

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2021-24

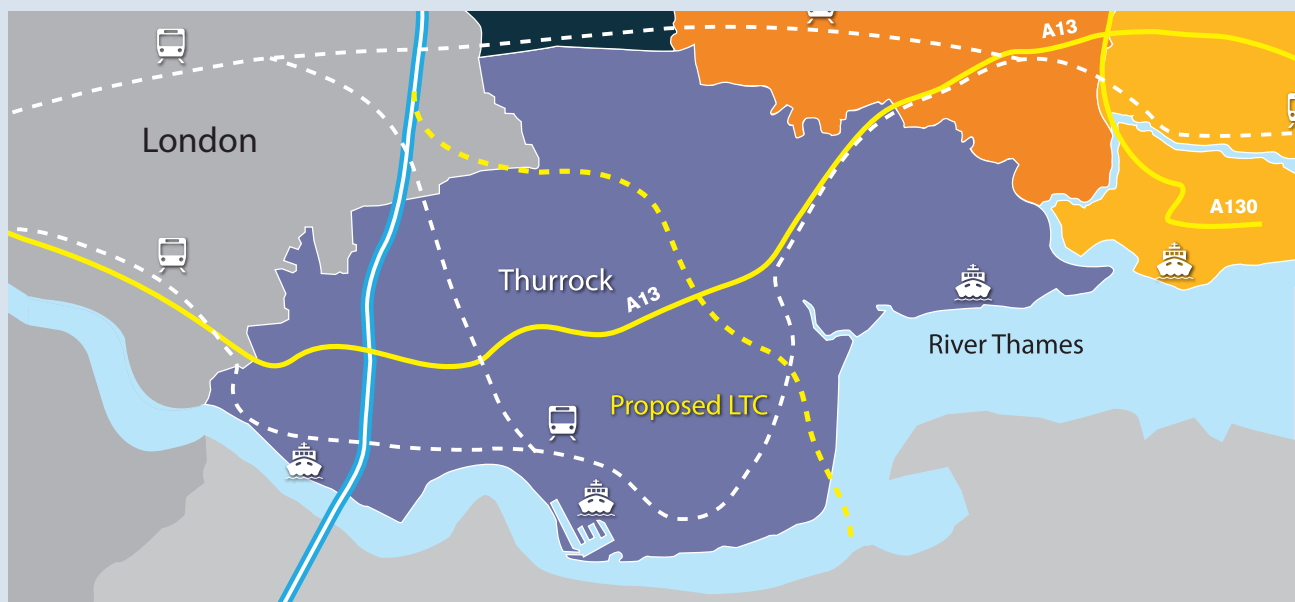
INTRODUCTION

Thurrock is a borough on the rise. Our motto of ‘By Thames to all the peoples of the world’ captures the essence of Thurrock and its unique location at the heart of the Thames Estuary and the rich opportunities on our doorstep.

Thurrock is:

- a borough with a hugely ambitious regeneration agenda with billions of pounds of planned investment in new jobs, infrastructure and homes
- one of the largest growth areas in the UK
- the lead authority for the new Thames Freeport
- leading the implementation of over £40million from the government’s Town Fund
- key to the delivery of projects such as South Essex Estuary (SEE) Park and the Technical University through the ASELA partnership
- involved in the Thames Estuary Growth Board and SELEP
- developing a Statement of Intent for 2030 which sets out the expected outcomes and deliverables for the council over the coming years

Communications will be essential to help unlock the unrivalled opportunity presented by our position at the heart of economic growth in the region. We need to ensure that we are telling Thurrock’s story locally, nationally and internationally and through doing so that we gain recognition for the borough as being an excellent place for residents, businesses and investors to work and play, live and stay; and to invest.



PEOPLE, PLACE AND PROSPERITY

People

A borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay

Place

A heritage-rich borough which is ambitious for its future

Prosperity

A borough which enables everyone to achieve their aspirations

Under the corporate priority banner of People, Place, Prosperity, the council is creating a place where people want to live and are proud of, where businesses want to stay and thrive, and where investors and talent want to be located.

