

## **East Herts Council Report**

### **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Date of Meeting:** 8 November 20

**Report by:** Councillor George Cutting, Executive Member for Corporate Services

**Report title:** Corporate Plan Progress – Digital Communications

**Ward(s) affected:** All

### **Summary**

- Overview and Scrutiny review progress against various elements of the East Herts Corporate Plan (East Herts: A Place to Grow) and the four “SEED” priorities. For November 2022, Committee Members had expressed an interest in looking more in depth at the “Enabling Communities” theme, specifically with regards to the objective of “growing our digital communication channels”. This paper updates Committee Members on progress within this objective as well as updating on the digital uptake of services more generally.

### **RECOMMENDATION FOR Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

- (A)** Committee Members consider the report and recommend any actions / considerations to the Executive with regards to digital communications

#### **1.0 Proposal(s)**

1.1 N/A

## 2.0 Background

### Digital Communications

- 2.1 The main objective with regards to growing our digital communications channels relates to our email marketing and social media platforms, specifically Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and our resident newsletter, Network. 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**).
- 2.2 Twitter is used as a resident information platform but tends to be news / interest driven and best for partner and business engagement. It is also our channel with the highest follower count. We have grown the number of followers from 11,494 in September 2021 to 11,988 in September 2022, a growth rate of just over 4% (figure 1).

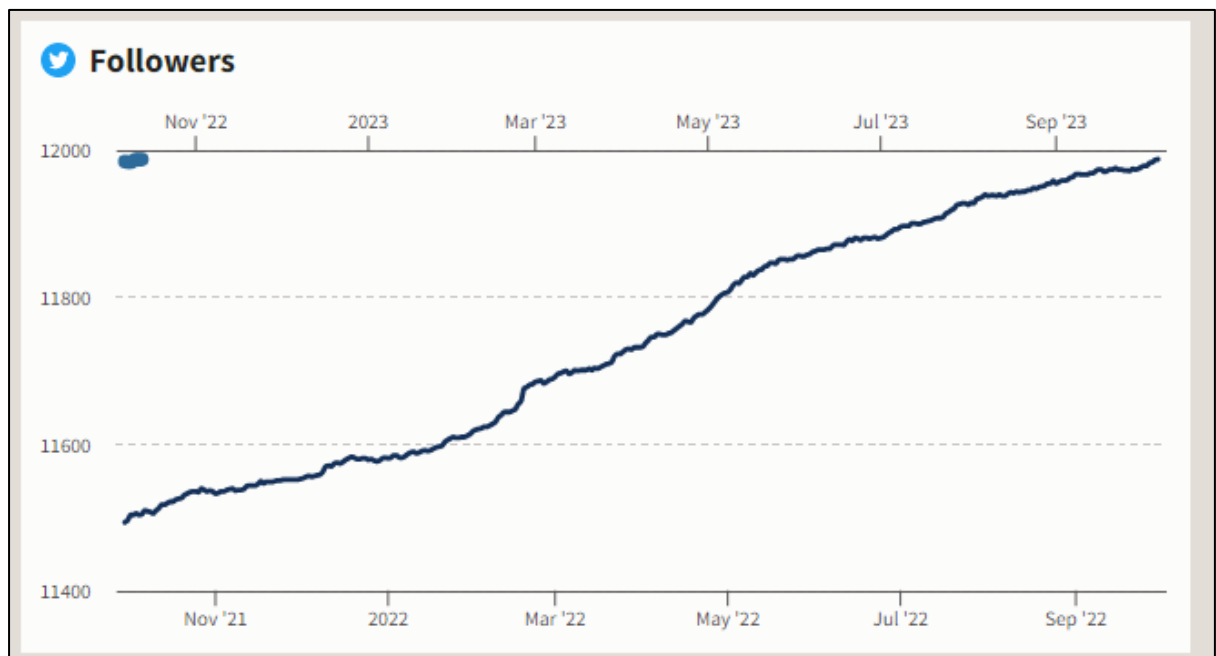


Figure 1

Industry comparison data is not available, but anecdotally this reflects the experience of most councils who are seeing a steady increase in Twitter following but at a slower rate than other channels. This is linked to Twitter's overall slower growth rate compared with emerging channels like TikTok and YouTube.

- 2.3 Facebook is a resident focused channel, where we are also seeing our highest growth rates. Follower count has increased from 5,568 in September 2021 to 6,529 in September 2022, a growth rate of 18% (figure 2).

