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| <b>13 October 2021</b>  |                             | <b>ITEM: 12</b><br><b>Decision: 110587</b> |
| <b>Cabinet</b>  |                             |  |
| <b>Communications Strategy 2021-24</b>  |                             |  |
| <b>Wards and communities affected:</b><br>All   | <b>Key Decision:</b><br>Key |  |
| <b>Report of:</b> Councillor Jack Duffin, Cabinet Member for Central Services           |                             |  |
| <b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> N/A  |                             |  |
| <b>Accountable Director:</b> Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth |                             |  |
| <b>This report is public</b>  |                             |  |

## Executive Summary

The Communications Strategy 2021-24 sets out the approach the council will take over the next three years to ensure that communications activity aligns with and supports the vision and priorities of the council.

This strategy follows on from the previous Communications Strategy 2017-20, and builds on the work that has taken place over the past three years to introduce a more modern, direct and digitally focused approach to the way that we engage with our residents.

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

A consistent and strategic approach to communications which ensures that the good work of the council is shared with residents and that they are kept informed on how

to access essential services is critical, even more so following a sustained period of change and uncertainty through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The strategy has been developed to ensure that recent learning and successes are built upon, and that all communications activity reflects best practice, taking on board expert advice and recommendations as well as input from senior management and members.

The approach to communications 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

Working with partners and colleagues across the council and the wider community this approach which will result in a strong and recognisable Thurrock brand as well as national recognition of Thurrock as an excellent place to work and play, live and stay and to invest.

It will also increase trust in the council and its decision making processes and ensure that staff are fully engaged in the council's work and transformation agenda and can act as advocates for both the local authority and the borough.

## **1. Recommendation(s):**

### **1.1 To agree the Communication Strategy 2021-24 as the principle policy document for communication with residents, businesses, stakeholders and staff.**

## **2. Introduction and Background**

2.1 This report sets out the Communications Strategy 2021-24, which outlines the approach the council will take over the next three years to effectively communicate and engage with residents, staff, partners, local businesses and other key stakeholders.

2.2 While led by the Communications Team, communications is a shared responsibility across the entire council to ensure that a clear and compelling story which articulates the council's aims and purpose is being told collectively.

2.3 This communications strategy follows on from the previous Communications Strategy 2017-20, and builds on the work that has taken place over the past three years to introduce a more modern and digitally focused approach to the way that the council engages with residents and to embed new ways of working.

- 2.4 The development of the new strategy was delayed from 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that this had on the work of the communications team.
- 2.5 During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic response, the work of the team focused heavily on ensuring that frequently changing critical public health messaging was communicated clearly and directly to Thurrock residents and businesses.
- 2.6 The Local Government Association (LGA) was invited to carry out a virtual peer review in October 2020, referred to as a 'communications health check' in preparation for developing the communications strategy.
- 2.7 This was similar to the 'communications health check' undertaken in May 2017 which informed the 2017-21 strategy.
- 2.8 As part of the peer review, the LGA met with members, senior officers, partners and representatives of the local media to seek their views.
- 2.9 The LGA's report highlighted that the council had good crisis communications, strong stakeholder relations especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and a flexible team who were proactive, committed and responsive. It also reflected that internal communications had improved since 2017 and communications were now more campaign-led overall.
- 2.10 To further inform the strategy the LGA also facilitated a workshop session with members and officers.
- 2.11 One of the LGA recommendations was to commission a survey into how residents find out their news and information about the council. Independent market research was commissioned which consisted of a telephone survey with 200 residents. This ensured a response from a representative cross section of those in the 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.
- 2.12 At Cabinet on Wednesday 8 September, the Cabinet Member for Central Services requested that the local media be given a further opportunity to feed into the strategy and specifically comment on the draft document. The local media were invited to offer feedback on the council's overall strategic approach to communications as outlined within the strategy document.
- 2.13 No feedback was received from any local media outlet in response to this invitation within the deadline provided of 27 September, however, one response was received on 4 October. The feedback in this response is focused on operational aspects of communications including timescales, equipment and on-call arrangements. Feedback on the media briefings already included as part of the strategy will be taken into account as the approach is further developed. Consideration will be given to the operational

issues raised in the response but they do not impact on the overall strategic approach to the council's communications and the strategy itself.

## **Communications Update**

Through the implementation of the previous Communications Strategy, there has been much more focus on digital communications, the use of consistent messaging, campaigns and work to raise the profile of the council and the borough.

### **Digital Communications**

- 2.14 The council's reach on social media has grown substantially since the previous strategy, with the council's Facebook page going from 2,000 followers to almost 13,000 (we have 12,891 followers, 11,920 likes).
- 2.15 An Instagram account has been launched which has almost 1,800 followers, Twitter has grown to 13,400 and LinkedIn has increased to over 5,000.
- 2.16 Engagement rates of posts have increased across all channels, and there has been an improved focus on the use of eye-catching imagery and video content.
- 2.17 During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of the Thurrock News e-newsletter and the council's social media channels were the primary tools for getting very rapidly changing information directly to residents.
- 2.18 There was very high engagement with these channels, with up to 65,000 residents either opening the e-newsletter or being reached by Facebook posts at times of key changes to guidance, such as the introduction of the government's Tier system.
- 2.19 Since the introduction of e-newsletters in 2016 they have continued to grow their audiences. There are specific e-newsletters for topics such as Careers, Weather Warnings and the A13 Road Widening Project, all of which have consistently high open rates.