Effective communication and engagement will:

- tell a compelling story which articulates the council's aims and purpose and uses our unique position at the heart of the Thames Estuary to ground this
- use clear messaging to ensure that council priorities are easily understood by local residents, our staff, our partners, local businesses
- reinforce Thurrock's pivotal role and position as the heart of the South Essex region with key external stakeholders including regional bodies and government
- ensure Thurrock is first in the minds of opinion formers and decision makers in order to support us to achieve our vision for the borough

WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE

Working with partners and colleagues across the council the key outcomes that communications will be working to achieve are:

- embedding a strong and recognisable Thurrock brand which positions the council as a leader in local government
- achieving local and national recognition of Thurrock as an excellent place to work and play, live and stay; and encourages inward investment both regionally and nationally
- ensuring the council is viewed by residents as delivering excellent services and positive change and transformation for the benefit of all who live and work in Thurrock
- building increased trust in the council and its decision making processes through clear and consistent dialogue with our target audiences
- demonstrating improved wellbeing of residents and empowered communities which have been positively influenced in improved behaviours and life choices through collaborative working with the council
- having informed, motivated and empowered staff who act as advocates of Thurrock Council and Thurrock the place

Communications activity will be built around:

- brand recognition – further developing and embedding the Thurrock Council narrative to support growth and regeneration
- a strategic approach – clearly planned activity which is aligned to the corporate objectives of People, Place and Prosperity
- direct digital communications – sharing engaging information and content with residents through their preferred channels

BRAND RECOGNITION

We will be working to develop the Thurrock brand as both a local authority and a place in order to support the council's economic growth and regeneration agenda and ensure Thurrock gets the national recognition it so richly warrants.

The council is at the heart of developing a better future for all those who live and work not only in Thurrock but the wider South Essex region and Thames Estuary.

Through the development of a new place brand and the implementation of a long-term new Economic Growth campaign, we will ensure that the borough is seen as an attractive option for potential further investment.

This will mean:

- using the council's narrative alongside a vivid and identifiable place brand to develop a strong external affairs approach
- supporting the council to articulate the deliverables and outcomes of the Statement of Intent for 2030
- having the right conversations at the right time with key partners and stakeholders, and working together on consistent and cohesive messaging
- clearly explaining the benefits that investment in our borough will bring to residents and local businesses through a large-scale campaign
- this campaign will run for three years and use audience segmentation to deliver targeted messaging to different stakeholders
- it will use all communications channels at our disposal and will be a key focus of the work of the communications team

STRATEGIC APPROACH

Communications is a strategic function of the council, and we have a collective responsibility to plan, prioritise and consider the potential impact of all communications activity, as well as ensure that all our output is focused on achieving the best possible outcomes for the council, residents, business and our partners.

By prioritising key campaign activity, we can align resources to ensure we are meeting our objectives. Annual priorities and the annual campaign plan must be agreed by Cabinet and Directors Board and clear planning is crucial to ensure that all output from the communications team is in step with these priorities. Anything which does not directly support key corporate objectives will receive communications support in the form of appropriate social media or media relations only.

Campaigns

Campaigns developed by the communications team will:

- be outcome focused
- have specific and measurable objectives
- work to directly assist the council in meeting its strategic aims
- link directly to the council priorities of People, Place and Prosperity
- focus on issues that we know are important to residents
- aim to create greater understanding between the council and the borough's residents
- support positive behaviour change

This will mean:

- have a planned schedule of activity which clearly sets out the priorities of People, Place and Prosperity and how we are achieving them
- build trust and confidence in the council through increased and improved direct digital communication with residents
- strengthen relationships with residents, stakeholders and staff through improved opportunities for collaboration and engagement including through the Collaborative Communities Framework
- ensure residents are fully informed on how we are investing in infrastructure, housing and job creation, and kept up to date on the latest news on our roads, schools, leisure, culture and community facilities
- influence key external stakeholders' view of Thurrock as a council to do business with and as a place to invest



The communications landscape continues to change at pace.

- traditional media audiences have been in decline for a number of years, and this has been highlighted in our survey results
- since our previous communications strategy was implemented in 2017, Thurrock has gone from having three local print publications, including one which was delivered to households, to only having one print publication which is now 'pick up' only
- digital channels continue to increase in popularity with the majority of UK adults now using at least one social media network
- more traditional face-to-face and direct methods of communication with residents are still valuable especially for harder to reach communities

Digital Channels

A key element of implementing effective communication is ensuring that we are communicating with residents through the channels they are already using, and that all information provided on our council website information is clear, easy to understand and up to date.

Based on our research findings we can ensure that the content we are providing is in line with what that age group have said they are most interested in. This will help build trust with our audience and have the knock-on effect of enhancing the council's reputation through clear and consistent direct messaging. It will also help us to increase our audience and broaden our reach.

