



EP#179: CALM IN CRISIS:
REBUILDING TRUST THROUGH
COMMUNICATION

WITH CHLOE CASEY

TRANSCRIPT

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Voice Over:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms, a podcast about the practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke; thanks for joining me. As we begin our conversation today. May I first acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from where I am broadcasting from today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. Indeed, may I also pay my respects to all First Nations people of the lands from where anyone listening to this podcast today is joining us from. So what happens when trust breaks down between governments and the communities that they serve? In today's fast-moving digital world, public expectations are rising. Misinformation spreads in seconds, and communities are more diverse than ever. For public sector communicators, that means one thing.

The way we engage, inform, and build trust has never been more important nor more challenging. So then how do we connect meaningfully with every corner of our community? How do we lead through crisis? How do we navigate reputational risk? And how do we create cultures where internal teams thrive? Well, to explore that today, I'm joined by Chloe Casey, who is the manager of communications and corporate governance at the City of Casey. With more than 13 years in local government, Chloe brings a strategic and deeply practical approach to communications in what are often high-stakes environments. In her current role, she oversees strategic comms, governance, public health, and crisis response, and she's also led reputation and issues management through complex political challenges, including the Operation Sardon investigation. She holds qualifications in journalism, business management, project and change management, and also community engagement. And she has a real passion for understanding trust and building that trust through inclusive communication and also thinking carefully about those effective engagement strategies. She joins me now. Chloe, welcome to GovComms.

Chloe Casey:

Hi, David. Thanks for having me.

David Pembroke:

Okay, so we start generally at the beginning. So the Chloe Casey story, just take us through that and how it is that you've landed where you are today.

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, sure. So I always loved writing. I actually thought I'd probably end up being a journalist, but then that dream sort of failed quickly when I did my internship and I realised, "Yeah, that's not for me." So I gravitated

over to public relations. I thought at that time it probably had less pressures than journalism, but yeah, public relations is no walk in the park. As your intro around some of my career and work aspects has highlighted, public relations has its own set of fun. And then the governance aspect of my role that sort of just found me. I've worked in local government for, as you said, 13 years, and I was fairly familiar with the function, having been in councils for that time. So I really enjoyed expanding my knowledge in that space, and comms does lean well into governance.

David Pembroke:

What do you like about working in local government?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, I love that we are close to the community, and you can see the direct impact in the services we deliver and what we put out to the community, and particularly through comms and engagement. It is right there. It's in front of us, and so I really enjoy that aspect. It's rewarding.

David Pembroke:

And so with that, there's so much to communicate, so many opportunities that you need to create to listen to your communities. So what would a typical year look like for you in terms of putting it all together, putting your planning together, and then, once we've understood what that year looks like, how then do you plan the days, the weeks, and the months?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, that's a great question. So luckily at councils we have quite a rigorous planning process that occurs annually, and so we can look to that process to draw upon the key projects and engagement opportunities we are going to need to undertake. There's the standard things that come up every year, which are the big pieces of work we talk to our community about around the council plan and the budget, and generally we have a thorough overview of what the other big-ticket items are going to be before we start the year, which does help make our ability to plan for those consultations a little bit easier. But then, of course, there's things that come up or issues that pop up or new projects that arise out of a council meeting or that come through from funding. So you do have to pivot a little bit, but generally we can have our big-ticket items planned out across the year.

David Pembroke:

In terms of that big planning set piece, how involved are you in that in terms of being able to influence some of the outcomes around that planning?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, so my service particularly having communications and engagement, and then governance, we have quite a big involvement. We are part of many workshops and discussions that go on in the lead-up to planning for the new corporate documents that go out every year. So we get to have conversations with lots of the teams ahead of time around what they're looking to achieve or what their new initiatives might be, seeking so that then we can provide some advice and early discussions around what might be possible and help frame what outcomes they're looking to get through the community engagement or the comms aspects.

