

5 April 2017		ITEM: 16 (Decision 01104421)
Cabinet		
Communication Strategy 2017-20		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Councillor Shane Hebb, Portfolio Holder for Finance & Legal Services		
Accountable Head of Service Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
Accountable Director: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

This report sets out the changing landscape and context for the council's communication activity. It proposes a strategic approach in response and clear principles to guide engagement with residents, partners, staff and the media, aid reputation management and improve public perception.

The recent Residents Survey results showed that 68% of Thurrock residents get information about their local area from the council including the website and social media but also from the local newspapers and via word of mouth.

The Communication Strategy provides a set of overarching principles to guide effective communications to better inform our residents and partners.

The council wants to be regarded by its residents, peers and partners as ambitious for Thurrock and focused on meeting current and future aspirations. This requires a shift-change in the way we communicate and how we engage with the media, residents, partners and staff.

The Communication Strategy at Appendix 1 is centred around the following principles to support delivery of the council's ambitions and priorities:

- Digital first
- Targeted messaging
- Brand promotion

Delivery of the communication strategy will be underpinned by a media protocol providing a framework for engagement by the council with the local, regional and national media and other guidance to support both officers and members.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 To agree the proposed Communication Strategy 2017-20 as the principle policy document for engagement with residents via all communication and media platforms.

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 This report sets out the changing landscape and context for the council's communication activity. It proposes a strategic approach in response and clear principles to guide engagement with residents, partners and the media, aid reputation management and improve public perception.
- 2.2 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, the council's website and internal communication including the Intranet.
- 2.3 Communicating effectively is every service's responsibility and the Communications Team provide advice, guidance and technical support to promote what the council is doing, raise its profile, provide important information to residents and protect the council's reputation.
- 2.4 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, social media and updates to the website.
- 2.5 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.
- 2.6 The council does not currently have an overarching Communication Strategy providing a set of guiding principles to ensure effective communications for well informed residents and partners. This report seeks to reconcile this deficit.

Communication Activity

- 2.7 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.

Media

- 2.8 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, Planning and Licensing committees by issuing press releases in discussion with Chairs of committees. 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.
- 2.9 The team also respond to enquiries from the media on a daily basis, and on critical issues out of hours where necessary to protect the council's reputation, 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. The Communications Team will aim to respond to any non-critical media requests or enquiries within 24 hours.

Campaigns

- 2.10 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 Love Thurrock promoting 'bin it' and litter enforcement as part of clean it, cut it, fill it, social worker recruitment, sign up to My Account, becoming a foster carer and promoting consultations for example on the frequency of local elections.
- 2.11 Campaigns involve a mixture of communications channels, including releases to 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.
- 2.12 Promoting events and awards - which are funded through sponsorship - is also a significant activity for the team including campaigns to communicate the Education Awards and Civic Awards in 2016 and support at the event.

Social Media and Website

- 2.13 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 the Thurrock Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Essex Police. This has seen an increase in people engaging with the council's pages, hitting 10,000 followers on Twitter in February 2017.

- 2.14 The council has over 2,000 'likes' on Facebook and we have seen increased engagement with the introduction of the use of videos. Although more business-focused, the council's LinkedIn profile has 1,747 following us. The council also has a YouTube channel but this is currently not fully utilised as yet.
- 2.15 Social media and other communication channels are used to sign post residents to the council's website where additional information and advice is hosted and services can be accessed. This is in line with both the Digital and Customer Service strategies. The website homepage includes a Twitter feed, rolling carousel images with links to key campaign and service pages as well as static areas for prominent issues such as consultations or those affecting all residents.

Resident e-newsletter

- 2.16 Thurrock News, a 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. There are over 11,500 subscribers. The council will continue to promote sign up to the service which informs residents of key council updates.