DIRECT DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS



Social Media

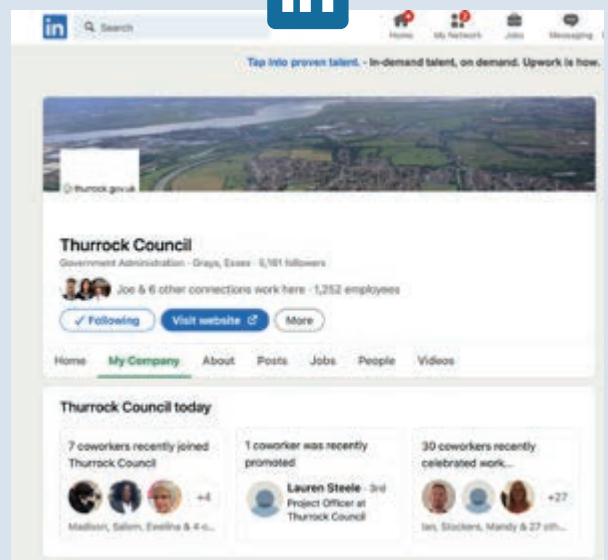
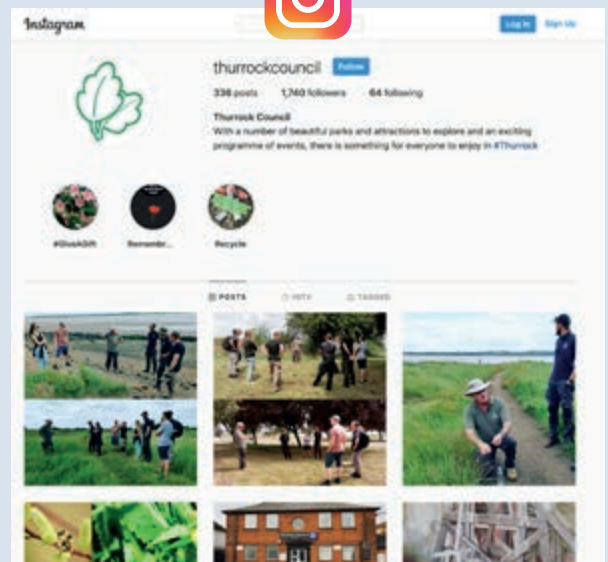
Our resident research has shown that:

- the council's Facebook page is used as a source of information by one in six residents in the borough
- this demonstrates that it is an excellent way of sharing good news directly with residents and helping to promote important services and initiatives
- during the COVID-19 pandemic some of our posts were being seen by over 65,000 people on a regular basis
- the age profile of those who use Facebook in Thurrock is primarily those aged 35 and above

We therefore want to build on this channel as a trusted source of information for local residents.

Twitter has fallen in popularity nationally, and as such is not as effective a method of directly communicating with residents.

- only 2% of survey respondents said that they use it to find news or information about the council
- this is in line with the national picture, where it comes below Facebook and Instagram in user numbers and popularity
- Twitter is still a useful channel for key updates and breaking news
- this is how we will be using it as part of our overall approach to social media



DIRECT DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Our LinkedIn continues to grow at pace.

- we have seen increased engagement during the past year
- its use ensures a visible presence for Thurrock with key stakeholders and partners
- this is a valuable channel for connecting with decision makers and professional influencers

The approach to social media will include:

- focusing our resource on the channels which have proven to have the most impact on our residents
- an increased emphasis on video content and the use of real life case studies, not only about the council but key community and business partners as well
- working with our residents to tell our story to build trust with our audience
- increased use of Instagram and its targeted ads function to engage residents aged between 16 to 34
- continually investigating new and emerging channels, such as TikTok
- introducing more specific and topic-led Facebook groups so that we can increase our two-way engagement with residents in a more meaningful way, and enhance links between individuals in our communities
- engaging with local community Facebook group admins to build relationships and ensure that important information and messages can be shared

Email newsletters

Email newsletters have proven to be exceptionally effective, especially for communicating crucial public health information about COVID-19 directly to residents over the past year and a half.