### **Media**

- 2.20 The media landscape has changed substantially in Thurrock since 2017. Where there were once three printed publications, there is now one, and this is no longer delivered to homes. This is in common with the national picture, where local news has moved primarily to news websites and other online offerings.
- 2.21 Regional and national coverage of Thurrock related stories has increased, and member participation in interviews, particularly radio interviews, has risen substantially.

## **Campaigns**

- 2.22 There has been a much more campaign driven approach to communications, with large-scale behaviour change campaigns on the issues of fly-tipping, recycling and anti-social behaviour, as well as awareness campaigns on fostering, careers support and Transforming Thurrock which highlights regeneration and positive change in the borough. In addition to this, a long-term campaign called 'Discover Thurrock' highlighted the excellent amenities on offer in the borough including the many parks and open spaces.
- 2.23 All campaign activity is fully evaluated to measure impact and effectiveness.

## **Internal Communications**

- 2.24 The approach to internal communications has been enhanced over the past three years through introducing a new Intranet and new email newsletters. These e-newsletters receive excellent engagement from staff, with over 65 per cent of staff with access to email opening each one – well above benchmarking against other public sector organisations. Digital communications to staff are also supplemented by printed materials and in-person/virtual briefings to ensure that office based and front-line staff are kept fully informed of key information.

## **Design and Brand**

- 2.25 The council's graphic design has moved to a 'digital first' approach, where content is developed with an online audience in mind as the first stage. This includes increased use of animation and gifs. There will always be a need for some printed materials, particularly for residents who do not or cannot access the internet, and this forms part of the overall campaign approach to channel use. The council's brand played an integral part in the response to COVID-19, where a recognisable identity ensured residents knew what information was coming directly from Thurrock Council.

## **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options**

- 3.1 The issues set out above and the analysis of the resident research have informed the development of the approach set out in the Communication Strategy 2021-24 at Appendix 1.
- 3.2 Through independent market research, it has been established that the majority of residents get their information from the council's website (65 per cent) and through e-newsletters (38 per cent).
- 3.3 This insight into resident preferences has guided the approach taken in the strategy to ensure that the council is communicating with residents through their preferred channels.

- 3.4 The research also outlined the content which is of most interest to residents, which means that a strategic and planned approach can be taken to ensure high engagement with key messages.
- 3.5 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 improve 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.

#### **4. Reasons for Recommendation**

- 4.1 Cabinet are asked to agree the approach to communications as set out in the strategy. The strategy will shape the work of the communications team and all communications activity carried out on behalf of the council.

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

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with the Communications Team, Strategy Engagement and Growth Directorate Management Team, Directors Board, Cabinet and the Leader as well as with partners and the local media through the LGA communications health check. In addition, a communications update report was provided to Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee in March 2021 which outlined the feedback and recommendations of the LGA health check. The recommendations from that report and feedback from the committee meeting have been used to inform the development of the strategy. These included:
- commission a 'who reads what?' survey to establish how Thurrock residents consume news and prefer to

- consider commissioning an externally facilitated workshop involving members and officers to help develop the new strategy
- ensure the refreshed communications strategy includes measurable objectives and an annual campaign plan
- consider more productive ways of engaging the local media (e.g. briefings) rather than relying on press releases
- focus more on the council's own communications channels which are read by more people (e.g. e-newsletters)

5.2 Feedback from Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the draft Communications Strategy discussed on Tuesday 7 September 2021, included:

- Overall the committee recognised the good work and positive direction of travel for the council's communications
- The committee were keen to see the evaluation and outcomes from delivering the strategy overall and specific campaigns
- They supported targeted social media and more use of video/engaging content and wanted to see a more 'fun' tone where appropriate
- There was concern about the digitally excluded but the committee were reassured that the council uses a range of communications channels and the approach is reflected in the strategy
- The committee were keen to see an improved relationship with the local media and felt there was still work to do. Detail on the day to day processes with the local media are not included in the strategy as it is strategic and overarching and therefore does not include the operational information.

5.3 As set out at 2.12 above, the local media were given an opportunity to comment on the draft Communications Strategy 2021-24 and one response was received after the deadline covering operational issues only.

## **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.

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1 Financial**

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

There are no financial implications as a direct result of this report. The Communications Strategy and corporate communication activity will be delivered within existing budgets.

## 7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**  
**Deputy Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer**

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

## 7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**  
**Team Manager – Community Development and Equalities**

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. Research to inform this strategy was carried out with a demographically representative sample of the Thurrock population.

## 7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, Health Inequalities and Impact on Looked After Children

A strong communications strategy in relation to crime, disorder and ASB will encourage reporting by residents and improve their perceptions of crime and response thus supporting Thurrock Council in fulfilling its Duty towards S17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

There are no other specific implications, however, the council regularly develops communications approaches and materials in partnership with other public sector organisations including health partners and Essex Police, the voluntary sector and businesses as appropriate.

## 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):

- LGA Communications health check: Thurrock Council
- Communication Strategy 2017-20

## 9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1: Communications Strategy 2021-24



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Communications