David Pembroke:

So at most of those deliberation points, people are asking, what are the communication impacts? What are the stakeholder engagement impacts in order for us to deliver on this policy?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, yeah, we're really lucky here. We've got a really great corporate planning process and team, and they do have those early conversations with us so that we can provide that advice, and then we're putting the best possible option up to the community when the councillors are looking to endorse the corporate plan or the action plan or the budget. We've got that engagement, and the initiatives have been able to have scoped out quite well so that we can then be clear with the community what we are looking to achieve through each of them.

David Pembroke:

Okay. So there's probably no such thing as a typical week, but what might a standard week look like?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, there's definitely not a typical week in my world. Some of them are more chaotic than normal. They're fast-paced, but anyone who works in comms, that's our lifestyle really. We thrive off it. For me, a typical day can involve or a typical week, year, anything can involve lots of considerations around our councillors and our council meetings because, as you're aware, in the government there are decision-making forums, so that's where all of our decisions flow from. And so that could be anything from reviewing council reports, the schedule, the briefing calendar, planning, the meetings. Depending on what matters are in the community, we have a high volume of meeting inquiries, so the team will run those past me, and we'll discuss the approaches for responding. I answer a lot of other random questions in any given day, and that could be things from gift declarations, social media content, issues, management considerations. It's a varied role over here.

David Pembroke:

And in terms, then, of your team supporting you across comms, engagement, and governance, how many numbers do you have? And what are the functions that they perform?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, sure. So our comms team, we have, it's about 15. So we have those roles split up across three teams. So we've got a digital focus comms team, we've got then what would be more of our traditional comms, so strategic comms and marketing are combined as one team, and that includes media relations. We then also have an internal communications team. We have an engagement team that is combined with advocacy, and there's four people over in that team. So they deliver all of our consultation and our links with the community. And then our governance team holds many different functions, and there's around 20 people across governance, and that also includes things like prosecutions, child safe, risk, and then our councillor support team as well as governance functions.

David Pembroke:

How then have you managed that integration of the governance function with the communications and stakeholder engagement? Was it always part of the role, or did it emerge over time?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, so our teams became one in 2023, and at the time we did get some feedback that, "Okay, that's an interesting mix," but they do actually come together in more ways than you would think. So communications is pretty much at the centre of everything that is happening in the organisation. So communications generally fits with most areas. And then I'm also finding that governance holds that same sort of central function in most of the aspects of the organisation, and together, particularly when we're doing issues management, comms and governance have a lot of overlap. We also then find comms and engagement that's always a natural fit. They

have a lot of overlap. Then I've got public health as well, which doesn't have as many overlaps as the other three areas, but it does work quite closely with a number of the governance functions, particularly risk and prosecutions and FOI. And then public health also relies on communication. So it's a big, loud, and mixed team, but somehow we have it all working together.

David Pembroke:

And do you find that the governance team are a very useful source of information for issues that are of real resonance to the community?

Chloe Casey:

100%, and that's one of the great benefits we've found in having the teams together is that we can pull on the knowledge that... Traditionally, comms probably wouldn't have always gone to governance for some of those aspects, but because we're one team, we see the synergies, and it is really helpful to have those insights leading straight in. So my head of corporate governance and my head of communications, they now jointly oversee our issues' management process, whereas predominantly it used to just be one of those functions, but the synergies are too great, so we now have them as a joint response.

David Pembroke:

So over the 13 years that you've been involved at the City of Casey, what are the biggest changes that you have noticed in that time?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, so I've been at Casey for eight years; previously I was at a smaller rural council. Lots of changes at Casey, you might be aware; we had an integrity investigation in 2019, so that led to a lot of changes in our organisation. Our councillors were dismissed, and then we went into administration for almost five years. We've just recently welcomed back our councillors at the last election in October of 2024, which has been exciting, but that was massive. That's been a huge shift for our organisation going into administration and then back out again. So that's probably been one of the biggest focuses for us recently.