- 35% of residents say that this is the way they find out information about the council
- we will continue to grow and expand our newsletter offer including broadening our range of specific topic lead bulletins
- direct communication to resident and business inboxes will be used both to keep people informed and up to date on weekly updates and as a valuable channel for campaign materials
- we will investigate additional issue specific newsletters to supplement our existing offer



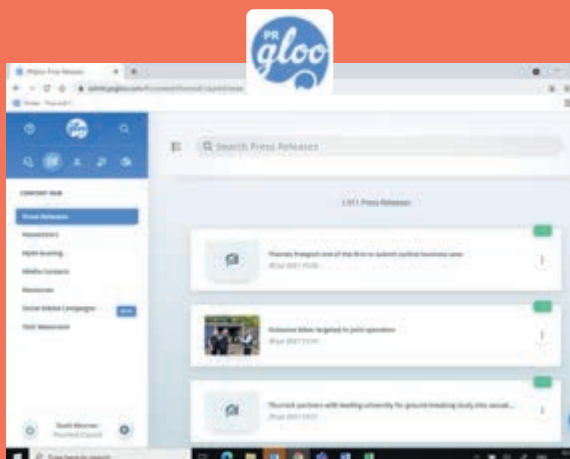
DIRECT DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Media relations

As part of raising the profile of both the council and the borough, we will be taking a broader approach to media relations which will help to tell Thurrock's story on a wider stage.

The approach means that:

- more emphasis will be given to developing relationships with trade and specialist press as well as increasing links with regional and national media outlets
- resources will be managed in a way which enables the communications team to focus on producing high quality proactive and direct communications
- day-to-day proactive and reactive media relations will focus on key decisions and local issues which link to council priorities
- responsive work which does not work towards achieving strategic outcomes and goals will be dealt with on a case by case basis
- press briefings will be introduced, as well as more interactive discourse around key issues
- we will increase the use of video releases and photography

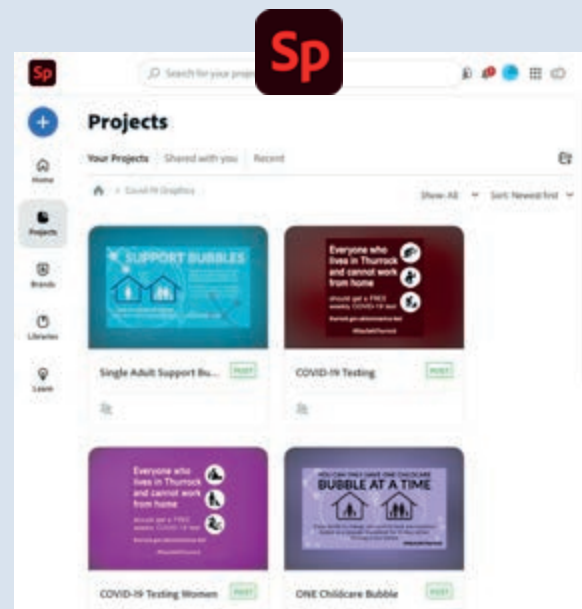


Design and Print

Our graphic design has moved to a 'digital first' approach, where content is developed with our online audience in mind as the first stage.

The approach means that we will:

- increase our use of animation and gifs across all digital channels
- only produce printed materials for specific projects and for groups of our population who do not or cannot access the internet
- provide additional options for getting important, locally targeted messages to residents in areas of high footfall through introducing more council owned outdoor advertising channels
- ensure that the council brand is applied in a consistent way across all materials and that the use of partner branding is applied in a consistent way
- ensure materials being displayed by or distributed on behalf of the council are of a high quality



Internal communications

Our council staff are our biggest asset as an organisation and as such it's crucial that we ensure that we have clear, open and honest communication with them. They are also an important audience for wider council messaging as over 70% of Thurrock Council staff also live in the borough.

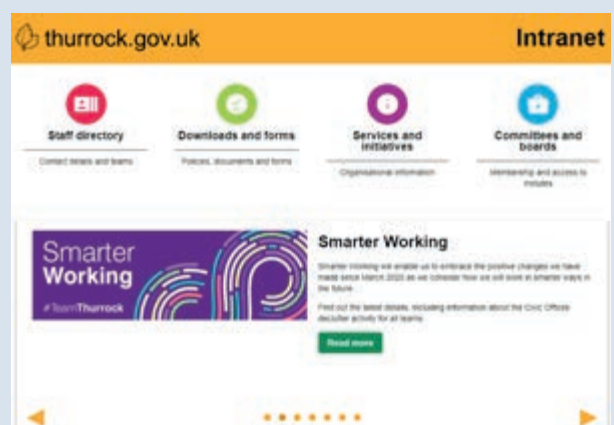
We have enhanced our internal communications approach over the past three years, introducing a new intranet and new email newsletters. Over 65% of staff with access to email open each one – well above benchmarking against other public sector organisations.

