

Communications activity report

Cllr Liz Little, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services & Customer Services, Revenues and Benefits

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Key Decision? NO

Local Ward Members None – not geographically specific



**Strategic (O&S)
Committee**

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The committee have requested an opportunity to review three main areas of the council's communication activity:
- Our approach to media relations and the policies and procedures we have in place to ensure consistency and responsiveness of our activities with the press.
 - General council communications, including the costs, reach and editorial approach used by our corporate communications team in managing our websites, social media and LDC News.
 - Our approach to designing and distributing service specific marketing materials and publications, including the cost of key publications and their impact.
- 1.2 The council corporate communication's function oversees the development and delivery of internal and external communication activities. They take a lead in all media management, the council's website and main social media accounts. They provide training, advice and support for all other service specific communications and marketing activity, including the design of key documents, however the control of these documents and specific activities ultimately remains the responsibility of the relevant Head of Service.
- 1.3 The corporate team employs 4 members of staff, which includes a full-time web manager, full-time graphic designer and part-time PR and media officer, managed by the corporate communications and performance manager amongst their other duties (total team 3.5 FTE).
- 1.4 The team has a moderate supplies and service budget of £30k which includes £14,600 contract costs associated with our website and intranet, and £9,480 to design, print and distribute LDC news.
- 1.5 The corporate communications and performance manager also manages the corporate print contract, currently delivered by Walsall MBC which covers all corporate publications, meeting agenda packs and corporate stationary such as letterheads and pre-addressed envelopes.
- 1.6 The print contract has a £21,700 budget for 2018/19, which is likely to be underspent by around £4,500 if current use continues, as traditional print requirements reduce and email use increases. An additional £26,000 is spent from other service budgets on specific publications via the print contract.
- 1.7 In order that publicity is well coordinated, legal and cost effective, it is necessary to have a media protocol in place. Our media and social media policy (www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/mediapolicy) is designed to provide councillors and officers with clear guidance to follow when dealing with the media and includes specific guidance on Purdah.

1.8 The communications team also manages the overarching communications activity for the council via:

Tool	Cost	Detail	Reach
External			
Council website www.lichfielddc.gov.uk	£13,400 per annum, plus any one-off developments, plus officer time	4* SOCITM rated website. Managed in line with content guidelines.	2018 visits: 458,897 2018 unique visitors: 266,177
Facebook	Officer time	An interactive Facebook page, 94% customer response rate.	1,723 followers (wider reach with re-posts)
Twitter	Officer time	A busy twitter feed, with over 8,000 followers, 3,500 likes and over 9,000 tweets. Set up in 2008.	8,150 approx. followers averaging 50k a month reach
LDC News	Up to £8,000 plus officer time (£4,000 per edition including distribution to 28,000 households)	Bi-annual council newsletter that carries key council stories and updates, including councillor promotion post-election, and Your View consultations.	Delivered to approximately 50% of local households and available online.
Headlines – members and partners	Officer time	Council e-news sent to all members and key partners, including county council, housing and tourism partners etc.	All members and approx. 60 partners.
Various websites including Active Lichfield, Lichfield Historic Parks, Southern Staffordshire Building Control, Lichfield Proms, Birmingham Road	Officer time, plus limited artwork costs and hosting/ maintenance costs (Active Lichfield only). Any external development costs are funded by the commissioning teams.	The team develops, supports and content manages a range of sister websites.	Various visitor numbers.
Various publications (newsletters, leaflets, banners, adverts) including annual recycling calendars, Historic Parks, Lichfield Proms, HMO posters and strategy	Officer time, plus limited artwork costs. Any external artwork costs are funded by the commissioning teams.	The team produces a range of literature – from regular newsletters through to information leaflets, enforcement cards and calling cards, and supports commercial activities such as the drive-in movies	Various audiences, detailed in comms plans specific to the service, event or project.
Internal			
Team LDC – internal staff newsletter	Officer time	Monthly staff newsletter that highlights key information and staff news	All staff
Key messages from Leadership Team	Officer time	Regular update from Leadership Team on key messages for staff.	All staff
Brian – the council's intranet	Officer time, plus support costs (approx. £7,000, depending on issues/support required)	Internal staff web platform/intranet that contains policies, guidance and information for all staff to support their daily work	All staff
Staff group emails	Officer time	Sporadic updates on key issues that affect staff – from pay negotiations through to health and safety information.	All staff

