, recognising that that was a County Council issue, and why the Council did not collect glass and food waste.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager appreciated the importance of listening and asking residents for their views and noted that the Council could look at ways of better showcasing results from consultations and surveys, particularly for areas that were relatable and of interest. The Group was informed that in the post covid-10 era there was much over saturation of information and it was necessary to find the right balance, that there was only so much information that residents could consume and so it needed to be prioritised.

In relation to broad shoulders, the Communications and Customer Services Manager referred to the Action Plan referencing the Environment Bill and kerbside collections. The Group was informed that transparency was important and it was important for content about issues to be positive to generate new ideas about new topics and issues for improvement rather than those already known about and which had already been responded to. A continued highlighting of known issues risked spread of misinformation and confusion.

Councillor R Mallender thought that reviewing the Strategy in three years as opposed to five years meant that people elected at next year's elections would review it whereas if on a five year cycle they may not.

Councillor R Mallender expressed surprise at only four thousand email subscribers and asked whether the Council received statistics on how many people had opened emails, deleted them and clicked on any links.

In relation to social media, Councillor R Mallender agreed that it was a fast moving market and noted that during covid-19 many people joined many social groups. He said also that people from other countries often used the social media platform from their country which may be different to those used in the UK. He said that there was also common information that people searched for, such as bin days and local supermarket opening times, and endorsed the message about being concise, that concise communications were more impactful and reached out to more residents.

Councillor R Mallender referred to the language of communications and how many residents did not understand local government speak, that it was important to think about how the Council expressed itself and what it called its services so that their meaning translated to residents.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager confirmed that the Council had a campaign to increase subscriptions and thought that there would be much future exploration of different social media and communications channels. The Group was informed that the new website would look to address providing key search information.

In relation to the Council's language the Communications and Customer Services Manager agreed that this was important and added that the Council continually looked at what other services and local authorities were doing, particularly those in more urban areas. However, it was important to recognise that Rushcliffe had the oldest demographic in the County and so some care was needed when making changes to ensure that all could engage, but that it was likely that some changes would be made over time.

Councillor Healy referred to the residents' survey statistics and asked whether questions had been asked as to why many residents did not feel that the Council kept them well informed and the potential 45% of residents who did not trust the Council and whether the Council set itself any achievement targets.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager confirmed that when looked at in more depth the response rate potentially related to a variety of reasons, some due to perception and some not related to the Borough Council, and that this would be explored further in the future. The Group was informed that the last survey results were in line with the LGA national average markers, except for the two results highlighted by Councillor Healy. The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that the next residents survey was due to be held in 2025 and he could provide further information about review of the residents' survey separately.

The Chairman referred to the Action Plan, namely regarding providing audio for people with sight loss and asked whether it would be possible to offer sign language and whether the new website would be able to provide audio with the text read and to sign language. The Communications and Customer Services Manager Audio said that he would review options and thought that access to this and different languages and social media would become ever more accessible over the years.

In relation to the weekly subscription email being sent on Sunday mornings, the Chairman asked if there was research about best times to send different types of communications to maximise impact and engagement. The Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that it was always difficult to gauge but that there was good engagement on weekend mornings as it was thought that people had more time to digest information.

The Chairman referred to different platforms being popular with different

generations and asked about harnesses that potential, including to make content more accessible, visually and audibly. The Group were informed that social media channels would be explored over the coming years to review what would work best in engaging with different demographics.

In relation to the internal survey, the Chairman asked how the results were reviewed by the organisation and the Communications and Customer Services Manager said that these reviewed through all levels, from Service Managers to team leaders discussing with their staff.

Councillor Jeffreys thought it was important for Councillors to be approachable by the public, that Councillors needed to have awareness of how they may be perceived by the public. The Communications and Customer Services Manager noted that the Town and Parish Forums regularly sought to provide information about how to use social media in positive ways and whilst he recognised that what Councillor Jeffreys was referring to was slightly different, there was some overlap in terms of best communication.