David Pembroke:

And so just in terms of that, because this does happen to other local governments, not just here in Australia but around the world, where they are moved into administration. What are the biggest differences between managing a council during administration and managing a council under the governance of elected councillors?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, it's really quite different. There's pros and cons for both models, and I was lucky that I'd worked in local government for seven or so years before this actually happened, so I had quite a good understanding of working under councillors. If you came and joined under administrators, you would have a completely different working arrangement than you do under councillors. The biggest difference we probably noticed in the work that we do is we didn't have as much connection to the community that we would normally have through councillors, and that was challenging with our community engagement when we were undertaking those activities.

We had a lot of distrust in the community because their elected representatives were no longer there. So we were constantly working out ways that we could go around that and ensure that their voices were heard and just trying to build that trust with them so that they could see that as a council, we were all still here working for them and for the best outcomes of our community, even without having the elected representatives there.

Working under administrators is completely different than... They are almost like having a board as such. They were more interested in governance processes and setting up policies and that type of thing. Whereas councillors have that community lens, and they are members of the community, so they bring in different focus points. So it's very unique working under both.

David Pembroke:

So in terms of Operation Sandon and the investigation and everything that flowed from it, you played a key role in and around that. Can you explain to the audience, who may not know so much about it, what the investigation entailed?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, sure. It was a really unique experience, actually. I often get asked, "Why did I work through it? And why did I stay?" But I actually think it was such a valuable learning experience, particularly for someone in comms. So the investigation started in 2019, and it was looking into alleged corruption from some of our former councillors around decisions that had been made through notices of motion, predominantly at council meetings, spanning a number of years. And then there was also varying other allegations linked to that, with some developers and some other stakeholders were in the mix. So that became a public investigation with hearings at the end of 2019. It then dragged on due to the pandemic. Initially, IBAC had anticipated a six-week process, but that wasn't achieved due to a number of witnesses and the time it took to get through the evidence. So then it was supposed to conclude in 2020, but we all know what 2020 was. The pandemic that threw us out.

And so then we got caught up in this investigation dragging out over two years of public hearings, which was extensive during that time as well. The Minister for Local Government dismissed our group of councillors. That was in February of 2020, and so we welcomed the administrators in, I believe it was February or March of 2020. So they commenced with us while the investigation was still occurring. We didn't get the final IBAC report until July of 2023. So it was a really long process, one that we had to be incredibly flexible in, particularly around our comms strategy and our approach and issues management. It was just ongoing for a number of years.

David Pembroke:

How did you lead your team? Or how did you think about leading your team during that? Obviously very challenging, uncertain period where you didn't know where the end of it was. You didn't know ultimately what decisions were going to be made, but you still had to deliver for the community.

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, it was a challenging situation. I like to pride myself on being a calm leader, and I think that was probably one of the biggest strengths that I pulled on throughout that time. Making decisions quickly, I also had to ensure that I could do that to limit the impact on the team. We were getting hundreds of media inquiries a day, so many community questions, so there was no ability to stop and plan things out.

I just had to adapt and move quickly with the comms and the direction so that the team wasn't then feeling the burden of things being halted. We also had set up an internal response team, which was really great in ensuring that my team were able to get the approvals that they needed quickly without having to go through many layers of the organisation, because as we know, comms needs to move quickly at times, and particularly in local government, you can have quite long approval leads or processes you need to follow. So we ensured that that was set up so that the team were able to do the work they needed to do quickly and not be waiting for people to give them the sign-off on things.

David Pembroke:

So what advice, then, do you have to the audience, people who may be in similar situations where they have to lead through a period of crisis? You mentioned being calm is one thing, but that'll get you so far. What were some of the other things that you did or you would advise people to do to manage a crisis effectively?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, sure. So scenario planning, we were working with a lot of assumptions and unknown information. So scenario planning was great. Sometimes it didn't eventuate, but it just ensured that the team had some idea or direction that we were hoping to head in. So I definitely would suggest that if you're able to. Being flexible, working with the media as well, we had some really great relationships we built with some of the journalists, which I know as a comms person doesn't always happen. You often have to have your guard up with the media. But it was really great that we were able to build some of those connections and have some really thorough and robust conversations with them around what was happening, what the organisation was going through, and they were quite upfront with us around what their angle was going to be or what they was seeking from us.

