

RESOURCES AND SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14 MARCH 2022

REPORT OF DEPUTY LEADER, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR CORPORATE FINANCE & GOVERNANCE

A.3 TENDRING DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS

(Report prepared by Will Lodge)

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To examine the Council's Communications Strategy – using different media, utilising technology efficiently, and assessing the impact of communication.

INVITEES

- Cllr Carlo Guglielmi, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Resources, Tendring District Council
- Anastasia Simpson, Assistant Director (Partnerships), Tendring District Council
- Will Lodge, Communications Manager, Tendring District Council

BACKGROUND

While setting its work programme, the Resources and Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee asked to be provided with an update on delivery against the adopted Communications Strategy.

The Committee wishes to appreciate the underlying elements of the Council's communications approach and the opportunities for developing these to address the information needs of residents and service users.

The Committee also wishes to understand the approach towards key campaigns, reach and action, service user communications and marketing opportunities.

DETAILED INFORMATION

The below section provides the detailed information requested in advance by the Committee under its Work Programme.

Communications Strategy

Tendring District Council's Communications Strategy was adopted in April 2021 and sets out the strategic framework and principles which guide all of the Council's communications activity. It builds upon the development of communications already carried out following from the 2018 Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge of Tendring District Council, which included "improve how you tell the story of your ambition, plans, successes and positive impact" as one of its key recommendations.

While the Communications Team is responsible for overseeing the function, and will carry

out many of the operational communications the Committee may recognise, as an organisation there are many officers who carry out communications – whether explicitly, such as posting to social media for their service, or implicitly in conversations they have with our residents, businesses and visitors. Therefore a key role of the Communications Team – and the Strategy – is to advise, guide and promote best practice in communications across the Council.

Communications, like the rest of the Council, has a digital-first approach; but recognises that some in our society are digitally excluded, and therefore will need to be reached using other methods.

Communications also includes how we share information internally, with staff and Members, as well as externally to the wider public; and consideration of cascading information to all stakeholders in a timely manner forms a key principle when planning communications.

The Strategy adopted in 2021 set out a narrative of Council communications; the journey it had undertaken and the vision for the next three years, with the Strategy aligned to the Corporate Plan. The Corporate Plan, as throughout the Council, guides the priorities and objectives of communications.

Within that context, the Strategy set out five broad areas for improvement over its lifespan:

- Video content
- Project work
- Social media
- Email and SMS communications
- Internal communications

From these flowed some SMART targets, which are listed below along with progress achieved to date:

- By 2024 increase the number of videos created each year by 50% from the 2020 figure (50 – target of 75).
In 2021 the Council created a total of 49 videos, against the 2024 target of 75, ranging from internal staff vlogs to live streams of events. The Tendring District Council Communications Group has begun discussions on ways of increasing this number. NB This figure does not include live streams of committee meetings, which is around 65 additional videos.
- Ensure every initiative which goes through the Council's Projects Boards has a communications plan.
At the time of writing there were currently four projects progressing through the Boards, three of which had a communications plan or strategy associated with it. The fourth is not yet at an appropriate stage for a plan or strategy.
- Grow the number of Facebook followers on the Council's corporate account to 8,000 by 2024 (baseline of 5,300).
As of 4 January 2022 the Council had 7,659 followers, showing a steady trajectory towards the target.
- Increase the number of staff actively carrying out posts to the Council's corporate Facebook page by 300% by 2024 (baseline of 5).
Through 2021 we had 16 staff regularly posting; largely bolstered by the Community Ambassadors. Staff changes also slightly inflate the statistic. This figure should stabilise as we progress towards the target date.
- Present a business case for email communications software, and reinforce the Council's Branding Guidelines with regards to email content, by 2024.

Initial work considering Digital Transformation Phase 3 Projects has a proposal within it for an email communications software, so this is in train. A full, independent, business case may need to be worked up independently of this. Revised Branding Guidelines with renewed focus on email content issued to staff in January 2022.

- Work with the IT Team as part of its review of SMS (i.e. texting) communications software, scheduled for completion by January 2022.

An initial review meeting was held in May 2021, but due to pressures of Covid-19 and cyber security work this project has been put on hold temporarily.

- Review and improve the Council's Communications Group and the Intranet, refreshing both by the end of 2021.

Funding for new Intranet software is included within a finance report agreed by Cabinet in February 2022, so this is in train although delayed against the original target.

The Council's Communications Group has been reconvened and refreshed in 2021, with a revised membership and new Terms of Reference agreed.

Key campaigns

Communications campaigns are largely aligned with key projects or events, with the Communications team supporting work of other Council services.

An example of a larger campaign of this nature would be around the roll-out of the new waste and recycling service in 2019, which saw a programme of activity planned for and delivered from May 2019 until February 2020.

More recently Covid-19 has seen more general campaigns devised in alignment with the pandemic response.

An example of this would be the Summer Comms Campaign rolled out across summer 2021. Aligned to the organisation's summertime plan, it picked up key messaging around five themes:

1. Destination marketing and the Love Tending app
2. Water safety
3. Summer health
4. Covid-19
5. Anti-social behaviour (including littering, parking)

This was a multi-channel campaign, focused around a customer journey; the concept being to reach people before they set off for the area, on their journey, and at various touchpoints once they arrived at destinations across the district. Different messaging and imagery was used for local/nearby residents, to those who live out of area.

Out-of-area messaging was targeted at East London, Hertfordshire and Luton, with these areas selected as known points of origin for summer tourists.

Outputs included:

- Newspaper adverts in local press, titles in the target out-of-area locations, some magazines, and associated websites
- Digital adverts across a number of news websites, which appear on smartphones within designated locations
- Billboards, bus shelters and supermarket digital screens

- Posters on bin lorries, banners along the seafront, stickers on seafront summertime bins and roundabout signs
- Adverts on two local radio stations and geo-located digital radio
- Social media – both paid-for with advertising partners, and our own; including boosted posts.