Councillor Jones thanked the Communications and Customer Services Manager for the report and thought that it demonstrated how complex the communications of the Council were. In relation to the Council having broad shoulders, Councillor Jones said that one of the most controversial aspects of the Council's services was planning and whilst very difficult to explain in guidance was an issue important to many people. The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that the team could look at providing educational information about the Council's services but that planning was very challenging with much complexity about decision making and so was very difficult to provide in a concise and quickly understandable way.

Councillor R Walker referred to the Action Plan points eleven and thought that they fell into the tell and sell categories, with none being ask or delegate and asked if it would be possible to review them. In relation to residents not feeling able to influence Council decisions, he noted that Full Council included a section for citizens questions and wondered how this could be increased.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that he would review the action plan point. The Group was informed that the Council had previously run a campaign explaining citizens questions which had received limited engagement but which could be revisited.

It is **RESOLVED** that the Communities Scrutiny Group reviewed the action plan contained within the External and Internal Communications Strategy 2022-2025 and made any further suggestions to officers they felt appropriate.

31 **Customer Access Strategy**

The Communications and Customer Services Manager presented the Council's Customer Access Strategy to the Group.

The Group was informed that the previous Customer Access Strategy had expired in 2017 and that covid-19 had brought about significant changes in

resident behaviours and the Council therefore wanted to ensure that it delivered contemporary, efficient and easy to use channels for residents to access services where and when they needed them.

The Group was informed that the Strategy sought to respond to customer's current and future needs and to identify and explore innovative digital options to meet the increased engagement with web and email services, whilst balancing with the continued need for traditional face to face and over the phone services. The Group was informed that the Council was looking at its customer services sites and working with partners to ensure that they were accessible and were places that residents felt that they could visit.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that the key themes of the Strategy were to build on and explore innovation, embed further self-service, review and building on partnerships and to listening and respond to residents

In relation to the Action Plan, The Communications and Customer Services Manager ran through the key elements which were to identify and explore new contact channels, develop and embed self-services and online options, aided by free wi-fi at customer service sites, showcase digital solutions in person to customers, review existing contact point locations, use Customer Service Advisors to further shape services, signpost customers to develop their digital skills, have clear Customer Service Standards across channels and sites, review service level agreements with partners, routinely monitor customer feedback and satisfaction, evaluate systems for more responsive service and review postal communication.

Members of the Group said that they were pleased to see that face to face and telephone services were still being offered. The Group referred to some hold messages being irritating, in particular when being constantly directed to the website.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that often the answer to a customer's query could be found on the website and so the Council would continue to signpost to it. He explained that the Council was also exploring chat bot options as an effective way of providing quick answers. He confirmed that the key aim was to provide features that helped people find information quicker, whilst noting that it would be important to find balance between options.

Councillor R Mallender understood but thought that there were times when people just wanted to speak to a human being or required help in understanding nuanced information, and so it was therefore important to continue to offer the option. The Communications and Customer Services Manager assured the Group that the Council was committed to providing the option of having someone to speak to, to meet the needs of the Borough's demographic but that there was also need to review how it would evolve over the next three years.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that it was also important to consider inhibitors to digital interaction and how best to enable

residents to upskill where possible.

Members of the Group suggested that providing information about a caller's position in the telephone queue would be helpful so that people would have an idea of how long they may be waiting. The Group also asked whether the Council had call time targets. The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that Council constantly reviewed customer service call numbers and hold times and believed that no-one would be waiting to speak to a Customer Service Advisor for more than a few minutes in general but would explore offering queue numbers. .

Councillor Murray asked about the opening hours of Fountain Court and noted that they were less than when it had been based at the Police Station. The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that having reviewed the increased shift to web and email engagement, the Council was not looking to increase opening hours, which would also have budget implications due to increased staffing costs. Whilst there was some anecdotal feedback about expecting the contact point to be open longer, there wasn't sufficient demand to support it. Whilst the contact point had seen a slight increase in visitors recently to 400 a month this was still significantly fewer than previously.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that the Council had also looked at what neighbouring local authorities were offering and confirmed that Rushcliffe had the most contact points in the County. He said, however, that if there was evidence of greater need then opening times would be reviewed.

