BAKER TILLY

# Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Essex and Bedfordshire Fire Authorities

Thematic Review - Communications

September 2015

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| | Glenn McGuinness  - Deputy Director of Finance  (Essex) |

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# 1    Executive Summary

## 1.1    Introduction

Baker Tilly provides internal audit services to a number of Fire and Rescue Services.  During 2014/15 we undertook a review of Communications at Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex Fire Authorities which included a review of the levels of risk and control in place to manage those risks.

In addition to providing a detailed report to each of our clients on their control environment relating to these subjects, this thematic review looks to combine the findings from each of those individual audit assignments. This includes identifying those common controls, any difference approaches, good practice and any areas of common weakness.

The audits were designed to assess the controls in place to manage the following summary objectives and risks:

| Summary Objective | To ensure a positive image of the service |
|---|---|
| Summary Risks | Public and media perceptions of the service may be negatively affected by activities of other services, leafing to reputational damage;<br>Poor internal and external communication could impact staff morale, missing the opportunity to promote the Authority and the excellent work undertaken. |

## 1.2    Conclusion

This Thematic Review does not seek to provide an opinion but to apprise each Authority of the common themes from the series of audits. The following common controls and processes were documented:

**Common controls**

- Each Authority had a documented Communications Work Plan or similar document in place, detailing the work to be undertaken in relation to communications, individual plans are also drawn up.
- Each Authority had undertaken some form of stakeholder mapping or identification exercise and identified broadly similar stakeholders.
- All three Authorities utilise similar mechanisms for capturing the thoughts and feeding back information for internal users including staff. These included intranets, news bulletins, internal meetings, staff surveys and informal station visits by senior officers to speak to staff.
- Social media featured heavily as part of the communications strategies for each Authority in relation to external stakeholders. This included the use of Twitter and Facebook by all three Authorities. However, the use of Facebook differed between each and this has been highlighted below.
- Each had clear processes identified for the management of information requests, adhering to the 20 day deadline.

**Common issues identified**

The following issues were identified within two or more the reviews completed. The following common issues were identified:

- Whilst training was not necessarily mandatory within each Authority, we did identify that **media training should be undertaken by those key staff with responsibilities relating to communication outside the organisation,** and maintain a record of those who have completed training and when further refresher training is required.
- **Inconsistencies were identified with regards to the monitoring of all communications plans and projects, including the use of key performance indicators (KPI's)**. All three Authorities may wish to liaise with each other to identify those KPI's they think could be used to formally monitor the overall communications strategy, whilst individual KPI's should be documented for each specific project, aligned to the outcomes expected and required.

- **A public opinion survey could be completed by all three Authorities** to gauge their thoughts on the communications programme as a whole and whether the objectives of the Authority and Service in relation to its relationships with external stakeholders are being met. This could be devised together to identify common questions and themes, and disseminated through several channels.

**Issues or good practice identified where cross sharing could be used**

- Two of the three Authorites (Bedfordshire and Cambridgershire) reviewed had formal Communication Strategies in place. However, Essex did not have a documented strategy or associated policies and procedures for the external channels of communications. It may be helpful for all three Authoritess to review strategic direction together to identify any instances of good practice from the other.
- One Authority (Essex) utilised four key 'states' for its stakeholders. These were day to day, during a major incident, during industrial action and reduction of service. These states helped to identify all stakeholders and could be considered by the other two Authorites as a means of ensuring all key stakeholders are captured. Cross sharing of stakeholder maps may further enhance each Authority's communication plans.
- Two of the three Authorites (Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire) utilised a Peer Challenge Review, undertaken by the Local Government Association. This resulted in a report being produced that included actions for improvement. However, we did note that one had not completed such a review and this process may identify improvements in relation to the Authority's communications strategy and processes.
- A review of one Authority (Cambridgeshire) Facebook page identified this as a forum for communications out to the public about initiatives, national news and local work undertaken, including the number of call outs of the previous day and night, key themes etc. This differed from the other two Facebook pages where they were titled as HQ pages. The HQ pages were more used by Service employees and whilst still identifying some of the initiatives, were more used as a means of communicating with employees within the Service and making comments. These pages did not necessarily provide information to external stakeholders.
- Whilst we have not made any recommendations regarding this within any of our reports, all three Authorites may wish to review their social media, determine whether they are using it as intended and communicating as effectively with stakeholders as required.
- Formal governance and reporting structures for communications had been identified at two of the three (Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire) Authorites with differing models in place. Working groups were used to review implementation of the strategy and individual projects, whilst other governance structures included monthly, six weekly and quarterly performance reports being escalated through the organisation. Essex Fire may wish to collaborate with Bedfordshire and/or Cambridgeshire to identify a suitable governance structure that works best for them and provides assurance over progress of the communications strategy and individual plans.
- We did note the use of Parish Newsletters (Cambridgeshire) to deliver messages and communicate with elderly stakeholders who will not necessarily be captured through the use of new technology and social media. These methods further ensure that mechanisms are in place to effectively communicate with all stakeholders.

