

## Overview and Scrutiny Commission

**Date: 9 September 2020**

**Subject: Communicating with residents, businesses & partners through the Covid-19 pandemic**

Lead officer: Matt Burrows, Head of Communications & Customer Experience

Lead member: Stephen Alambritis, Council Leader

Contact officer: Matt Burrows

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### **Recommendations:**

- A. That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission considers and notes the update on communications during the pandemic, and offers any suggestions and recommendations to further add to the Council's approach.
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## **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to update Commission Members on our communications with all key audiences during the Covid-19 pandemic to date.
- 1.2.

## **2 DETAILS**

### **Summary**

- 2.1. The Council has communicated comprehensively with residents, businesses and staff throughout the pandemic, delivering messages via all its existing channels, as well as through the introduction of two new, temporary digital channels (a residents e-newsletter and a business e-newsletter) to signpost to our main website pages holding latest information.
- 2.2. The pandemic has also generated unprecedented increases in the demand and consumption of communications, with increases of 1,000% in consumption of external communications (news page views) and more than 150% internally (views on staff intranet pages) from March-August.
- 2.3. The below outlines the channels & content/information we have delivered to date, and our current future priorities are outlined at the foot of the section.
- 2.4. **External Communications**
- 2.5. **Channels**
- 2.6. **Website** – a dedicated set of Covid-19 web pages were created (one for residents, and one for businesses) in early March, and have consistently been the most-visited pages on the website since, with an increase of more than 1,000% in page views.
- 2.7. These pages have been updated on a regular basis with comprehensive advice on health, financial support, business support and stakeholder support, and our other channels have been successfully used to signpost to this. The pages are available at <https://news.merton.gov.uk/covid19/>

- 2.8. **Weekly borough e-newsletter** – In March we launched a weekly Covid-19 e-newsletter, which is now distributed to more than 100,000 email addresses each Thursday and has become our main channel. The newsletter generates an average 35% open-rate (70% at peak), and generates, on average, between 1,000 and 4,000 visits to our website per story.
- 2.9. **Merton Business e-newsletter** – established to inform & engage local businesses through the pandemic, our as-needed business newsletter has been issued twice, to more than 5,000 businesses, supporting the council to one of the best performances pan-London in delivering businesses support.
- 2.10. **Social media** – the council runs two main social media accounts (on Facebook and Twitter), and both have been used on a daily basis, as a core channel for delivering each campaign. Our total reach is over 20,000.
- 2.11. **My Merton** – We have published two editions of My Merton (83,000 households) since the start of the pandemic, and the third is due for delivery in early September.
- 2.12. **Local media** – Local and regional media have all been supportive of the council in publishing vital information on the public; we have had regular pieces in the Wimbledon Times and on Radio Jackie throughout, as well as pieces on BBC London and BBC Radio London. The Council Leader has also written two columns for the local Times.
- 2.13. **Community & faith groups** – an engagement manager has been working closely with the MVSC, Community Hub and community groups throughout, delivering information to more than 50 community & faith groups across the community, and later on via online Community Forums. The Chief Executive has also written to (and spoken with) faith leaders to keep them updated of impacts to their communities.
- 2.14. **Video** – video has been a central part of our campaign to inform residents in a human, short, easy-to-digest way. These have featured both staff and Cabinet Members.
- 2.15. **Printed media** – we have, where necessary, produced printed media to inform residents, primarily to offer support and translation services to those presenting at the civic for support.
- 2.16. **Members & MP's update** – A weekly Covid-19 update to all members & MPs from the Chief Executive was launched in March and continues to provide up to date information on case rates, council decisions and performance in combatting the virus.
- 2.17. **Content & Campaigns**
- 2.18. Each campaign has reached more than 100,000 people through a mix of the above channels.
- 2.19. **Merton Together (March-July)**: Our initial campaign to highlight public services & support to those impacted by the initial lockdown. The campaign also provided daily updates to local services, closures & the establishment of the Community Hub with MVSC, which formed the partnership base for the future campaign.