- 1.9 The team supports a wide range of service specific promotions and marketing for individual teams and projects and is positioned to support the council's commercial ambitions – from promoting the council's garden waste service through marketing the council's shared building control service and the annual tourism marketing publications.
- 1.10 Service specific marketing is developed in partnership with service areas and governed through contact reports that set out the objectives, actions and milestones and also allow for evaluation. The style and tone of communications/marketing are governed by some overarching principles set by the communications team, including the council's Plain English guide (www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/plainenglish) and corporate style guide (www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/styleguide).
- 1.11 Corporate templates have been developed for general leaflets and promotions to reduce costs, and uphold the council's corporate identity.
- 1.12 The committee also requested details on the promotion of parks, festivals and events, tourism and waste. To assist in this an analysis of print spend has been undertaken of the services who produce high value publications.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that the committee:

- 2.1 Notes the contents of the report.

3. Background

Media approach

- 3.1 The objectives of council's media approach are to:
- Improve people's understanding of the work of the council, the services it provides and how to access them.
 - Support the council's strategic objectives.
 - Defend the council from inaccurate or misleading information.
 - Protect and enhance the council's reputation as a provider of quality services and as a good employer.
- 3.2 The communications team achieves this by:
- Creating and maintaining positive relationships with local, regional and trade press.
 - Issuing media releases and responding to media enquiries with openness, consistency, responsiveness, accuracy, accessibility and legality.
 - Promoting the decisions of the council in a way that people understand.
 - Delivering a coordinated approach to the media and linking it with wider communications activity.
 - Using media enquiries as a way to drive service improvements where appropriate.
 - Developing strong relationships across services and with councillors to ensure a constant flow of information to the media.
 - Working with officers and members to develop media awareness.
 - Being clear about legal frameworks and clearly explaining roles and responsibilities.
 - Responding robustly to inaccurate reporting in the media.
- 3.3 All media statements and releases are expected to comply with the Plain English guide. This is to ensure that they are easy for people to understand and have a consistent approach. Communications officers always:
- Use plain language and cut out jargon.
 - Ensure any technical terms, or acronyms are explained simply.
 - Check work for factual accuracy, spelling and grammar.
 - Check the statement is correct and in accordance with legislation.
 - Seek advice from management/monitoring officer when dealing with controversial or legal matters.

- 3.4 Approval of press releases is carried out in accordance with the council's media and social media policy (www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/mediapolicy). In 2016/17 133 press releases were issued, in 2017/18 this increased to 148. Press statements are issued in response to media enquiries. In 2016/17 26 statements were issued, in 2017/18 there were 28.
- 3.5 During Purdah the activities of those individuals directly involved in the elections, particularly in relation to council-led publicity, communications and use of council resources are restricted. Any councillor directly involved in an election as a candidate, an election agent, canvasser, or in any other role is subject to restrictions on their usual role in council communications.

Council website and digital support

- 3.6 A key element of our communication activity is the council website, www.lichfielddc.gov.uk which has been rated consistently as four star by Better Connected for the last three years. That means we're in the **top 4% of shire districts/boroughs** nationwide, and the **top 9% of local government websites overall**. Only 39 out of 414 council websites were awarded a four star rating, and of these, only seven others were district or borough councils. 44% of local government websites were found to provide an overall bad user experience.
- 3.7 We have the highest performing council website in Staffordshire (joint with SCC), and one of only four councils in the West Midlands region to achieve the full four stars – **we are the only district/borough council in the region to achieve four stars**. The development and use of our website provides a vital foundation for our digital and channel shift ambitions.
- 3.8 We aim for all content on the website is written in plain English and the overall design of the site is created to ensure it will reproduce clearly on mobile devices and work effectively with assistive technologies, such as screen readers for sight impaired customers, in line with the council's content guidelines (www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/contentguidelines) We also limit the use of attachments and pdf documents which are designed for print, as these do not make for a great user experience. Similarly, we restrict the use of pictures to improve search and accessibility of our site.
- 3.9 The team develops and manages a portfolio of specialist council websites including www.southernstaffs-buildingcontrol.co.uk, www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/lichfieldproms, www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/spending, www.lichfieldhistoricparks.co.uk, www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/councillorwelcomepack and www.activelichfield.co.uk and www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/chairmansblog
- 3.10 The team also provides a range of digital services and project support – from leading the procurement of the council's new CRM system, through to project managing the launch of the technology to support the garden waste charging scheme. The team also tests and streamlines all online processes to ensure they are usable and the customer journey is positive. This work helped to ensure that over 75% of all garden waste sales have been carried out online, reducing the impact on the council's telephone lines/Lichfield Connects. This approach is also helping to increase the number of self-serve customers and underpins the work of the Fit for the Future programme.