So I would definitely say where you can, work with the media. The other advice I would give is to work with the integrity agency if that's the situation that your organisation's going through. They have the information, they are there to support you, and there was a lot of things that we could then seek from their communications team. We would call them and just ask for clarity or clarification or if they could give us some timelines or dates around when things were going to expected to go out or land, which was really helpful. And it's probably, it took us a little while to actually utilise that channel, but I would definitely recommend if you can. The comms teams, they're all doing the same thing that we're doing and more than happy to help, was what we found.

David Pembroke:

Did you undertake a lessons learned exercise post the crisis?

Chloe Casey:

We sort of have, but we are sort of still in it in some regards. So whilst the report landed and we did do a debrief, and we responded to the recommendations out of the Operation Sardon report, they still haven't concluded with prosecution. So there's still that playing out in the background if they are going to go forward with prosecutions. So while we've been able to wrap it up on our end as much as we can and learn from it, there's still that piece hanging around, and we still get questions from the community around, "Do we know what's going to happen there?" Which we don't. We don't find out anything ahead of time. We often would even sometimes find out things in the media. So yeah, it's definitely been an opportunity for us to take some learnings, which have been great, but still with it in the back of our mind a little bit.

David Pembroke:

What are the most common questions that you get and your team gets from the Casey community?

Chloe Casey:

Up until October, still now, "When can they have their elected representatives back?" There was so much confusion around the state government's decision within the community. They didn't understand that the state government had dismissed the councillors. So that was probably the question we got the most throughout that time. There was also a lot of confusion around how the organisation still works without the councillors there, what the decision-making body is, what the role of the CEO was. We would get a lot of

questions around that. But the main one was around when could they have their representatives back, which we are really excited that they're back now.

David Pembroke:

So they are back.

Chloe Casey:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

And things while not back to normal. They're slowly, slowly restoring. Casey is a very diverse community with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Chloe Casey:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

How do you plan your communication to be effective in that type of environment?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, it is a challenging environment, and coming off the back of not having councillors, we're also trying to do a lot of that rebuilding trust with our community. So we're testing and trialling communications and engagement approaches as we go to just find out what works, what the community's going to resonate with now. We're finding that they're really loving short-form video content, particularly with our mayor. Not having elected representatives for a long time, they are resonating with seeing him and seeing him as a face, which is really great.

So we are leveraging that at the moment, and it seems to be working well. We often have to utilise a number of different channels and communication platforms to reach our community. Over 400,000 people, it's a lot to try and get to everyone. So we have traditional digital, we have print media, we have an EDM newsletter that goes out to our subscribers. We do pop-ups, a range of things to try and reach them, and then we also have cold communications that we have to undertake, try and reach those communities as well. It's never a perfect science, so sometimes something will work well for one aspect or one project, and then the next time it's a completely different approach. So we have to be flexible and adapt pretty quickly.

David Pembroke:

That's an interesting point that you raised there, isn't it? Is that mindset of being prepared to continually test and learn and not get too wedded to particular tactics because the way things move these days, things can move quickly and decisively in one particular direction, but just as equally, once that position has been established, it quite easily could change just as quickly again.

Chloe Casey:

You're spot on, David, and sometimes you put a video out and you think the videos are doing well, people are liking the videos, and then that one flops a little bit and you think, "Ah, okay, so videos last week was working. Or is it the length of this one?" It's never perfect. You're constantly evaluating, which is one of the things I love about comms is you don't get bored because things change so quickly, or you need to learn something else or adapt.

David Pembroke:

So in terms of that short-form video content of the mayor, where did that idea come from, and which of the channels are you using to distribute the short form?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, so we predominantly do that on our social media platforms. In 2023, we actually made a conscious decision to try and increase our story usage. We were noticing that a lot of our posts, due to whether it was the algorithm or the sentiment or all the varying factors that play into the social media channels these days, we thought stories was possibly an avenue that we weren't utilising much. So that's where we try and put out a lot of our content. Now we've seen a really great uplift in that. So when we made the shift over, we saw our organic reach on Facebook increase from around 30,000 up to 91,000, and we also saw engagement across our Instagram stories, had a 70% increase. We've also found that because a lot of the community are time-poor, they will just flick through the stories to get their information.