Internal Communications

- 2.17 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. 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.
- 2.18 The Staff Survey conducted in 2016 shows that staff are engaged, with the majority satisfied to be working for the council and understanding how their role contributes to the council's success and delivering the overall priorities. The majority of staff feel they are kept informed about their team and service, but an area for improvement is information about what is happening in the council as a whole with just over half feeling well informed. Communication between service areas was also identified as an issue. Actions are underway to address this with internal communications - now part of the corporate Communications Team - to help ensure messages are timely and joined up while continuing to work closely with the HR and Organisational Development teams.
- 2.19 There is an opportunity through the strategy to do more to ensure staff are well informed and advocates of the council especially as we know word of mouth is a key way in which residents receive information. The council should also ensure as a principle that staff are informed of key issues directly, ahead of finding out through the media wherever possible.

Branding

- 2.20 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. and a writing style guide. This is to ensure consistent and appropriate use of the brand including when we work with partners. This reflects the council's ambitions to continue the development of a competent, professional perception from those that engage with it.

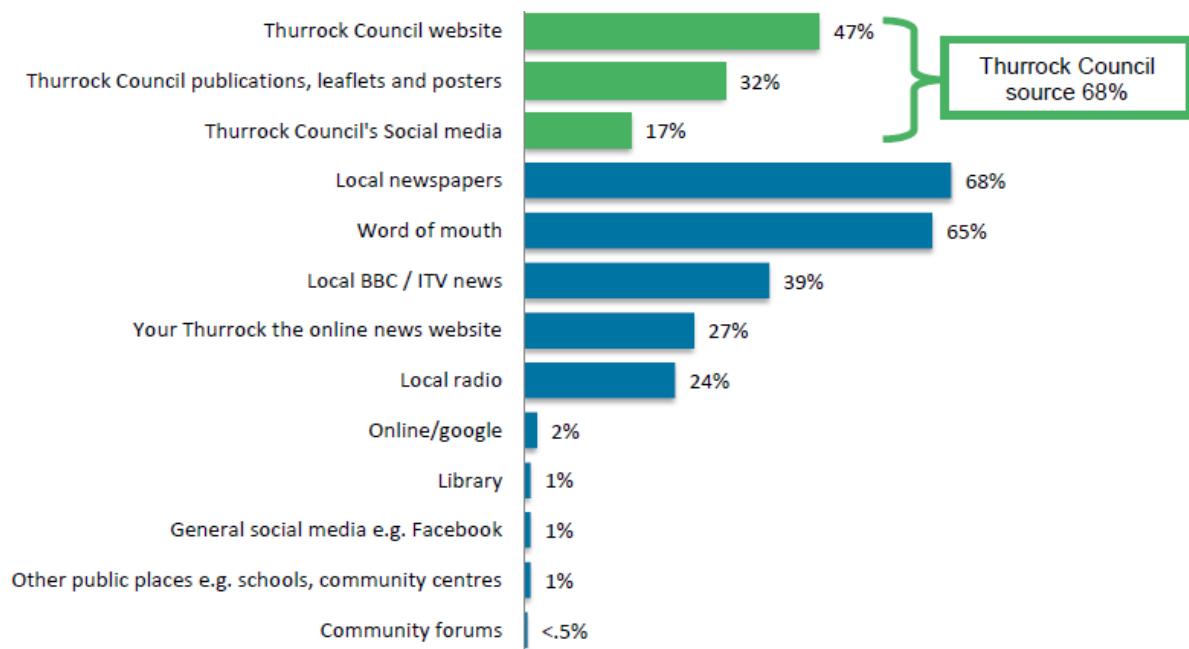
Profile

- 2.21 Work has been ongoing to ensure the council's brand and Thurrock the place is shared widely and recognised. This is a main focus of proactive communication activity. Recent examples include:

- 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 specific national awards e.g. HR and OD, Planning
- 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 launched in January 2017 generated income but also promoting both local businesses and the council
- Host for recent SELEP Local Growth Fund ministerial announcement.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 The issues set out above have informed the development of the approach set out in the Communication Strategy below, as well as analysis of the recent Residents Survey. The results showed that 68% of Thurrock residents get information about their local area from the council including the website and social media but also from the local newspapers and via word of mouth. Despite this, 58% of residents think that the council keeps them well informed about services.



