

<b>4 September 2018</b>		<b>ITEM: 5</b>
<b>Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b>		
<b>Communications Strategy Update</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> No	
<b>Report of:</b> Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
<b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> N/A		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
<b>This report is public</b>		

## **Executive Summary**

The Communications Strategy agreed by Cabinet in October 2017, 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

This report outlines the progress which has been made on implementing the strategy, including increasing our engagement rates on social media by 89%, directly increasing the number of foster carer enquires by 60%, launching a new Instagram account and implementing the Transforming Thurrock regeneration and growth brand.

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

**1.1 The committee is asked to comment on the progress made on implementing the communications strategy.**

### **2. Introduction and Background**

**2.1** This report provides an update on the implementation of the Communications Strategy 2017-2020. This report has been produced at the request of a member of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It follows the update report of the Cabinet Member for Central Services to Full Council on 25 July 2018, and the Communications Strategy which was agreed by

Cabinet on 11 October 2017. The draft Communications Strategy was called in for discussion by Overview and Scrutiny at the meeting of 30 June 2017. Recommendations from this discussion were then included in the final version of the report which was approved by Cabinet.

- 2.2 A key element of the work to implement the strategy was a restructure of the communications team, which increased the team size from 8.6 FTE to 9.6 FTE. The majority of the recruitment to the newly created positions in the team took place between November 2017 and March 2018, with one vacant position still to be filled. The service works in a strategic, proactive and multi-disciplinary way across the areas of campaigns, digital communications, graphic design, media relations and internal communications.
- 2.3 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**

#### **3.1 Digital first**

Engaging with residents through digital channels is at the heart of modern local government communications. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) latest report on [Internet access and use in Great Britain](#) has shown that 78% of the UK population own a smartphone (up from 17% ten years ago) and 77% of people have a social media account. This demonstrates just how important it is that the council communicates with residents through channels that they are already using.

This work supports our Digital Strategy aims of providing better citizen journeys which enable our residents to interact with the council digitally for better and quicker outcomes, and using our digital channels to help to bring communities together. The Digital Strategy went to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 14 March 2017 and was agreed by Cabinet on 5 April 2017.

The council has long established Facebook and Twitter accounts, and has recently launched a new council Instagram account. The way in which the council is using social media has been transformed by increased use of video, by tailoring content to each channel and by improved sharing of relevant partner information.

A new online social media management tool is now being used, which brings together all council social media accounts in one place, meaning that the council can now cross share posts more easily and also have greater oversight of all social media in one place. The council currently has the following accounts:

<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Twitter</b>	<b>Instagram</b>	<b>LinkedIn</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thurrock Council</li> <li>• Coalhouse Fort Park</li> <li>• Love Grays</li> <li>• Thameside Theatre</li> <li>• Thurrock Business</li> <li>• Thurrock Fostering</li> <li>• Thurrock Museum</li> <li>• Young Thurrock</li> <li>• Thurrock Libraries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thurrock Council</li> <li>• Coalhouse Fort Park</li> <li>• Love Grays</li> <li>• Thameside Theatre</li> <li>• Thurrock Business</li> <li>• Thurrock Museum</li> <li>• Young Thurrock</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thurrock Council</li> <li>• Young Thurrock</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thurrock Council</li> </ul>

Since October 2017, Facebook followers have risen by 1,130 to 4,627. Some of the most successful posts have been those about waste collection dates for the Easter bank holiday which reached 10,179 residents, with 11 comments and 78 shares by local residents. A post on emergency roadworks on the A13 reached 229,194 people, while a post on the London Road gas works reached 13,987 residents, with 29 comments and 60 shares.

These results demonstrate the power of social media in reaching local people with important messages about key council services that they really care about. But it's not all about factual information messages – Facebook has also proved incredibly successful in engaging residents on issues as diverse as private fostering and cancer awareness. Video content has proved exceptionally impactful, attracting a high number of likes, comments and shares on both main platforms.

On Twitter, where we have 11,500 followers, there has been an 80% increase in retweets and an 87% increase in likes in July 2018 compared with October 2017, again with videos proving an effective tool to improve engagement rates as posts with videos have a 37% higher rate of likes and retweets.

Digital communications isn't just about social media - the council is soon to launch a new range of e-newsletters which will offer the people of Thurrock content relevant to their local area, not only from the council but also from partner organisations. The council is investigating the best ways to increase our use of e-newsletters and possible options for using text messaging, as well as working closely with representatives from local communities and partner organisations to share important information as widely as possible.

As part of Member's Induction after the elections in May 2018, training and guidance was on offer to all Members (both newly elected and already serving) which included advice and guidance on their own use of social

media, and a refreshed social media protocol for Officers and Members will be issued in the coming months.

Full live streaming of Full Council meetings via the council's YouTube channel was introduced from June 2018. This is a way in which the council is using digital communication to engage residents in local democracy, providing people with a way to virtually 'attend' the meeting and to follow the proceedings in real time.

While focusing on digital channels is important to provide both value for money and increased engagement with a wide range of residents, the council always makes sure to supplement digital communications with a range of other channels including posters, leaflets, face to face engagement and press releases to local and regional media. There is also support for online access available in community hubs and libraries.

### **3.2 Targeted messaging**

A key component of a successful communications strategy is the consistent use of agreed key messages. This needs to be part of the overall strategic approach to communications, which is campaign led and based on insight and subsequent evaluation.

The council has planned and implemented a number of key campaigns in the past months, all of which exceeded their SMART objectives. Some of the campaign materials can be viewed at Appendix 2.