But it's finding that balance between using the stories to get the information out but noting that they only stay there for 24 hours. So if it's important information, you need to cast a wide net for the community, particularly when we have so many residents. We then have this balancing game of how do you supplement, or what other channels are you supplementing with, or do you repeat the information, noting you don't want to agitate the people who saw it initially? So stories have their own challenges. Whilst we are seeing success with them, they need a little bit more strategic planning sometimes as well.

David Pembroke:

So you've been doing some training in the management of, or the response to, mis- and disinformation. How big a challenge has that been for you in Casey and perhaps around an area like a corruption investigation that was probably fertile ground for lots of information to be distributed? I'm only presuming that, but how are you managing it and how are you thinking about it, and how are you working with your team in terms of managing misinformation and disinformation?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, misinformation is such a big issue for the local government sector. We're also experiencing it firsthand on another matter at the moment that's completely separate to the Operation Sardon investigation, but it seems to just be the norm now. Social media takes off with something that one person can say, and we then watch that go wild across the channels. So you're right, throughout the investigation there was definitely misinformation spreading. That was probably more challenging for us to try and combat, as we didn't have a lot of the facts at that time because it was playing out day by day in the public hearings. In trying to combat misinformation around other issues we've experienced in the sector and at Casey, we found the best tactic is to just try and get your narrative out as early as possible. Also, making sure that you have your narrative out on your channels.

A lot of people, we find in the community, while there is noise from those small minorities that circulate the misinformation, a large portion of the community will come and seek the correct information. They'll read something, they'll question the validity of it, and then they'll come to our channels for the correct information. You see, if that's working, then if you have the time to scroll through hundreds of the social media comments, which sometimes the team do that just so that we can see how it's tracking and you will get a bit of a feel for the people who are then moderating the misinformation, which that's the best outcome you can have because as a corporation or an organisation, you can't often get into every Facebook group and try and explain and clear up and put accurate information out.

It's just not possible to get to every single message or YouTube video. So it's great when you can see your information circulating through the community members. So that's probably the thing we've found first, you

need to respond quick. Even if you don't have all the answers, it's paramount to just try and get something out on your channels as quickly as possible so that those who come to seek it get that information first.

David Pembroke:

So apart from being quick and being accurate, what else from your training have you been able to apply in this challenge of managing mis- and disinformation?

Chloe Casey:

Yes, so the training was great; it gave us a formula. So that was training that was run by the MAV late last year, and it gave us a formula and a structure for how you structure your communications, how you combat the information, in what order you should outline the facts, repetition, and being really clear. So that was perfect. Then the other traditional comms things that come into play is plain English, making sure it's clear and concise, and not delving into the misinformation. You clarify it, you clear it up as quickly as you can, and then you go onto what the actual information is or the program or service that's being provided.

David Pembroke:

Now, you mentioned before around the volumes of content that you are often having to scroll through to try to establish a sense of where the sentiment in the community is. What sort of digital technology stack are you using to listen to the community, to evaluate the community, and where are you on your journey into the application of artificial intelligence to assist you and your team to do some of their tasks?

Chloe Casey:

We have been dabbling in AI. We're actually really excited about the possibilities that AI can bring to the space. We haven't really utilised it yet for any of that social media monitoring. Predominantly we use a platform called Brolly that helps keep track of our social media for us and the conversations that are out there. The challenge always is, in tracking those social media comments and conversations, is that none of the platforms traditionally can access those closed Facebook groups, and as we know, that's where a lot of the conversations occur. That's where often some of the misinformation is spread, and even having a business page, that means we can't get into those closed Facebook groups either. So you generally then have to do that manually, which is what takes the time scrolling through those comments. Hopefully we will find a platform utilising AI that will be able to help streamline that for us.