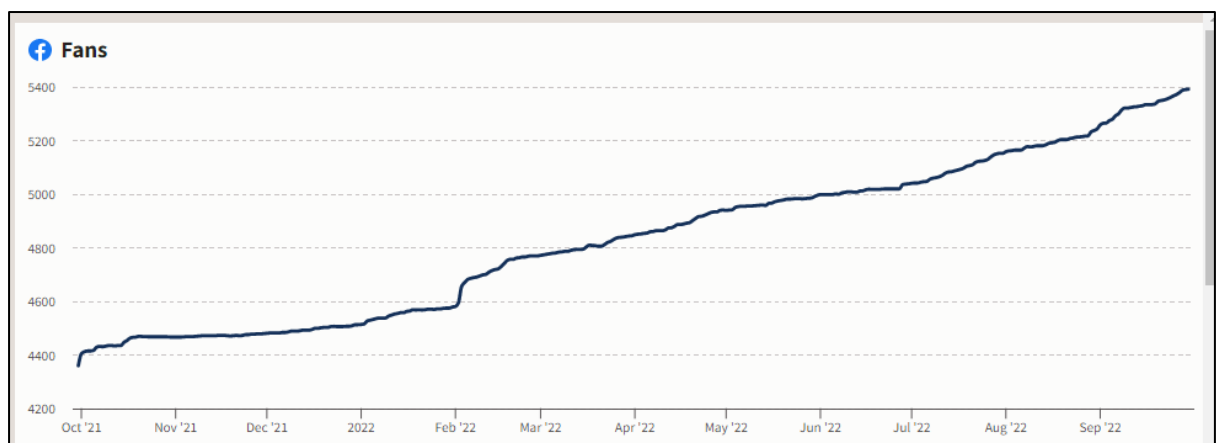


Figure 2

Again, industry comparisons are hard to come by, but this puts us fifth in Hertfordshire for follower count, which is a good result considering the resources available for social media management in the team.

- 2.4 Instagram is an image-led platform. It does not allow content links in posts, which, depending on the nature of the story, does not always lend itself to our content. That said, 'stories' is an increasingly popular feature, which you can cross-populate with Facebook, and our follower count has grown from 2,444 in September 2021 to 2,650 in September 2023. The team has made a concerted effort to build a library of high-quality local

photographs so that we can improve our Instagram content and presence.

- 2.5 LinkedIn is used predominantly for business focused content, staff engagement and job post sharing. We advertised through LinkedIn for the first time this year and saw good levels of reach and engagement. It has grown from 1,495 connections in September 2021 to 1,845 in September 2022.
- 2.6 Email marketing is done through Mailchimp and is an 'opt-in' weekly newsletter called Network, which residents subscribe to through our website. We have grown subscribers by 13% this year, from 3,647 to 4,112 (figure 3). Whilst we have an above average open rate of 60% (compared to the industry average of 40%), there is potential to significantly boost subscriber numbers. The team is currently working to refresh the newsletter's look and feel and continually evaluates the top performing content to ensure we tailor stories to better engage our readers.