As we enter a more challenging period in the post COVID-19 world, including the move to more remote and 'smarter' working, keeping our staff engaged and informed will be more important than ever.

Our approach will focus on:

- communicating key information in a very clear and easy to understand way which keeps staff involved in the decision making process
- building on the success of our email newsletters which receive excellent engagement from staff
- continuing to supplement digital communications with printed materials and in-person briefings to ensure that office based staff are kept fully informed of key information
- increasing the use of text messages to reach staff who either do not have access to email or are away from their devices
- investigating new channels to communicate with staff such as internal social networks and new functionality of Microsoft 365

Engaged and informed staff can be some of our best advocates for the work of the council. Feedback on internal communications is obtained through the annual Staff Survey which all staff are encouraged to complete. A full staff survey explores a large range of issues and topics relating to all aspects of working for the council which is followed by a 'Pulse Staff Survey' the following year, further exploring the six top themes and topics highlighted in the previous years' survey results.



WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Evaluation of our communications activity is critical to ensuring that we understand what works well and what doesn't in achieving our objectives. From this evidence base we can make sound judgements on what approach to take at any given time, and adapt our content and channel use accordingly.

- a monthly monitoring and evaluation report will be produced to give a snapshot of campaign activity and the outcomes achieved, audiences reached and key issues that needed to be managed
- through thoroughly evaluating all of our work and the impact it has had against measurable objectives, it will ensure that we are able to allocate our resources efficiently and in a way that ensures we are working cohesively to achieve the council's overall priority objectives
- the monthly evaluation report will be shared with Directors Board and Cabinet and published on our intranet where it will be available for all council staff and members to view

The evaluation will link directly back to the key outcomes communications will be working to achieve, and by 2024 will ensure that:

- the Thurrock brand is fully embedded and Thurrock is recognised as an excellent place to work and play, live and stay; and to invest
- residents believe that the council has and continues to deliver excellent services and positive change and transformation
- trust in the council and its decision making processes is substantially higher
- residents' wellbeing is significantly improved through working together to influence positive life choices and outcomes
- council staff consider themselves to be well informed and are motivated to be strong advocates for Thurrock Council and Thurrock the place

WHAT HAS INFORMED THIS STRATEGY?

This communications strategy has been developed to ensure we build on recent successes and reflect best practice, taking on board expert advice and recommendations as well as input from senior management and members.

As good practice, we invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to carry out a peer led 'communications health check' in October 2020 which made recommendations to support the development of the communications strategy 2021-24. One of their recommendations was to commission a survey into how residents are finding their news and information about the council.

To do this we commissioned a market research agency to conduct an independent telephone survey with 200 residents. This ensured that we got a representative cross section of those in our borough who may not currently actively engage with the council on a regular basis. This was supplemented with an online survey which was promoted through the council's online channels. An externally facilitated workshop involving members and officers was also held to help develop the new strategy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Where do residents get their news and information about the council?

A survey was administered by telephone by an independent market research company from 21 June to 5 July. Demographic quotas were set for gender and age in line with population statistics to ensure a representative sample of residents were interviewed.

The findings from this research shows that:

- Thurrock residents have a preference for online sources of information with the council's website being by far the most popular
- more than half of residents surveyed by telephone saying that thurrock.gov.uk is the main way they learn about the council
- next most popular were our council email newsletters, with 35% of residents saying this was their primary source of information, and 97% of those saying that its contents were useful to them

- in total just under half of those surveyed (46%) said that they receive the Thurrock Council email newsletter; the vast majority also said they always read it
- 92% of those who read the email newsletter believe it keeps them informed, with 47% saying that it keeps them very well informed

The next most popular ways to find news and information about the council were word of mouth (18%) and Thurrock Council's Facebook page (14%). Overall, a third of residents who access the internet follow Thurrock Council's social media channels, with the most common being Facebook. The print edition of the Thurrock Gazette was referenced as a source of information for 8% of respondents, with primarily over 55s referencing this publication. Online news outlets were referenced by 3% of respondents.

An additional online survey carried out through the council's consultation portal was promoted through our own digital channels and local online media outlets.