#### **Fostering**

The council's fostering campaign was refreshed in March 2018 to focus more on digital channels, using highly targeted Facebook boosted posts in combination with some outdoor advertising in areas of high footfall. All web content was refreshed, and the new, more friendly and engaging tone being used on social media has led to 624 link clicks to the Thurrock Council Fostering web page and a total reach across posts of 228,598.

The revitalised campaign has led to an increase of enquiries by a huge 89% compared to June 2017, and since March has led to five new foster carers being fully approved, with seven more applications currently in progress.

Increasing the number of our in-house foster carers is not only better for our local children, but also saves the council approximately £400 per child, per week when they are placed with a council foster carer rather than with an independent fostering agency carer. This is just one example which demonstrates the impact that a successful communications campaign can have on the overall financial and business objectives of the council.

## **Discover Thurrock**

This campaign was all about promoting Thurrock as a wonderful place to visit during the summer, with something on offer for everyone to enjoy. Primarily focusing on digital channels, a series of social media posts were shared across Facebook, Twitter and the council's newly-launched Instagram account, reaching more than 2.4 million people and resulting in 3,200 click-throughs.

Away from digital channels, posters have also been displayed in libraries, children's centres, bus shelters, sports clubs and various other locations across the borough.

The campaign has so far resulted in almost 2,000 unique visits to the Discover Thurrock webpage, which sign-posted residents and visitors to a wide range of events and activities taking place across the borough, from well-known attractions such as Thurrock's two forts to smaller more hidden gems like Grays Beach Riverside Park.

## **#SpeakUpPlease**

A consultation on the future of our community hubs and libraries was launched on Monday 25 June. To support the consultation, a campaign was developed which encourages residents to 'speak up please' and have their say on how they could improve their local hub and library. This was another campaign which focused mainly on digital channels, with some additional posters, bookmarks and engagement sessions at each location to ensure that those who struggle with online interaction were also fully involved in the consultation. The hashtag #SpeakUpPlease was used on all posts and our Facebook and Twitter posts achieved a total reach 518,572, with 841 people clicking on links to take them to the survey. Results as of 17 August are that over 500 surveys have been completed since the consultation and accompanying campaign was launched. Three press releases have also been issued to accompany the campaign, which have been covered by all local media outlets.

### **3.3 Brand promotion**

The council's promotion of Thurrock revolves around the council's vision and priorities of people, place and prosperity. A new corporate narrative is under development, and all communications activity is linked to promoting Thurrock as an ambitious and collaborative community, proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.

The exciting regeneration agenda is a key element of continuing to build Thurrock's reputation as a place to work, live and do business. The council has developed and implemented a new Transforming Thurrock brand, which is being rolled out at all regeneration sites across the borough. The council has been working with regeneration specialists to promote investment

opportunities to developers in order to encourage positive growth in our borough, including supporting the production of a Thurrock Magazine aimed at this target audience. The council is closely involved in all communication activity relating to the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA).

As part of the Windrush 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in June, the council contributed to a special commemorative edition of The Voice magazine which was distributed to all 2,000 attendees at a memorial service in Westminster Abbey, which contained pages of content about Thurrock as a place to live and invest as well as celebrating our important heritage. The council also worked with the Port of Tilbury to promote a well-attended celebratory event which highlighted the importance of Thurrock on a national and international stage.

The council is continuing to working with partners from the NHS, CVS and Essex Police to ensure consistency of brand and messaging across all joint initiatives. To increase brand awareness of Thurrock as an innovative and forward thinking council, submission of entries for awards to the LGC and MJ local government annual awards continues on an annual basis, with consistent shortlisting success.

In more local level place branding, new 'Welcome to Thurrock' signs have been designed and will be installed at key entry points to the borough.

### **3.4 Media relations**

Local, regional and national journalism will always have an important role in helping to keep residents informed. The council work on both proactive media relations, such as issuing press releases and statements, and a reactive way responding to media enquiries. The council has a publically available dedicated email address and phone line for the media to get in touch directly with the communications team. There is an out of hours number on which an on-call member of the team can be called at any time with urgent enquiries. The stated aim within the communications strategy of responding to non-urgent media enquiries within 24 hours does not nullify the standard journalistic practice of setting a deadline when an enquiry has been submitted. Since March, there have been more than 220 media enquiries, 90% of which were from local media outlets and 10% from national media. 48% were responded to within 24 hours, with 83% responded to within three days.

The council has a policy of not commenting on individual cases or cases to do with individuals including staff, so there will be times when no comment is offered on an issue. This is standard practice across a wide range of public and private sector organisations. The council is working towards implementing a new online newsroom which will make it easier to host more visual and interactive content including videos and case studies, which will be available for journalists and residents alike.

### **3.5 Next Steps**

The council will continue to embed the new ways of working in line with the communications strategy, focusing on increasing digital engagement and encouraging behaviour change, for example through upcoming campaigns focusing on recycling, fly tipping and anti-social behaviour. The council's approach to communications will build on the progress so far by operating strategically, using insight and data to inform the work that is done and through working closely with local communities and partner organisations to build trust, engage with residents and deliver tangible positive outcomes.

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

- 4.1 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to comment on the progress made on implementing the communications strategy and to support the continuation of this work.

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

- 5.1 Consultation on the Communications Strategy 2017-20 which was agreed in October 2017 took place with the Communication Team, Directors Board, Portfolio Holder and Leader. In addition, input was received from the Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

### **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.

## 7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**  
**Deputy Head of Legal**

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: **Roxanne Scanlon**  
**Community Engagement and Project  
Monitoring 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.

## 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 Strategy 2017-20

## 9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1: Communication Strategy 2017-20
- Appendix 2: Examples of campaign material

### Report Author:

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