Councillor Jones said that the location of Fountain Court was not as prominent as when it was located in the Police Station and thought that offering a public toilet may help make it more attractive. The Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that the lease of the premises would not allow the Council to offer toilet facilities and that there were public toilet facilities located nearby. He said that the Council was looking at how to make the premises more attractive, such as having vinyl windows displays to make it stand out more.

In relation to chat bots, the Chairman asked whether they would direct a customer to a person or to leave a message should they not be able to offer an answer or perhaps redirect to the County Council. The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that the Council was looking at what could be offered currently but that this would be line with expectations and with the aim of providing a timeframe for when an answer could be provided.

In relation to accessibility of Customer Contact points, the Chairman asked whether the Council had considered having staff go out on road trips to different localities that didn't have contact points, such as Ruddington and Keyworth. The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that roadshows would be an over and above service and would need to be assessed to see if there was desire. They may not align with the move to upskill and improve digital capacity but could perhaps be used to promote the digital skills education. He noted that there used to be a contact point in Keyworth which closed due to lack of activity.

Councillor R Walker referred to statistics about face to face and telephone contacts and asked if there was information that drilled down further that could be shared with the Group, for example as to what the contacts were about. Councillor R Walker said that whilst often people thought that they wanted to speak to a human there was a difference with needing to speak to one. He said that providing personal quality contact came with a cost and suggested that the Council should provide personal contact where people needed to speak to someone and not where they only wanted to due to the huge cost differentials involved.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager said that customer service staff speaking with customers about alternative places where they could find the information would be a key focus in helping to educate residents and identify barriers and solutions. He noted that the pandemic had shown that people were able to access information and service differently and that it was more about preference. He said that revenues and benefits brought most calls and were the longest calls and whilst the Council was committed to increasing its digital offer this needed to be balanced with improving digital skills and confidence

Councillor Purdue-Horan referred to physical access and thought that care was needed as a recent survey found that 22% of the population did not have access to a computer, whilst the ONS had this at 10% and the Council did not want to leave this section of society behind. He referred to increased footfall in Fountain Court over the summer this year and wondered whether it needed to be open more often with more advertising. He thought that most visits involved paperwork and the society was currently in a period of transition.

The Communications and Customer Services Manager confirmed that the Strategy reflected that there some of the Rushcliffe demographic were not digitally engage and so there was need to continue to provide contact points and that this would be monitored as to how it evolves over the next three years. In relation to Fountain Court visitor numbers, he explained that this was half pre pandemic figures and the Council need to respond and juggle its resources accordingly so as to provide efficient and cost effective services.

Councillor Jones thought that people still needed to access facilities to help understand documents and to print and scan paperwork. The Communications and Customer Services Manager agreed and confirmed that was part of why the Council continued to offer those services.

Councillor R Mallender asked about SLAs with partner organisations and whether the Council could ask them to make their digital information more aligned and comprehensible. The Communications and Customer Services Manager confirmed that the Council was working with partners to review services, for example the Council had changed its contact point opening hours at Cotgrave to enable the library to extend its opening hours. The Council would continue to work closely with partner agencies. In relation to forms and correspondence, the Communications and Customer Services Manager explained that the Council continued to look to improve and ensure that that information was clear and easy to use.

The Chairman referred to 82% of people having a smartphone and noted that some websites were not user friendly on mobile phones and asked if there was the option of having an app for information and alerts, and whether it would be possible to sync bin collection dates with personal calendars. The Communications and Customer Services Manager confirmed that the Council's new website would explore making information as accessible as possible. Over 50% of website hits are through a smartphone and it was already configured some years ago for it to be accessible from all digital platforms and the Council has not received any negative feedback about accessibility.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Communities Scrutiny Group reviewed the action plan contained within the Customer Access Strategy 2022-2025 and made any further suggestions to officers they felt appropriate.

32 **Work Programme**

The Chairman presented the report of the Director - Finance and Corporate Services, which detailed the proposed Communities Scrutiny Group Work Programme for 2022/23.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Group consider its Work Programme and that the following items for scrutiny were agreed.

19 January 2023

- Establishment of a Youth Council
- Corporate Enforcement Policy
- Work Programme

16 March 2023

- Carbon Management Plan
- Environment Policy
- Work Programme

The meeting closed at 8:43pm

CHAIRMAN