Communication Strategy 2017-20

3.2 The council wants to be regarded by its residents, peers and partners as ambitious for Thurrock and focused on meeting current and future aspirations. The Communication Strategy is set out at Appendix 1. It is focused on three key principles to support delivery of this priority:

- Digital first
- Targeted messaging
- Brand promotion

The strategy is expected to enable the following outcomes:

- Well informed and engaged residents involved in decision making and shaping services
- Recognition and improved perception of the council and its services with residents, staff and partners as advocates
- Pride in Thurrock the place with national profile and recognition

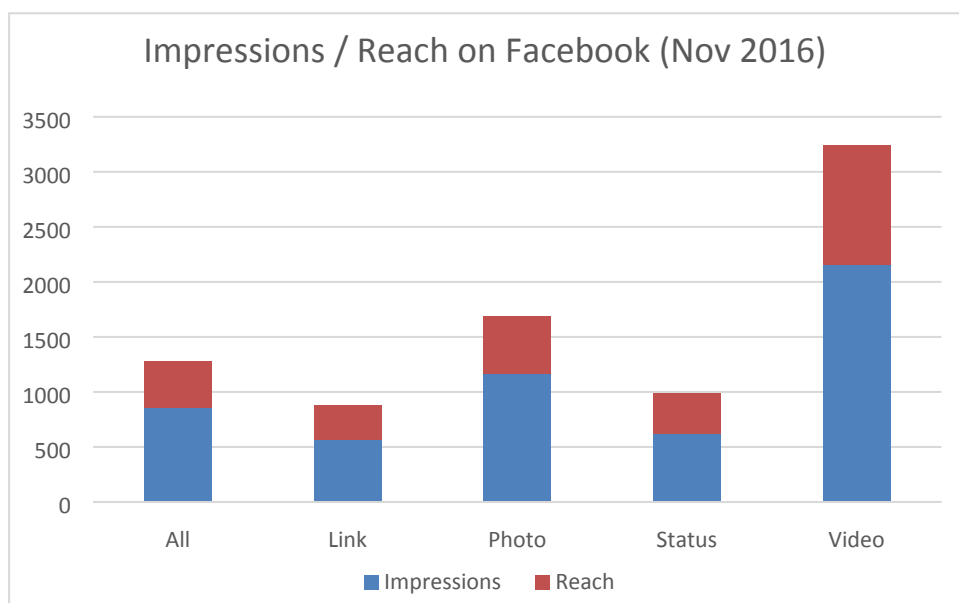
Digital first

3.3 We know from the Residents Survey that over 90% of residents have access to the internet at home or via a mobile device. 60% said that they would be willing to contact the council using the website, social media or via email in the future.

3.4 Digital communication is a growing area for the council as it is both 'always-on' and more cost effective - but also evolves very quickly.

3.5 Local and regional media organisations are an important channel for getting messages out to the public. 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.

- 3.6 The council is working in 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 Digital and Customer Services Strategies.
- 3.7 Digital first is therefore a key principle in the Communications Strategy. The Communications Team have already started to embrace this including increased use of video which attracts much higher engagement (see below example). Facebook will have an increased focus as part of the new approach.



- 3.8 By developing the use of social media we are responding to a clear customer demand. A growing number of residents use social media and expect to engage with the council in this way – both in terms of service requests and general communications. Social media will continue to sign post residents to the council’s website where additional information and advice will be hosted and services can be accessed or requests raised. Use of other social media will be explored including Instagram and Snapchat.
- 3.9 Use of social media supports our priorities as a means for promotion; community engagement and customer service delivery as well as being aligned to Connected Thurrock – the Digital and Information Technology Strategy. In particular the principle that people will be connected and enabled by technology and ‘digital by design’ for all services.
- 3.10 The council will ensure that residents who are less digitally and ICT confident and competent will be able to make full use of and access services. Support will be signposted on the “Contact Us” page of the council website, where

residents can find help and advice such as through assisted self-service via the contact centre or volunteers at Community Hubs. This is in line with the Customer Services Strategy.

- 3.11 An increased emphasis on digital communications by the media and growing use of social media by the council will impact on reputation. The social media guidance has been reviewed and updated in this context.