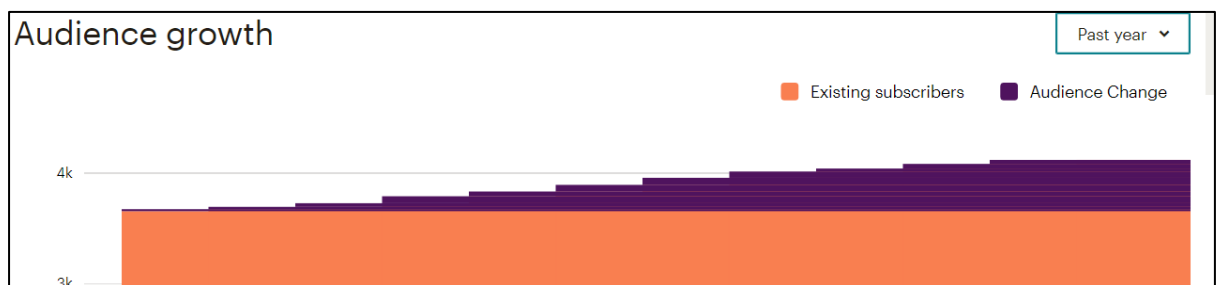


Figure 3

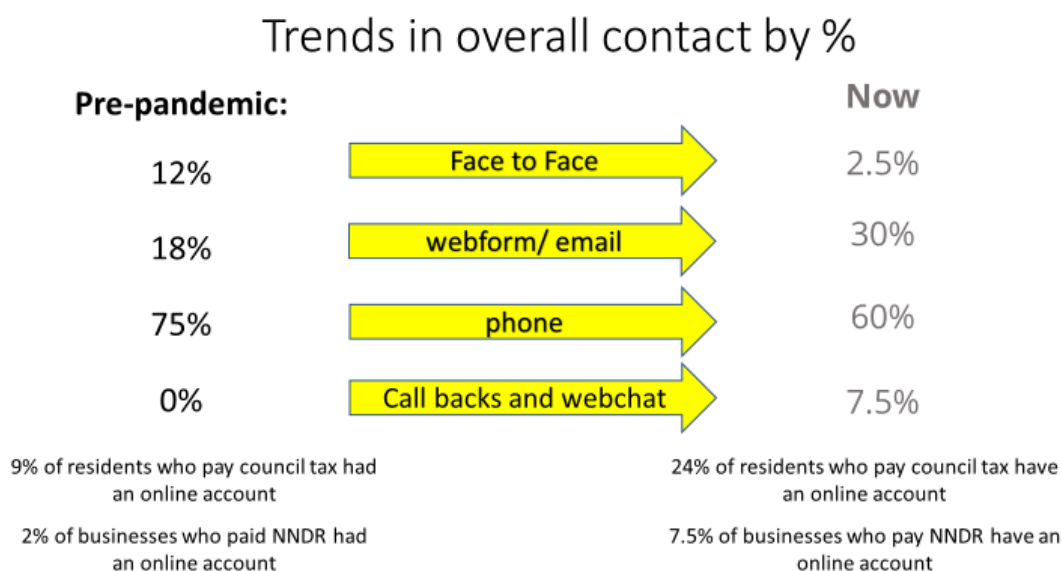
- 2.7 To conclude, we are continuing to drive growth across all our digital communication channels, albeit at different rates. Our current strategy has significantly boosted Facebook channel growth and subsequent page views to the website, which we have seen double compared to last year.

2.8 A key question for the future is whether we need to explore additional / different channels as YouTube and TikTok continue to increase in popularity, especially with younger audiences. This is likely to be tested on a campaign basis depending on the target audience.

Digital take up of services

2.9 On the 12 July 2022, Executive approved the [Transforming East Herts Business Case](#) which recognises the need to promote more digital take up of services in order to modernise delivery and achieve efficiency savings.

2.9 Digital take up of services has accelerated as a result of Covid and this has been a general trend seen globally. Looking across our four main contact channels there has been a noticeable shift in behaviours since 2019/20 (pre-pandemic) and now (first two quarters of 2022/23):



2.10 Telephony remains the contact channel of choice for most of our residents however this has dropped from around three out of every four contacts to three out of every five contacts in

the last two years. Similarly, face to face contacts have dropped by around 10%. In 2019/20 we saw around 12,000 visits to our offices. For the first six months of this year the number of visitors has been 1771 (it should be noted of course that some of this behaviour has been driven by the limited opening hours of reception as well as Covid induced behaviour change).

- 2.11 Contacts over the website and email have increased as a proportion of contacts and interestingly the “call back” option for residents is proving increasingly popular.
- 2.12 There has been a strong uptake in the percentage of residents who now have an online council tax account. The 15% increase equates to around an extra 9000 households signing up. The trend has not been as strong for business owners who pay business rates with an increase of just over 5% (around 250 businesses). Interestingly this is in stark contrast to the percentage of businesses that accesses Covid support grants via digital means which was 100%. This is a clear illustration that most businesses have the capability of engaging digitally when the incentive is there to do so.
- 2.14 As part of the Transforming East Herts programme we will be continuing to nudge customers towards digital engagement and take up of services. A useful benchmark is the level of residents who signed up online for green waste services (92.5%). Whilst not perhaps representing a cross-section of all those who live in East Herts, it is clear that there is potential for many more residents to contact us via digital means.

### Digital Exclusion

- 2.15 Committee Members discussed the topic of digital exclusion on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2022, with input from two external speakers. A recommendation was then made regarding the need to

ensure that any digital transformation programme also supports vulnerable individuals who may not have access to or be comfortable with using web based services.

2.16 The business case approved by Executive in July recognised this need, highlighting the logic of maximising self-service for those who can so that officers can focus on complex cases.

2.17 The council still offers a face to face service for those who require assisted support. Examples include:

- A number of residents who visited council offices over August and September who don't pay their council tax by direct debit and needed assistance with accessing the £150 rebate
- Visits by people who are at immediate risk of being homeless or at risk in the near future. Where the risk is immediate an assessment will be arranged as soon as possible. Where the risk is in the near future a call back will be arranged
- Residents needing parking vouchers for permit zones. Although vouchers can be purchased on line through the permit smart system, some residents prefer the flexibility of the hard copy version as they can be used hourly/ daily and for different vehicles. This flexibility is not available in the online system and works much better for residents that have, for example, different carers visiting them.

2.18 There are currently no plans under the Transformation programme to withdraw face to face services.

### **3.0 Reason(s)**

3.1 N/A

## **3.2 Options**

4.1 N/A

## **5.0 Risks**

5.1 N/A

## **6.0 Implications/Consultations**

6.1 N/A

### **Community Safety**

No

### **Data Protection**

No

### **Equalities**

Yes – digital exclusion is covered in the report in terms of the Council's approach

### **Environmental Sustainability**

No

### **Financial**

No

### **Health and Safety**

No

### **Human Resources**

No

### **Human Rights**

No



## **Legal**

No

## **Specific Wards**

No

### **7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material**

7.1 **Appendix A:** Quarterly Communications Report

7.2 **Appendix B:** Quarterly performance monitoring

### **Contact Member**

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