Social media

- 3.11 The communications team operates a twitter account for Lichfield District Council (@Lichfield_DC) which has around 8,140 followers with an average reach of 50k a month. The twitter feed is used at least daily to promote key council services and announcements and re-tweets relevant content. Tweets often include images and artwork created as part of Twitter campaigns – for example, 'Save time, get online'.
- 3.12 Our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/lichfielddc>) has 1,723 likes that allow our posts to appear in newsfeeds for Facebook users and are regularly re-posted with thousand more seeing content.

- 3.13 The team does not currently pay for any advertising on Twitter and Facebook, however this has been trialled in the leisure service (with communications support) for specific events/recruitment and may be rolled out further if proven successful following evaluation.
- 3.14 The team spends time responding to customer tweets and Facebook posts to ensure residents are appropriately and helpfully responded to. Whilst the sites are free to access and use, they do use officer time in developing the posts and tweets, scheduling and dealing with responses. Due to the nature of the medium, users expect instant responses and use these channels to raise complaints and service requests.
- 3.15 The team is working with the HR service to look at the potential use of LinkedIn and Glassdoor to support recruitment and potentially lower costs.
- 3.16 The team regularly monitors and considers other forms of social media, which it may adopt depending on customer demand and market analysis.

LDC News and launch of council emailer

- 3.17 The communications team issues a bi-annual newsletter to residents called LDC News. The costs are just under £4,000 per issue including print and distribution.
- 3.18 LDC News is issued inside the Lichfield Mercury, which is a low cost method however the distribution of the publication has dropped significantly as the Mercury has cut back on its own distribution.
- 3.19 In the past we have used a variety of more costly distribution methods, including SOLUS and direct door drops with distribution companies. These often resulted in over delivery to areas outside our district (resulting in complaints), and numerous complaints about hundreds of copies being dumped in skips/hedges etc. 100% coverage is not necessarily achievable for a reasonable cost, and the team do their best to balance cost/distribution.
- 3.20 Currently 28,000 copies are issued, which includes 21,500 copies via the Lichfield Mercury and a 7,500 via SOLUS. The team recognises the publication is not inclusive as it does not reach all customers and it is not feasible to offer an 'opt in' option for customers who do not currently receive it to request it, although copies are also made available in council offices and to members.
- 3.21 As such, the team is working to develop the council's approach to email marketing, which the team developed to significant success for the year two garden waste service (74% of sales to date have been made online and a large percentage have been via the email marketing). The team envisages that over time, depending on customer recruitment to the email database, that an online emailer could replace or supplement the production of LDC News. Plans are currently in development which will include a full equality impact assessment and will be brought to Cabinet at some point in early 2019.

Other key publications / campaigns / work

- 3.22 The team supports the publication of a range of service-led items – from the annual recycling calendars, through to quarterly Lichfield Historic Parks newsletter and a range of leaflets and strategy documents, ranging from housing strategies through to environmental strategies.

The team also devises and leads a range of promotional and marketing campaigns – from the recent digital services campaign that has seen an increase in online interaction, through to the recent campaign that has successfully encouraged residents not to use black bin bags in the blue bins.

When working with Tamworth on joint waste promotions, the team takes the lead in delivering all comms related work, including writing and designing the Waste Less survey and guide to recycling.



3.23 The team also supports the delivery of all new online services and offers a Plain English service and usability testing in partnership with the performance team.

Design support and tourism publications

3.24 The communications team provides a graphic design service to teams across the council and advises on design in line with the council’s style guide. Projects range from supporting the development of local plan documents, through to the council’s annual tourism promotion work. Approximately 70% of the in-house design capacity within the comms team is used to support tourism activity.

3.25 The team supported the council’s tourism team, Visit Lichfield, to deliver the following publications in 2018/2019:

Publication	Description	Print run	Printing Cost*
Visitor guide 2018	80 page booklet	60,000	£14,720
Visitor guide 2019	16 page gate fold leaflet	30,000	£2,869
What’s on spring/summer 2018	32 page booklet	50,000	£5,208
What’s on autumn/winter 2018	12 page leaflet	10,000	£770

*Distribution costs are excluded from these figures.

3.26 A review of the marketing approach for tourism recommended a reduction in the size and quantity of the What’s On and Visitor Guides as people no longer tend to read such large publications. With the large investment that had been made to improve the Visit Lichfield website, this has been an area of focus for the Tourism team as it was time consuming for them to collate the listings, sell advertising, format it for print and then proof a considerable amount of information.

