

18 January 2017		ITEM: 5
Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Communications Update		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key	
Report of: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
Accountable Head of Service: n/a		
Accountable Director: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

This report was requested by the Chair of Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee as part of the work programme.

It summarises the focus of the corporate communications team over the last year, highlighting the main promotional campaigns throughout the year and the outcomes.

The Committee are invited to give their views on the future direction of travel for communications to inform a Communications Strategy to be developed for 2017/18.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 To note and comment upon the update and direction of travel for communications to inform the development of a Communication Strategy.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The Communications team is part of the Strategy, Communications and Customer Services Directorate and is responsible for media liaison (proactive and reactive), social media, marketing campaigns, design, and the council's website. Internal communications has recently returned to the central team from Human Resources and Organisation Development.

2.2 Communicating effectively is every service's responsibility and the team provide advice, guidance and technical support to promote what the council is

doing and to raise its profile, provide important information to residents and protect the council's reputation.

- 2.3 The team's work programme is driven by the council's priorities and direction from the Administration on the overall approach. The team also respond to ad hoc requests from services for communications support including proactive press releases, promotional information such as leaflets and updates to the website.
- 2.4 The council follows the Recommended Code of Practice for Local Authority Publicity. The Code provides guidance on the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

Communication Activity

- 3.1 The main areas of communication activity over the last year are set out below. The activity reflects the use of a range of communications channels and tools, within the context of an overall shift from print to online media and keeping pace with these changes. The council needs to be able to respond to the way the media operates locally, regionally and nationally, as well as how residents want to be kept informed and where different audiences are most likely to pick up and react to key messages. This is in line with the overall approach to digital and channel shift in the emerging Digital and Customer Services Strategies.

Local Media

- 3.2 The local and regional media organisations are an important channel for getting messages out to the public, however, this is no longer just focused on a weekly print deadline. Many media organisations now operate a 'digital-first' approach to publishing content and have an increasingly active social media presence.
- 3.3 The team also identify opportunities to share releases with national trade press such as the LGC and MJ where the story is of more strategic significance or innovative in nature.
- 3.4 Media/press releases are issued proactively to highlight good news, communicate important messages to residents and share key decisions after meetings such as Cabinet and Council. The team also publicise the important work of Overview and Scrutiny committees by issuing press releases in discussion with Chairs of committees. 286 releases were issued between 1 April and 30 November 2016. All releases are issued to media outlets including radio and television, all Councillors and are made available on the council's website and social media channels. However, the media do not have to cover what we release and can take their own perspective on a story.

- 3.5 The team also respond to enquiries from the media on a daily basis, and on high profile issues out of hours where necessary, providing statements with the council's response to a particular issue. The team has a key role should the emergency plan be activated and participate in practice exercises with emergency service partners. They are also represented on the Congestion Taskforce.
- 3.6 The team provides media liaison and support at key events and public meetings, for example, the general and local election counts and the public meetings on the Lower Thames Crossing.
- 3.7 The council has a contract with the Gazette for the publication of Public Notices which runs until June 2016. Other adverts can be placed in any newspaper at our discretion and are done so for issues such as changes to refuse collection days over Bank Holidays as an additional channel to communicate the message where appropriate.
- 3.8 To support members, the team offered media training sessions to Cabinet members, Chairs and Vice Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and Planning and Licencing Committees. This included media awareness as well as practical interview training led by nationally recognised journalists.

Campaigns

- 3.9 A number of communication campaigns have taken place throughout the last year. These have been prioritised and focused on particular areas which can lead to efficiencies and behaviour change. The campaigns include social worker recruitment, Thameside Theatre events, My Account and fostering. Appendix 1 provides a summary of some of the key campaigns which have taken place over the last year. This includes the evaluation of the campaigns where available.
- 3.10 Campaigns involve a mixture of communications channels, including releases to local media, posters and outdoor advertising, internal promotion, digital and social media to enable the greatest possible reach across the borough as well as targeted marketing to particular audiences.
- 3.11 The communications team also have a role as guardians of the council's brand. There are brand guidelines available for all services to use including templates for email signatures and Powerpoint presentations etc. This is to ensure consistent and appropriate use of the brand including when we work with partners.
- 3.12 Promoting events and awards - which are funded through sponsorship - is also a significant activity for the team including campaigns to communicate the Education and Civic Awards in 2016 and critically support on the night. The team has started to use video as a way of capturing the event and promoting future sponsorship opportunities. Video is also a channel that is

used to support campaigns and bring them to life e.g. foster carer case studies.