Targeted messaging

- 3.12 As set out above, the Communications Team are leading work or supporting services to communicate and engage widely with residents. However, the overall approach and focus on key messages must become more targeted so that:

- Key messages are identified and imbedded in all communications
- All opportunities to communicate key messages are taken
- Repeated key messaging over a prolonged period

- 3.13 The key messages should be real and relevant for residents, reflecting the issues of most importance to them and in the context of the overall priorities for the council.
- 3.14 Other messages must be relevant, appropriate to the audience it is hoped to reach and reflect the intended outcome of the communication.
- 3.15 The overall approach should be proactive – promoting the place to investors, visitors, business as well as residents, informing customers and partners of service changes, events and opportunities to get involved, and ensuring all critical day-to-day service messages, reminders and signposts are timely and effective. This will be planned in advance for both external and internal audiences within an overarching calendar of communication activity.

Brand promotion

- 3.16 Work continues to increase the profile of Thurrock both within the borough and to people and businesses looking at Thurrock as a place to live, work or do business.
- 3.17 There is a need to develop a clear and confident narrative for Thurrock the place, including opportunities for jobs and training; culture and heritage; investment and growth, alongside a strong and recognisable brand.
- 3.18 The narrative will involve using targeted messaging and communications channels for each of the audiences we want to appeal to – staff, residents, businesses, community and voluntary organisations, and investors.
- 3.19 As well as messaging, branding and signage will be explored in line with the future and aspirational public realm branding proposal agreed for detailed

consideration as part of the capital programme. This builds on work the council has already done and will be progressed with partners, such as the Business Board and CVS, as a focus of the new strategy. This should also include consideration of the council's presence at strategic profile raising events such as MIPIM.

- 3.20 The Communication Strategy aims to provide an overall focus for the council's communication activity and new clarity on the overall approach.
- 3.21 The council aims to be open, ensure information is accessible, encourage public involvement in decision making and promote and protect the interests of the borough's residents.

Media liaison

- 3.22 Delivery of the communication strategy will be underpinned by a media protocol providing a framework for engagement by the council with the local, regional and national media and other guidance to support both officers and members. It recognises the important role the media play in informing the public and in communicating with residents and other stakeholders on an increasingly digital and therefore constant basis.
- 3.23 The council will recognise organisations as 'media' who are a member of the Independent Press Standards Association (IPSO) or equivalent regulator and comply with the Editor's Code of Practice. Television and radio broadcasters, such as the BBC, are regulated by Ofcom. Any organisation which has membership of such a regulatory framework will be offered a place in the 'media area' for the benefit of reporting on council meetings. Other media organisations and reporters will be welcome to report from the public area.
- 3.24 Media liaison must be undertaken in a timely, consistent, professional, transparent and non-party-political manner. The Communications Team aims to provide an efficient and professional service to the media and treat all outlets fairly. In response, the council expects the media to report in an accurate and balanced way, including use of headlines. An agreed 'right of reply' is assumed in order to concurrently explain the council's position and protect its reputation as part of a media story.
- 3.25 Should a media outlet, or one of its journalists, fail to adhere to the regulator's code and in particular not reflect the council's position accurately ensuring a 'right of reply', the council will not engage and recognise that organisation and/or journalist as 'media' for a period of time determined by the council.
- 3.26 Changes in the media are ever evolving and emerging which the council must have the flexibility to react to. The BBC has recently announced details of where licence fee-funded local journalists will be based across the country, with jobs being phased in from the summer 2017. It has set aside £8m a year to pay for 150 reporters, who will work for local news organisations rather than

the BBC. Thurrock is an area to be covered by two journalists including Essex and Southend. The journalists will cover council meetings and public services and share their stories with the BBC. The council welcomes this initiative and will actively encourage the consideration of filming whole public meetings, such as Council including live streaming.

Next Steps

- 3.27 If agreed, implementation of the strategy and adherence to the supporting protocols and guidance will commence immediately. A key outcome measure will be how well informed residents feel when the Residents Survey is repeated in September 2017 as well as perceptions of the council, its services and Thurrock the place.
- 3.28 A review of the capacity within the Communications Team will be completed to ensure the right focus of resources and skills to deliver the approach as set out in the strategy.
- 3.29 There will be a full service review for communications in February 2018 in line with the council's transformation approach.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Cabinet are asked to agree the approach to communication and engagement set out in the strategy. This will guide the work of the Communications Team and all communication on behalf of the council.

