

East Herts Council Report

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 2 November 2021

Report by: Councillor George Cutting – Executive Member for Corporate Services

Report title: Communications Update

Ward(s) affected: All

Summary – This report provides an update on the council’s corporate communications activities, including recent highlights, performance monitoring, challenges and work underway to develop a new strategy and plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

a) That contents be noted.

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 N/A

2.0 Background

2.1 The Communications team is responsible for managing the council’s reputation, on and offline. It works closely with Executive Members and service teams to ensure our communications with residents, businesses, and other stakeholders, supports the delivery of council priorities.

2.2 A new Digital Content Manager and Communications and Digital Media Manager are in post to help develop and deliver a

new communications strategy and plan, supporting the aspirations set out in the refreshed corporate plan. The work on this is well underway and will report to Leadership Team and Executive later this month.

- 2.3 The council takes a proactive approach to communications, aiming to maximise engagement on council achievements/priorities via a range of channels, including the local press, social media and digital platforms. Since April, the team has been down a full time post whilst a new Communications and Digital Media Manager was recruited. This presented challenges during Q1 and Q2 in resourcing all requests. As such, requests were prioritised according to impact on reputation and/or meeting corporate objectives.
- 2.4 The following sets out recent highlights, themed by corporate priority:

Sustainability at the heart of everything we do

- Delivered an anti-idling campaign for Clean Air Day 2021.
- Launched a campaign to help reduce food waste during Food Waste Action Week 2021.

Enabling Communities

- Supported the successful delivery of major capital projects, including the redevelopment of Hartham play area and the launch of Grange Paddocks Leisure Centre.

Encouraging Economic Growth

- Delivered a 'welcome back' promotional campaign to encourage people into our town centres.
- Continued to raise awareness and increase uptake of funding/grant schemes with our local business communities.

Digital by Design

- Created six new web forms to allow residents to quickly and easily report issues to us online 24/7.
- Rolled out accessibility training to key council staff to ensure our content can be accessed by as many people as possible - including residents with disabilities, slow network connections, or through mobile devices.

2.5 The council's communications team offers a responsive press office service, providing accurate, timely and useful information to the media, whilst also advising on contextual issues and reputation management to senior officers. The general downward trend in enquiries from journalists continues, with the team responding to two/three enquiries per week. Planning continues to be the source of most media interest, followed by housing and operations.

2.6 The most significant issues in terms of reputational impacts were ongoing critical coverage of the amended plans for the Old River Lane Scheme in Bishop's Stortford, and the legal costs paid as part of the review into a planning enforcement case and subsequent Action on Planning campaign.

2.7 Expanding the reach and engagement through our digital channels is a key priority for the team. Progress towards this is reported corporately each quarter, alongside the press favourability score (see Appendix A and B). Follower count across all digital channels is at over 24,000, with some posts on our Facebook page reaching 50,000 people or more. The potential to grow this further, however, must be harnessed and

an approach to achieving this will be set out in the new communications strategy.

- 2.8 To ensure the communications team is capturing all opportunities, is maximising those opportunities, as well as preparing as fully as possible to manage reputational impacts, the team is developing a more robust approach to forward planning to be agreed by Heads of Service / Executive as part of the new strategy.
- 2.9 Web development work focuses on ensuring the website meets the needs of the customer, offering them what they need, when they need it, and in the right form. This aims to reduce the time and costs involved in managing customers who are driven to contact us via other channels because they cannot find what they need.
- 3.0 In a bid to improve our content further, we have a new online system, Silktide that checks our website and intranet for errors. It checks for everything from spelling to readability and the accessibility of content. Alongside this, the team monitors feedback received via the Govmetrics widget placed on website service pages. Action can be taken efficiently to solve the issue or query, to avoid ongoing negative feedback. Reports are available every three months to capture the data, broken down by service area.
- 3.1 The communications team reports our website accessibility score quarterly. This follows the introduction of the WCAG 2.1 Regulations in 2018, which places new responsibilities on the public sector to make digital services, websites and apps accessible to everyone, including users with impairments. Our current score is 82%, which is considered 'good' by industry comparison.

- 3.2 Whilst we have worked hard to ensure our website is as accessible as possible, we recognise that some parts of our site are not yet fully accessible. We have monitoring in place to review the accessibility of the site on an ongoing basis. We use this monitoring to identify and fix any new issues that arise.
- 3.3 The team also manage the council's intranet to provide the information colleagues need to carry out their work, encourage collaboration and support consistent messaging around key corporate projects, including our Transforming East Herts agenda.

3.0 Reason(s)

None

4.0 Options

None

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 The Communications team keeps abreast of reputational radar issues through monthly meetings with Heads of Service.
- 5.2 Two full time officers work on day-to-day communications. This is half the national average for district communications teams at four FTEs, presenting a risk to the team's resilience. A set of core skills are being developed within the wider team to build and maintain better resilience.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

Community Safety

No

Data Protection

The council's corporate communication channels are managed in line with the council's data protection policy, including compliance with GDPR regulations.

Equalities

The communications team supports the principles and actions set out in the council's 'East and Equal' Equality, Diversity and Exclusion Strategy.

The team works to make content accessible for all, as set out in 3.1, and strives to champion the importance of Plain English and representation of different protected groups wherever possible.

Environmental Sustainability

The Communications and Digital Media Manager and Digital Content Manager sit on the council's Environmental Sustainability Steering Group and represent East Herts at the countywide Climate Change Communications group.

Financial

No

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

No

Human Rights

No

Legal

The council works within the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The Code is based around seven principles to ensure that all communications activity:

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

Specific Wards

No

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 Appendices:

Appendix A – Quarterly report figures Q1 Apr-Jun 2021

Appendix B – Quarterly report figures Q2 Jul-Sep 2021

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