- this sample is not as representative as the telephone survey as the demographic profile of respondents is much older and has a higher proportion of retirees
- it provides useful insight into how the audience who already engage with digital channels, both council owned and community based, receive their information
- almost 60% of respondents said that they receive information from the council from our weekly email newsletter, with 81% finding it useful
- a higher proportion of residents who responded to the survey said that they get news about the council from local and regional media
- this is in common with the national picture (source: Ofcom news consumption 2020 report) with an average of 9% accessing information from these channels

What type of content are residents most interested in?

- community news and events and service updates, e.g. changes to household waste collections, on the council's social media channels
- around a third would like to see updates on key projects or work by the council and information about upcoming roadworks
- a significantly higher proportion of residents aged 35-54 are interested in seeing service updates, information updates on council work as well as road and traffic updates
- this content is of less interest to residents aged 16-34
- the vast majority of residents are most interested in receiving information about waste and recycling, community issues, leisure and culture, environment and safety and adult care and health across all of our communications channels
- there is less interest overall in news about travel and transport and planning and growth
- over 55s displayed more interest in these topics than the younger age group

- a significantly higher proportion of residents aged 16-34 would be interested in receiving information about housing, education and learning, children and families, jobs and careers and business and licensing
- a lower proportion of residents aged 55 and over would be interested in receiving this information

Respondents to the online survey indicated a wider interest across council topics, with the vast majority of respondents saying they would be interested in receiving information about waste and recycling, environment and safety, travel and transport, community and living, planning and growth and leisure and culture.

Over two thirds of this group indicated their interest in receiving information about council and democracy; far higher than observed amongst the random representative sample. Over half are interested in receiving information on housing and money, tax & benefits.

Priority 1 campaigns

These campaigns will be directly linked to high level corporate priorities that are of strategic importance to the council. These campaigns will have clear, measurable objectives linked directly to priorities and require significant research, planning and communications resource. The campaigns will be implemented across a wide range of channels over an extended period of time.

Economic recovery

This campaign will build on the success of the Transforming Thurrock campaign to harness the excitement and potential of the ambitious growth agenda. A key element will be focusing on real life case studies from individuals and businesses across the borough to highlight the work the council is doing to support everyone who lives and works in the borough to reacclimatise to the new post-pandemic world. This will be a cross-cutting campaign covering many different council services from jobs and skills and strategic planning to Children's Services, and compliment work with partners through the Towns Fund Boards, Thames Freeport and ASELA.

Neighbourhood pride

The proposal for this campaign is to work across the Environment and Housing services to encourage positive behaviour change relating to how residents treat their local areas. It will aim to encompass elements of tackling untidy front gardens, low level 'bad neighbourly' anti-social behaviour (ASB) such as noise disruption and encourage more residents to feel empowered that they can improve their local area with help from the council, rather than having the expectation that the council is responsible for every aspect of civic life. It will also promote neighbourliness and build on the community spirit seen throughout the pandemic.

Smarter working

This will be our main internal communications campaign and will support council staff to embrace the new technology we have available, the different places we can work from and how we view our work to deliver it in the best ways possible – work is what we do, not where we do it. This is linked to the council's approach to providing better services from fewer buildings and ensuring that staff have the tools that they need to work in a modern and flexible way.

Priority 2 campaigns

These campaigns will be shorter in duration with a more defined audience and specific, time bound deliverables. They will require research, planning and sustained communications input and support over an agreed time period and will be implemented across targeted channels.

Fostering

A refreshed fostering campaign will encourage potential foster parents to foster directly through the council rather than use agencies. The campaign emphasises both the financial advantages, such as the Council Tax discount, and the additional excellent support available from our dedicated team. The campaign uses design materials which have been newly created this year and tested on a panel of existing foster parents.



Recycling

Building on the previous campaign which ran from 2018 to 2021, a new recycling campaign is being developed which looks to use a mixture of factual information and emotional appeals to influence positive behaviour change and encourage residents to recycle more and create less general waste. It will work to prepare residents for expected forthcoming changes in waste collection by emphasising that the majority of household waste should go in the blue recycling bin which will be collected weekly.

Report it online

This campaign will encourage residents to report issues including crime, ASB, repairs, environmental issues including missed bins and other service requests through the appropriate direct online channels. It will explain that this is more convenient for them, rather than taking indirect routes such as posting on social media, and means that reports can be acted upon straight away by the relevant officers, partners or contractors.