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

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with the Communication Team, Directors Board, Portfolio Holder and Leader. In addition, a communications update report was provided to Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee in January 2017 and consultation update in March 2017. The feedback from that meeting has been used to inform the development of the strategy. It included:

- More consistent use of Facebook in line with the approach to Twitter
- Increased use of videos including of meetings to increase engagement
- Use of non-digital channels where more appropriate for different audiences to avoid exclusion
- The council's position communicated through the Communications Team ensuring that messages are non-party political
- Advice and guidance from the Communications Team to be available to all members

- 5.2 Peer support has been provided by the Head of Communications at Essex County Council.

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**
Management Accountant

There are no financial implications as a direct result of this report.

The budget for the communications service was £444k for 2016/17 having delivered savings in previous years. The majority of this budget is for the 9.6 FTE but also includes the centralised corporate communication budget of £144k which is used to fund all priority communication campaigns and activity including internal communication materials.

7.2 **Legal**

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

There are no legal implications as a result of this report. Reference to advisory codes are included in the body of the 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 have informed the development of the overarching strategy and includes information on how residents are engaged and kept informed.

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):

- Communication Update, Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee, January 2017
- Residents Survey Results, BMG, February 2017
- Community Engagement Strategy 2012-16

9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1: Communication Strategy 2017-20

Report Author:

Karen Wheeler

Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services

Communication Strategy 2017-20

This Communication Strategy provides a set of overarching principles to guide effective communication and engagement with residents, partners, staff and the media, aid reputation management and improve public perception.

The council wants to be regarded by its residents, peers and partners as ambitious for Thurrock and focused on meeting current and future aspirations.

The council aims to be open, ensure information is accessible, encourage public involvement in decision making and promote and protect the interests of Thurrock's residents.

The strategy aims to provide an overall focus for the council's communication activity.

Communication activity will be guided by three **principles**:

- Digital first
- Targeted messaging
- Brand promotion

The strategy is expected to enable the following **outcomes**:

- Well informed and engaged residents involved in decision making and shaping services
- Recognition and improved perception of the council and its services with residents, staff and partners as advocates
- Pride in Thurrock the place with national profile and recognition

Delivery

Communicating effectively and protecting the reputation of the council is the responsibility of all staff, councillors and those working on behalf of the council.

The Communications Team will provide a range of support and co-ordinate all council communication activity. The team provide advice, guidance and technical support to promote what the council is doing and to raise its profile, providing important information to residents and protecting the council's reputation.

All council communications will comply with relevant legal requirements and conform to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity, March 2011, which highlights factors to be considered when taking decisions on publicity (see:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1878324.pdf>). The principles of the code are that publicity by local authorities should:

- be lawful
- be cost effective
- be objective
- be even-handed
- be appropriate
- have regard to equality and diversity
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

This will be achieved by following the principles within this strategy and implementation of the actions below.

Delivery of the communication strategy will be underpinned by a media protocol providing a framework for engagement by the council with the local, regional and national media and other guidance to support both officers and members. It recognises the important role the media play in informing the public and in communicating with residents and other stakeholders on an increasingly digital and therefore constant basis.

The council will recognise organisations as 'media' who are a member of the Independent Press Standards Association (IPSO) or equivalent regulator and comply with the Editor's Code of Practice. Television and radio broadcasters, such as the BBC, are regulated by Ofcom. Any organisation which has membership of such a regulatory framework will be offered a place in the 'media area' for the benefit of reporting on council meetings. Other media organisations and reporters will be welcome to report from the public area.

Media liaison must be undertaken in a timely, consistent, professional, transparent and non-party-political manner. The Communications Team aims to provide an efficient and professional service to the media and treat all outlets fairly. In response, the council expects the media to report in an accurate and balanced way, including use of headlines. An agreed 'right of reply' is assumed in order to concurrently explain the council's position and protect its reputation as part of a media story.