- 2.20. **Merton Heroes (March – July):** This campaign aimed to celebrate the frontline staff and volunteers across Merton who continued to provide critical care & health support to vulnerable residents, and who kept vital everyday services (eg bin collection) running throughout. You can see our campaign video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNeGtNtl-IA>.
- 2.21. **Re-opening Our Borough (August – September):** Highlighted the safe re-opening our council services to the public, as well as the re-opening of businesses & high streets. This included burst-campaigns for libraries, open spaces and a comprehensive campaign around re-opening of high streets & shops.
- 2.22. **Keep Merton Safe (July – current):** Running throughout all our campaigns has been our core Keep Merton Safe campaign, reiterating public health, NHS and Government guidance throughout the pandemic. This has included advice on social distancing, face-coverings, and outbreak control planning.
- 2.23. **Discover Merton (August):** Our summer campaign was targeted at parents, families and young people, and was aimed at helping them safely start enjoying the borough's open & public spaces again, encouraging local activities. This included a re-Discover Merton activities promotion for children & families as well as *Hearts in Parks*, aimed at encouraging a safe return to local parks to find hearts sprayed on the ground.
- 2.24. **Back to School Safely (August – September):** Our current campaign is aimed at parents and pupils, helping them understand and find the relevant guidance for safely returning to school, as well as providing information on safely preparing for cycle routes, walking routes, School Streets etc. ([See the campaign here on facebook](#))
- 2.25. **Active Transport –** this has been a regular feature of our campaigns, and our safe transport improvements have been highlighted through each campaign.
- 2.26. **Supporting Merton Businesses (April – current):** Using our website and business e-newsletter to promote take-up of business financial support, supporting the council to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-best performance in London for financial support to businesses.
- 2.27. **Outcomes**
- 1,000% increase in consumption of council communications (website news page visits March-July)
  - 100,000+ emails reached weekly with updates on guidance on information locally
  - Record levels of engagement with campaigns on social media
  - 40% open rate on weekly e-newsletter
  - 90% positive/neutral media coverage & social media sentiment

## **Internal Communications**

- 2.28. **Channels**

- 2.29. **Intranet** – dedicated Staff Pages have been set up on the council intranet, along with regular blog updates from relevant directors on key issues such as remote working, risk assessments, manager support and safety guidance.
- 2.30. **Staff Bulletin** – between March and August, Staff Bulletins were issued each day at 5pm with comprehensive latest guidance on service changes, staff advice on remote working, safety updates, decisions affecting the borough and the latest Government updates.
- 2.31. **All Staff Briefings & Q&As** – Video briefings have been held every eight weeks for all staff, while Directors have held directorate video updates each month.
- 2.32. **Outcomes**
- 2.33. 92% satisfaction with communications from the council leadership team to staff during the pandemic (July Wellbeing Survey)
- 2.34. 86% of staff adapted well to remote working and feel well-supported in the change (July Wellbeing Survey)

### **Future priorities**

- 2.35. **Keep Merton Safe (Ongoing)**
- 2.36. The next few months will focus on promotion of the Council's **Outbreak Control Plan**, which will be subject to resident & business communications as well as community group engagement.
- 2.37. **Shop Local, Shop Safe (October – December)**
- 2.38. This campaign will focus on the promotion of using local shops & town centres safely, particularly in the run-up to Christmas.

## **3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

N/A

## **4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED**

N/A

## **5 TIMETABLE**

N/A

## **6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS**

To date, £50,000 has been allocated to communications from the ringfenced Public Health Covid-19 budget to cover the next 6 months. This is funding a temporary Senior Communications Officer for Public Health.

## **7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

All Council publicity is guided by (and meets the standards within) the Local Government Code of Publicity Conduct.

**8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS**

N/A

**9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

N/A

**10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

N/A

**11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT**

- Campaign examples – Merton Together (series of visual examples of our social media communications)

**12 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

12.1. None

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