At the moment, we've been using AI to test and trial. It's quite well accepted in our organisation so long as we use it within the parameters that have been set. But we use it for things like drafting speeches and having a first go at that, content ideas, comms plans, converting content to plain English. We've often used it as well to come up with some templates for our staff to use and support them in the communications they're preparing. So we've just been dabbling around the edges a little bit with it, but it is something that, over the next 12 months, we actually have it listed as one of our priorities in our strategic plan to embed further into our service.

David Pembroke:

So for you, when you're looking ahead over the next, I suppose you can't look that too far ahead, but what are you hoping to achieve perhaps over that next 12 to 18 months in terms of continuing to strengthen the performance of the comms, engagement, and governance team there at the City of Casey?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, so there's always lots of fun things happening for us, particularly at Casey. We're a really large council, so we get to work on some really exciting pieces of work. AI, as I mentioned, is something that we're looking at.

We're also really focused on uplifting our cold communications and engagement approaches. We have more than three-quarters of City of Casey residents that have at least one parent that was born overseas or who were themselves born overseas from across 150 different countries. So we're continuously looking at how we can reach and communicate and talk with those members of our community more effectively and have them engaged in our projects. So that's probably a really big focus for us as well over the next 12 months.

David Pembroke:

Where are you having success with cold and where are the biggest barriers? What are the biggest challenges apart from the diversity of the groups and the language groups you're trying to reach? But what is the hardest thing about doing cold effectively?

Chloe Casey:

Yeah, so the hardest thing is just trying to find where they're going to be seeking their information so that we can make sure we've got the correct translations or content available for them because they're often, they might not be at the same community groups or at the places that we are frequenting for pop-ups. So trying to understand and meet them where they're at.

So what we have found has worked really well in working with our cold communities is we have conversations with some of the community leaders in those communities, and we work directly with them, or we come out to some of their existing meetings or gatherings that they have, and then we can have more smaller conversations so that then we can learn and work out better ways to include those groups. But we do find that working with someone that they already have trust in, particularly, they also might not understand the role of council or the role of councillors. So trying to leverage the community leaders that they've built established relationships with works really well, and then we can have conversations through that leader, or the leaders will often then share the information through to the communities on our behalf.

David Pembroke:

Great. Well, Chloe, thank you so much for giving up some of your time to share with the GovComms audience today. We always look to try to share the stories of communicators across local government, state government, national government, multilateral government to share their experiences and for people to learn, really. That's the whole idea is that people can hear from others. And thank you so much for being generous with your time and generous with your advice and your experience. Because I know that there is a lot to take away from that today, and I'm sure, like I have been throughout scribbling down all sorts of notes where you take and think, "Oh, that's not a bad idea. I think I might go and use that." But thank you so much for joining us on GovComms today.

Chloe Casey:

Of course, thanks for having me, David.

David Pembroke:

And to you, the audience, thank you once again for coming back. What a great conversation there. And can you just imagine how difficult that was throughout that corruption scandal where you just don't know where your feet are, you don't know what might happen? The next person who comes in the room is going to move you elsewhere. But that advice around scenario planning, just to give people the confidence to be able to say, "Well, okay, the best available information we've got at the moment, let's work through what that looks like now." That would give that confidence to know that, "Okay, well that's maybe not the information, or that's not what's happened, and we now have to pivot either way," but at least to be continually rolling through those scenarios. I can understand there why that works. Such a good tactic there for Chloe and her team.

So anyway, audience, thank you for coming back once again, very grateful. As always, you can rate or review the program wherever you do listen to this podcast because that does help us to be found. So wherever you do listen to your podcast, if you jump on and do that now, it doesn't take long, and we're very grateful if you could do that. You can find all the latest information, updates, and insights from this and all the other GovComms episodes on LinkedIn at the GovComms Institute. And seriously, a delight to talk to Chloe today, and we look forward to bringing you another great story from the world of government communications in the next fortnight. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.