

CORPORATE AFFAIRS AND LOCAL ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 19 JANUARY 2023

PORTFOLIO: LEADER

COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITY

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 That the panel note this update report.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 At the November 2022 meeting the panel requested an update report on communications activity, "*The Portfolio Holder confirmed a report would be forthcoming to the Panel in January, providing a six monthly update on communications activities, following additional investment in this area as agreed in the 22/23 budget.*"
- 2.2 This report covers the resource in the corporate communications team, and highlights the work that has been undertaken in the past six months. This includes work with the media, social media activity, and longer term projects the team support.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Two communications assistants were recruited in July 2022. This followed a period of having one post vacant for an extended time, and the desire to meet the recommendations in a review of communications at New Forest District Council (NFDC) by the Local Government Association to align communications activity more closely with strategic aims of the council.
- 3.2 The corporate communications resource is now four full time equivalents – a communications manager, a senior officer, and two assistants. In the corporate team there is also a graphic designer, and an officer responsible for website content.
- 3.3 The Council is preparing for the next four years, including a new cohort of councillors, a new corporate plan, a transformation project, and a host of projects and reviews. This, amongst the context of business as usual service activity, and national issues that NFDC has a role in. Moving to a more proactive and planned communications approach will provide support that will contribute to the success of these projects, and provide much needed information for residents and other stakeholders.

4. COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITY HIGHLIGHTS

- 4.1 The communications team manages the majority of all corporate external communication, including media relations and digital channels. See section 4.2 for details. More recently they have focused on implementing a new strategic communications approach, which aims to improve the council's engagement with its stakeholders and the wider community. Key activity over the last six months (July to mid-December) included:
- i. Supporting a range of public consultations, which will provide valuable insights into the community's needs and priorities.
 - ii. Developing and distributing regular e-newsletters, which have helped to keep stakeholders informed about council news and events.

- iii. Media training with service managers and the executive management team.
- iv. Optimisations and accessibility review of website.
- v. Providing support to other council teams on media relations and communications activities.

4.2 For the 6 month period (July to mid-December 2023), the following notable activity took place:

- i. Completed 487 communications requests from service officers, generated from the communications request form, email requests, and proactive work
- ii. 36 media releases issued
- iii. Completed the annual residents email survey in which residents scored the emails out of 10 for usefulness (9.27), easy to understand (9.46), and containing relevant information (9.35). All 3 of these ratings have improved since the 2021 survey. Comments received were overwhelmingly positive (83%) with 13% being neutral and only 4% negative
- iv. 248 additional residents email subscribers meaning that 8.44% of residents now receive our emails
- v. 15 residents emails sent
- vi. 33 communications emails to staff issued
- vii. Posted on Facebook 234 times, posts seen by 116,793 people
- viii. Cost of living campaign research and created, in support of officer working group. This is an ongoing topic and has included warm spaces, insulation advice, energy saving advice, and financial support information
- ix. Awarded first place at New Forest Show for NFDC's stand
- x. Communications support to key projects both internally and externally, including:
 - Care for the Forest campaign (with partners) including recreation mitigation actions and Operation Mountie speed reduction project
 - A communications plan underway for electoral changes, including voter ID and boundary changes
 - Community safety messaging, including domestic abuse support signposting
 - A communications plan underway for the proposed Public Space Protection Orders, including the current consultation phase
 - Support to the resident insight survey project, ongoing
 - Amplification of messaging for the Solent Freeport, and the Christchurch Bay coastal strategy engagement phases
 - Messaging to support the Youth Hub project led by economic development team and the investment strategy, including the Platinum Jubilee Business Park
 - Comprehensive and successful response to incidents, including Operation London Bridge, weather incidents, and ICT and outage related incidents.
 - Proactive and reactive activity for Cabinet and Council meetings

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Effective communication is crucial for the success of a district council. It ensures that information is accurately conveyed and understood, helps build trust and transparency with the community, supports behaviour change, and enables the council to make informed decisions. Without effective communication to convey important details and implications to the community, there may be misunderstanding, reduced access to services, and potential resistance to change. Communications also supports the wider role of the council within the community and supports democratic engagement, for example through supporting the elections process.

- 5.2 In addition to the activity outlined in this report, a strategic approach is being put in place focusing on key campaigns that align with council priorities and support outcomes. For example, cost of living, safe communities and clean streets are key themes.
- 5.3 Early results from the resident insight survey show that two thirds of our residents feel informed about the services and benefits NFDC provides. This is 7% above the national average. Whilst this is welcome news for our communications work, for other image measures, there is at least one-fifth of respondents commenting “neither” or “don’t know” which shows there is an awareness gap that communications activity could help address.
- 5.4 The wider themes from the survey feedback indicate areas of focus for our residents which will be reflected in a more strategic communications approach and the survey results will be used in detail to inform communications activity.
- 5.5 The communications team will continue to focus on enhancing the council's reputation and engagement with stakeholders.

6. FINANCIAL, CRIME AND DISORDER, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS, EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY, DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None arising from this report

Background papers: None

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