Should a media outlet, or one of its journalists, fail to adhere to the regulator's Code and in particular not reflect the council's position accurately ensuring a 'right of reply', the council will not engage and recognise that organisation and/or journalist as 'media' for a period of time determined by the council.

The Communications Team will aim to respond to any non-critical media requests or enquiries within 24 hours. For critical issues enquiries will be dealt with out of hours where necessary, to protect the council's reputation, providing statements with the council's response to a particular issue.

Activity focused around the three principles is set out below:

Digital first

Digital communication is a growing area for the council as it is both 'always-on' and more cost effective - but also evolves very quickly.

Local and regional media organisations are an important channel for getting messages out to the public. 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.

The council is working in 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.

The council will have an increasingly active social media presence. It will embed the digital first principle by:

- Increasing sign up to Thurrock News
- Increasing engagement through social media – Twitter and Facebook
- Explore use of other social media including Instagram and Snapchat
- Increasing the use of video
- Continued focus on signposting residents to the website
- Training and guidance for officers and members
- Refreshed social media protocol and guidance

By developing our use of social media we are responding to a clear customer demand. A growing number of our residents use social media and expect to engage with us in this way – both in terms of service requests and general communications. Social media will continue to sign post residents to the council's website where additional information and advice will be hosted and services can be accessed or requests raised.

Targeted messaging

Key messages should be real and relevant for residents, reflecting the issues of most importance to them and in the context of the overall priorities for the council.

A consistent narrative and key messages with campaigns aligned to priorities will be achieved through:

- Key messages identified and imbedded in all communications
- All opportunities to communicate key messages are taken
- Repeated key messaging over a prolonged period

A limited number of targeted campaigns will be run at any one time, maximising the use of all communication channels and focusing resources on the areas of most importance.

The overall approach will be proactive – promoting the place to investors, visitors, business as well as residents, informing customers and partners of service changes, events and opportunities to get involved, and ensuring all critical day-to-day service messages, reminders and signposts are timely and effective. This will be planned in advance for both external and internal audiences within an overarching calendar of communication activity.

Work will commence as part of the review of the Engagement Strategy to establish local communication champions to support targeted communication in local areas with a view to improving perceptions of the council overall as well as better connected communities.

Approximately 80 per cent of the council's staff are Thurrock residents, and even more have friends and family who live within the borough. Work will take place to ensure that staff receive and understand these key messages as part of developing the approach to internal communications, enabling staff to champion the council and act as advocates.

The council will ensure as a principle that staff are informed of key issues directly, ahead of finding out through the media wherever possible.

Brand promotion

Work will continue to increase the profile of Thurrock both within the borough and to people and businesses looking at Thurrock as a place to live or do business.

There is a need to develop a clear and confident narrative for Thurrock the place, including opportunities for jobs and training; culture and heritage; investment and growth, alongside a strong and recognisable brand.

The narrative will involve using targeted messaging and communications channels for each of the audiences we want to appeal to – staff, residents, businesses, community and voluntary organisations, and investors.

As well as messaging, branding and signage will be explored in line with the future and aspirational public realm branding proposal agreed for detailed consideration as part of the capital programme. This builds on work the council has already done and will be progressed with partners, such as the Business Board and CVS, as a focus of the new strategy. This should also include consideration of the council's presence at strategic profile raising events such as MIPIM.

Evaluation

The Residents Survey will be used to evaluate the impact of this approach as it measures perceptions of both the council and its services as well as Thurrock the place. The 2016 survey results showed that 68% of Thurrock residents get information about their local area from the council including the website and social media but also from the local newspapers and via word of mouth. Despite this, 58% of residents think that the council keeps them well informed about services.

Implementing the approach to communications set out in this strategy is intended to enable better informed and engaged residents, as well as improved perceptions overall.

This is in addition to reviewing digital and social media engagement figures, and monitoring of media coverage across local, regional and national channels.

This strategy supports the delivery of the council's vision and priorities. It is underpinned by and sits alongside other key strategies and guidance including:

- Economic Growth Strategy
- Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Customer Services Strategy
- Connected Thurrock – Digital Strategy
- Media protocol
- Social media protocol and guidelines for officers and members
- Consultation and Engagement Strategy and Toolkit

March 2017