

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 all those who identify as being members of the press or media. Occasionally, there may be times when the number of media representatives attending a meeting is greater than the space allocated to the media in a Committee Room or the Council Chamber. Where this is the case, reasonable facilities will be put in place to ensure the media can report fully on the meeting and decisions taken, such as using seats in the public gallery.

The council expects media outlets to adhere to independent industry-led standards and codes, in the same way that the council follows the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (2011). In the exceptional circumstance where the council feels a media outlet has acted significantly and/or persistently against its own regulatory code, the council will seek redress by engaging directly with the outlet first, then through their own complaints procedure, followed by the independent regulator's appeal procedure should previous offers of resolution be insufficient.

Where a media outlet is not a member of a regulatory body and does not have a complaints procedure in place, should they act significantly and/or persistently against the relevant code, the council will continue to offer them the same access and opportunities as a member of the public as set out in the Constitution.

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.

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

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