Social Media

- 3.13 Social media use has increased in recent months with a proactive approach including posting press releases, campaign information, events, and sharing both promotional and emergency information from partners such as health and police. This has seen an increase in people engaging with the council's pages.
- 3.14 We had 9,803 Twitter followers and 2,102 Facebook likes as of mid-December 2016. We tweet on average 170 times each month and also use targeted Facebook advertising for campaigns where appropriate. Social media also gives the council the ability to communicate with a more personable but professional tone rather than as an institution. Although more business-focused, the council also utilises LinkedIn with 1,747 following us. The council also has a YouTube channel but this currently not fully utilised.
- 3.15 We use a range of channels to get the maximum impact and reach of our messages. Twitter is used both proactively and reactively for news and alerts and Facebook for more social activities such as events in general. A recent example is the Give a Gift tree which apart from two press releases and some localised promotion in the council offices and intu Lakeside, was only communicated via social media but resulted in over 1,600 presents being donated for Thurrock's young people in care and need for Christmas.
- 3.16 Other social media channels will be explored in the new year in order to ensure we cover a wide demographic with our communications but digital communication is a growing area for us as it is both 'always-on' and more cost effective - but also evolves very quickly.

Resident e-newsletter

- 3.17 Thurrock News, a new monthly e-newsletter, was introduced in October 2016 - as an additional communication channel to complement the use of other channels. This is now a regular email communication that residents can sign-up to receive. At the end of December 2016 there were 11,000 subscribers.

Internal Communications

- 3.18 Approximately 80 per cent of the council's staff are also Thurrock residents, and even more have friends and family who live within the borough. Therefore, internal messaging about public campaigns is of vital importance. As well as effective engagement on internal issues, the success of which is reflected in the reaccreditation of Investors in People Gold. Some examples are included in Appendix 1.

Other Communication Activity

- 3.19 Other areas of importance for 2016 have included an increased focus on raising the profile of Thurrock 'the place' and the council to both ensure residents know what is happening and available to them on their doorstep, as well as attract inward investment to the borough. This activity has included:
- Working with partners at High House Production Park including the Royal Opera House, Creative and Cultural Skills and the National College to jointly promote events
 - Awards submissions to the LGC and MJ local government annual awards with consistent shortlisting success and highly commended achieved in some categories as well as winners in other business areas e.g. HR and OD
 - Promoting investment opportunities through the MJ/MIPIM investment guide widely circulated at the Property and Investment Trade Show
 - Thames Estuary Growth Commission handout with Thurrock skyline and key facts
 - Developing a new roundabout sponsorship scheme which will launch in January 2017 generated income but also promoting both local businesses and the council.

Next Steps

- 3.20 Work is already underway to develop a forward plan of communication activity for 2017/18 with an overarching communication strategy. This will be informed by the results of the Residents Survey completed in December 2016. The strategy, alongside our overall approach to engagement, will be developed for March 2017 providing clarity of our overall approach and direction of travel. The committee is invited to comment on this report and activity to date to inform the development of an overarching communication strategy.
- 3.21 The service has delivered significant savings in the last few years and now has a budget of £444k for 2016/17. The majority of this budget is for the 9.6 FTE. This also includes the centralised corporate communication budget of £144k which is used to fund all priority communication campaigns and activity including internal communication materials.
- 3.22 There will be a full service review in February 2018 in line with the council's transformation approach.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 This update was requested by the Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the work programme. The committee are invited to note the information provided and comment on the approach to communications to inform the development of a communications strategy for 2017/18.

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

5.1 This is an update report and no specific consultation has been completed other than with members of the communication team and Directors Board.

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

6.1 Communication of the priorities, policies and performance is key to the overall success and reputation of the council as well as the wellbeing of residents. The service therefore actively supports and plays both a public facing roles in helping residents to access services and be informed as well as internally advising and assisting other directorates.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

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

There are no financial implications as a direct result of this report. The budget for the service is set out at 3.21.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**
Monitoring Officer

There are no legal implications as a result of this report.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Price**
Community Development Officer

There are no direct diversity and equality implications as a result of this report, however, the council must ensure that a range of channels are used to communicate with residents so as not to exclude any particular group. The results of the Residents Survey will be used to inform the development of an overarching strategy and includes information on how people are kept informed. The strategy will developed alongside the review of the engagement strategy, strengthening the overall approach in 2017/18.

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

There are no other specific implications, however, the council regularly communicates issues in partnership with other public sector organisations, the voluntary sector and businesses as appropriate and agreed as part of the work programme and overall approach as well as demand.

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

- None

9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1: Summary of Marketing Campaigns 2016

Report Author:

Karen Wheeler

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