**Summary of recommendations made**

| Recommendation Summary |
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| The Head of Communication should develop communication strategies and implementation plans |
| The Communications governance structure needs to be established. |
| The Service should ensure there is an appropriate process for managing the Communications Plans for each project implemented. |
| The Fire Service need to ensure that it has appropriate policies, procedures and/or protocols in place governing the key channels of external communications. |
| The Service should implement a training needs analysis, identifying which service personnel require communications training, and a training log, to effectively monitor training completion. |
| The Service should record when media training has been supplied and to whom, and when refresher training is due. |
| The Service should ensure a guidance document or procedure is developed for processing Freedom of Information requests, to ensure the process is implemented consistently. |
| Establishment of a mechanism to ensure that in future briefs to staff have been distributed and that any feedback or queries resulting are recorded and addressed as required. |
| As part of the review of SMT Station visits we would recommend that when devising this due regard is given to including a column on the form to not only record any action that may emanate from the visit but to also record when and how the action has been completed. |

## 1.3    Scope of the reviews

To evaluate the adequacy of risk management and control within the system and the extent to which controls have been applied, with a view to providing an opinion. When planning the audits, the following and limitations were agreed:

**Limitations to the scope of the audit:**

This report does not provide an opinion or summary of all findings from the original reviews and should be read in conjuection with the individual audit reports.

Further, this Thematic Review does not provide further assurance over the areas reviewed, but a consolidated report in relation to the findings of all three Authorities.

This report does not replace the need for the Authorities to implement the original recommendations within each of their individual reports.

Our work did not provide any absolute assurance that material error; loss or fraud does not exist.

## 1.5    Benchmarking

Whilst the above recommendations are a combination of the recommendations made across all four reports, below provides a benchmark for each individual Authority to benchmark themselves against, using the original Audit Report provided.

**Opinions**
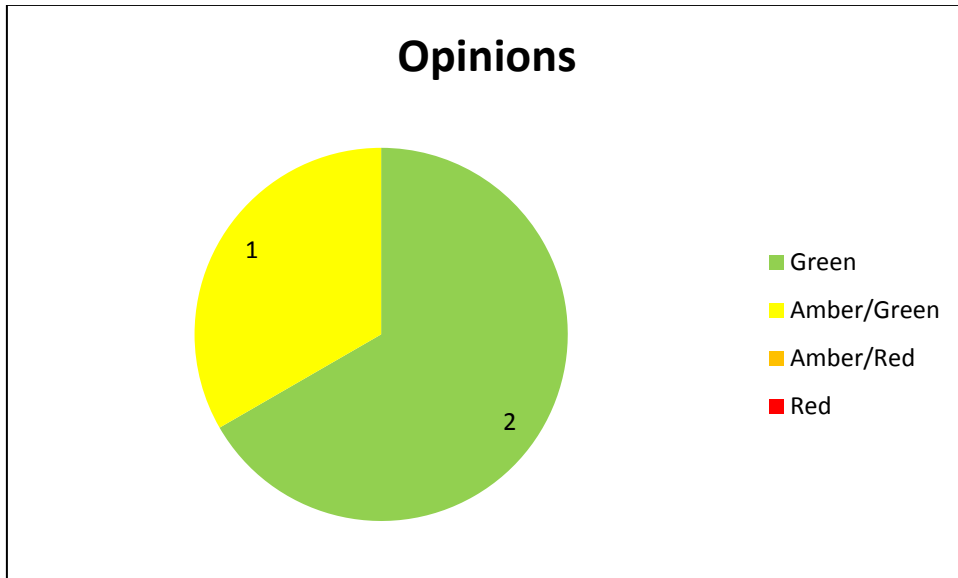


| Average Number of Recommendations Made | 3 |
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