3.27 In December 2018 the tourism team launched their “Marketing Opportunities with Visit Lichfield” flyer, which has been circulated by email to businesses that have previously advertised in the printed What’s On and Visitor Guides. As more targeted tourism and marketing material is developed in 2019, this will be produced digitally where possible, with small print runs for targeted locations only.

Consultation and feedback

3.28 During a recent residents’ focus group, communication with the council was discussed. From those present there was no one clear preference for the method or format in which the council communicates, whether that is according to the target audience group or the issue or service being discussed. However, participants did offer a useful insight in to why and where they would prefer certain types of communication for different things.

3.29 Newspapers, leaflets, the council website, news websites, social media, SMS and direct mailing were all discussed and the group recognised that different groups would use different channels. In particular engagement with rural areas was seen as a challenge, unless there were active community groups operating in

those areas. The use of social media was felt to be low amongst these groups, due to the profile of volunteers, with more traditional printed means, such as newspapers, leaflets and copies of LDC News being useful.

- 3.30 Participants liked reading information about their local area in newspapers, though few could recall seeing council notices or press releases. These were seen to be quite accessible – particularly free press delivered through the door where these deliveries take place.
- 3.31 Awareness of council newsletters was mixed. Most were aware that there is a newsletter, but not everyone was able to comment on its content as they had thrown it away without reading it. Older participants were particularly positive about the newsletter and liked that it was delivered through the door, whereas others had chosen not to read it because they did not think it was relevant to them or because they preferred to get their information online. Those who liked the idea of a newsletter were keen to ensure it contained articles on progress against key concerns and included points of contact for key services and issues. There was some discussion regarding costs and overall participants felt that the newsletter was value for money, but were concerned about ensuring coverage to locations where free newspaper deliveries do not happen.
- 3.32 Email communication was identified in the focus groups as being the most useful tool for keeping up to date with council information. Participants suggested that they would welcome the opportunity to sign up to an e-newsletter which would contain short headlines with links to further information online if so desired. They felt that information could be tailored to individuals by selecting which topics they were interested in when they signed up.

Alternative options	All communication activity is reviewed on a regular basis and there will most likely be fundamental shifts in activity as we continue to move away from paper and towards more digital means of interaction over the coming months. A Fit for the Future review is due to take place in this area as part of the programme to consider our longer term aspirations for digital media and customer experience and how these support our commercial ambitions.
Financial implications	There are no financial implications arising specifically from this report. Any financial implications made regarding marketing and communication spend have been considered as part of the service or relevant project budget and where relevant are contained within the report.
Consultation	During recent focus groups the extent and value of our communication plans were discussed and key communication methods reviewed. This demonstrated a need to maintain a mix of communication methods for the various audiences in the short term, whilst developing longer term mechanisms to engage by tailored email linked to digital content and channels.
Contribution to the delivery of the Strategic Plan	Lichfield District Council’s Strategic Plan 2016 – 2020 sets out our ambition to become a council that is ‘fit for the future’. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making our top services fully bookable online and so easy to use that people choose to go online as a first port of call. Our website is key to this ambition. • Seeking out ways to increase productivity and efficiency through our Fit for the Future programme and service reviews.
Equality, diversity and human rights implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is acknowledged that whilst many residents/customers are digitally enabled and will engage with the council online – the take-up of garden waste online is evidence of that – some people will not. • Appropriate channels/new systems are tested with an equality impact assessment to ensure that no individual, or group of people, is adversely affected. • Furthermore, customer engagement, testing and feedback will be a consideration as the communication mechanisms are reviewed and developed.
Crime & safety issues	None identified.

	Risk Description	How We Manage It	Severity of Risk (RYG)
The programme and individual projects have comprehensive risk logs but key risks to the programme include:			
A	Ineffective communication protocols	The protocols are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they are robust and lessons are learned when issues arise.	Green
B	Insufficient capacity to support communication activity	Communications mechanisms are constantly reviewed and the overall approach to communication and resources necessary to achieve our ambitions will be subject to a review as part of our Fit for the Future programme.	Yellow
C	Reputational damage	Protocols are in place to manage and eliminate reputational damage as a result of communication activity.	Green

Background documents

LDC's media and social media policy www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/mediapolicy

LDC's Plain English guide www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/plainenglish

LDC's Style guide www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/styleguide

LDC's content guidelines for website and Brian www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/contentguidelines