As with any campaign there was also a reactive element, picking up and addressing issues as they arose combined with looking out for short notice opportunities to support the overall campaign objectives. For example, reports from Beach Patrol of a busy weekend and a specific incident around jumping from a groyne led to the issue of a press release to reinforce safety messages; or reinforcing the campaign messages within the responses to a media enquiries about parking issues in a seaside town and lifeboat call-outs.

The campaign was successful; large numbers of impressions (i.e. times adverts were put in front of people) raised the profile of the Essex Sunshine Coast out-of-area; relatively low numbers of issues were raised during the summer (though it should be noted there are a wide variety of factors at play here); and download figures of the LoveTending app matched communications activity. As a result there was a real positivity around the summer season despite the challenges posed by an increase in domestic holidays.

A summary of the evaluation can be found in the infographic at Appendix A.

Expenditure

Due to the way the function is structured corporately, the Communications service has a minimal annual budget (excluding staffing costs) to cover software licences and equipment such as cameras. The total budget for 2021 (including staffing) is £75,320, though this does not include spending on the communications drone.

This is because spending on communications activity is paid for by the specific service which requires it, with the activity recommended by the Communications Team. As much work as possible is carried out in-house to minimise costs, with the Communications Team expanding its skill set and capabilities to accommodate this.

Covid-19 has been the exception to this principle, where some specific communications activity has been undertaken to support the Council's wider response. This includes the Shop Local Shop Safe campaign (largely funded from the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund allocation), and the 2021 Summer Comms Campaign funded from general Covid-19 grant funding. The latter had an allocated budget of £90,000 (which included contingency), of which £77,058 was spent.

Spending has largely been on advertising space – such as billboards and bus shelters ('out of home'), print and online media, banners etc.

There has also been some expenditure on additional capacity to support the Communications team, with freelance help procured for the Shop Local Shop Safe initiative, and some funding provided for casual staff to assist with social media activity at peak times.

Analysis of reach, understanding and action

Evaluation is an important part of communications, and something the team has worked to develop over the past few years.

Each month a 'Communications Snapshot' (see example in Appendix B; and the 2021 overview at Appendix C) is created to take a high-level look at the effectiveness of various pieces of the team's work. This report is submitted each month to Management Team, and then shared with the Senior Managers' Forum.

As part of the ongoing development of monitoring and evaluation, the Communications Team is looking to record more on outcomes than outputs; there is always, however, a balance to be struck between using available resources to carry out the required work and evaluating that work.

Individual campaigns may have evaluation carried out on them depending on their scope and requirements; the Summer Comms Campaign did, for example, have a full evaluation report written which was presented to the Corporate Enforcement Group (a top-level of summary of which is captured above in the *Key Campaigns* section).

It can be difficult to evaluate the success of communications, particularly when it relates to information sharing, when there are a wide range of factors affecting behaviour. It may be easier to achieve if carrying out a behaviour change campaign, but again actions may be driven by a number of factors.

However, we can learn valuable lessons from the evaluation that we do conduct, such as around effectiveness frequency of social media posting; uptake of press releases; and which topics will organically reach large numbers of people, and which will require more input.

Service user communications

All Council services will carry out direct communications with their 'customers' to varying degrees. More formal, regular communications, may take the form of annual billing or letters.

Some services have a newsletter (mostly digital) for their direct service users; examples would be the Princes Theatre (weekly and monthly 'What's on' mail-outs, plus seasonal programmes), Economic Growth (a monthly business e-bulletin), council housing (quarterly) and Careline (twice-yearly newsletter to customers). It should be noted that the frequency of these publications has been less rigid during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These are not overseen by the Communications Team, as per the function and structure outlined above, but the team is available for support and guidance as required. Moving forward, if a new email communications software is introduced there may well be more centralisation of templates and structure of this function.

Regarding internal 'service users' there have been regular staff newsletters in the past – the corporate newsletter was paused during the pandemic as information was changing so rapidly, while a short-term 'by staff, for staff' newsletter was run by a team of staff volunteers. Members will also be aware of the regular email bulletins to them by the Chief Executive. A piece of work is currently underway to review and refresh internal communications.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the council's move to virtual and hybrid committee meetings the Communications Team began live streaming public meetings so that people could watch remotely; this has continued even with a return to physical meetings to maintain transparency and engagement, and for those who feel uncomfortable returning to public venues. Figures vary meeting to meeting but viewers have peaked at 32 at any one

time for Planning Committee, and we average around 16 viewers across meetings.

The live stream response was created in-house and at short notice due to the pressures of the pandemic and been maintained pending development of a more formal solution – with the skills, technology and learning being used for other live streams outside of committee meetings.

Marketing

Marketing is largely undertaken by those services with a more commercial focus or approach, such as the Princes Theatre, Leisure Centres, and the Tourism Team to promote events such as the Clacton Airshow.

The Communications Team provides some support and advice if required, and has stepped into this arena to some degree during the pandemic with less conventional marketing of things such as the LoveTendring app, and a place marketing element to the Summer Comms Campaign. Communications also acts as a central, corporate point to ensure messaging is both joined up, and cross-pollination opportunities maximised.

A Digital Marketing Apprenticeship post began in the Communications Team at the beginning of this calendar year which, it is hoped, will strengthen the wider team's knowledge and capabilities in this area.

To support content creation the Communications Team operates a small drone, enabling it collect aerial images and video of various council projects and at events, and the use of this is under continual development to identify suitable opportunities for its deployment.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee determines whether it has any comments or recommendations it wishes to put forward the relevant Portfolio Holder or Cabinet.