



LEIGHTON-LINSLADE TOWN COUNCIL

Policy and Finance Committee

Date: 21 September 2020

Title: Communications Update

Purpose of the Report: To provide Committee with a six-monthly update in respect of Town Council Communications.

Contact Officer: Sue Perry, Senior Administration Officer (fixed term)
Sarah Sandiford, Head of Democratic & Central Services

Corporate Objective/s		Leighton-Linslade Town Council Five Year Plan: Objective #1: to regularly review how we communicate and seek to embrace new technologies.
Implications:		
Human Resources	X	None
Operational/Service delivery	X	None
Procedural/Legal	X	None
Financial	X	None

1. RECOMMENDATION

Should Members be minded, the proposal is:

1.1 To note the report.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 As a publicly funded body, Leighton-Linslade Town Council has a duty to actively engage with the local community, providing information regarding its activities and proposed future projects, seeking feedback from residents and raising awareness of the Council and its remit within the parish.

2.2 Regular community engagement takes place through a variety of platforms including a printed newsletter, email campaigns, public consultation exercises, websites, social media platforms, Apps, market stalls and community events.

- 2.3 In line with the Localism Agenda and e-Government and rapid developments in technology, the Town Council continues to increase its investment in electronic media, using multiple channels to continue to engage as much of the community as possible.
- 2.4 We continue to develop our communications using the LLTC Website, Market Website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Mailchimp, Survey Monkey, YouTube and the LLTC app, to make information accessible to all.
- 2.5 Our ongoing commitment to ensure we still maintain print-based communication channels for those without online access proved all the more important this summer, where printed communications were the key to ensuring vital information was received by every household in the parish.
- 2.6 In this past six months Covid-19 has dominated our communications, both in terms of method and content, and continually revising our process has been critical. Our multi-faceted approach was essential to ensuring communications reached all corners of the community and that clear, strong, aligned messages were sent by the Council, using all available methods, to inform residents during an unprecedented crisis.

3. INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

- 3.1. This year, we were forced to change our internal communications over a very brief timeline. Meetings between staff, councillors and external associates had to quickly rely on online platforms to take place remotely; something many staff and councillors had never done before.
- 3.2. Thanks to last year's investment in Microsoft's Office 365 accounts for all staff and councillors, we were able to attend and share training and be communicating effectively very quickly.
- 3.3. Remote Council Meetings took a lot more thought and planning: ensuring ease of public access; finding ways to ensure participants could contribute with minimal time delays or talking over each other; looking at ways to record and document meetings; looking at ways to address confidential agenda items; ensuring the continuing legality of meetings.

4. WEBSITE

- 4.1. During Covid-19 our website became one of the most powerful tools we had for communicating with residents and updating messages quickly.
- 4.2. In March 2020, shortly after the Government declared a national pandemic, 'lockdown' began leaving people scared, confused and feeling vulnerable. To address this, we quickly developed a bespoke web page with vital information including the correct telephone numbers to use in

order to get assistance. This page was complimented by a clickable banner that ran along the top of every page on the website.

- 4.3. The page was updated throughout lockdown with information about food/prescription deliveries, mental health awareness, local businesses offering deliveries, the closure of the Market, postponing (and subsequent cancellation) of town events, the closure of playgrounds and outdoor gyms, potential scam awareness and eventually the re-opening of the town but with the associated restrictions that applied to each area.
- 4.4. Links on the page provided a downloadable version of each of the two Covid-19 information sheets that were distributed to local households.
- 4.5. Timely updates were critical as information and Government Guidance evolved and changed. However, the monthly statistics on page visits we received clearly demonstrated that the page was a 'go-to' place for many residents looking for information that they could trust.
- 4.6. Alongside the Covid-19 updates we also maintained an element of 'normality' on the site, with the new Community Volunteer Awards being added to the Grants and Awards page, weekly virtual band concerts and a virtual 'Proms in the Park' added to the events page, VE Day and VJ Day celebrations, and the Mayor's online fundraisers all contributed to keeping a cheerier note.
- 4.7. To address the high volume of telephone calls being received we developed an 'FAQ' web page which is regularly updated with the most common questions of the moment.
- 4.8. As lockdown began to ease a 'Keeping it Local' page was developed to support independent business getting back to the 'new normal' by way of a new town logo and many downloadable posters and digital resources which were offered for free use. As guidelines changes these resources were re-made and updated on the website, linking to a social media campaign to promote their use.
- 4.9. Unfortunately the new Market website development has taken a back seat as priorities shifted and resources became overstretched. However, the existing Market website was quickly refreshed and became the focus for all communications for the closure and subsequent re-opening of the much-loved market, both in Hockliffe Street and then back to the newly pedestrianised High Street.
- 4.10. Looking ahead, we continue to work with the Events team to add online events on the website, including Living History and Christmas, as well as a current photograph competition linking to the Keeping it Local campaign.

5. TOWN COUNCIL APP

- 5.1. The LLTC app continues to be promoted via About Town and social media, as well as a dedicated panel on the homepage of the main LLTC website.
- 5.2. With no events taking place during this period it has had limited content added, although publications are still being added to download.
- 5.3. As the town has now re-opened and use of the Town Free Wi-fi picks up, a link to the App has been added to the website's Wi-fi landing page to encourage future visitors to use this tool to find out what's on in the town.

6. ELECTRONIC SIGNAGE

- 6.1. Content for all four electronic signs is planned alongside our wider communications messages using our digital content planner and content is communicated in advance on the first page of members' weekly newsletter.
- 6.2. As limited software capabilities require that messages must be manually uploaded or deleted real-time (no scheduling), an upgraded version which allows scheduling is currently being investigated.
- 6.3. At the time of writing, the sign on the by-pass is still offline and is covered over to prevent out-of-date messages from being displayed. For reasons of safety, rebooting of the by-pass sign must be carried out by the Highways team at Central Bedfordshire Council and this has been requested.

7. SOCIAL MEDIA

- 7.1. Along with our website, social media proved to be an invaluable tool in communicating vital information to the town during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 7.2. Posts are scheduled across 11 profiles (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) daily and in the last six months these have been mainly aimed at informing, directing traffic to our website for more information and to offer remote entertainment.
- 7.3. To address the growing number of younger people preferring to use Instagram as opposed to Facebook and websites, the Tactic Centre had a profile set up which quickly proved to be an effective way to engage with young people throughout lockdown.
- 7.4. Town Council profiles are still monitored daily for messages and comments and we endeavour to respond in a timely way, despite reduced time and resource currently.
- 7.5. We have streamlined Hootsuite, our scheduler, to make it much quicker and easier to identify messages and comments and to enable ease of cover when the main Officer responsible is on leave.

- 7.6. A message was added to the bios during the pandemic to request that important questions be directed to us by email/phone to avoid any likelihood that they will be missed, especially during weekends when social media platforms are busy.
- 7.7. An Instagram 'landing page' has been added to the website with a suite of links to facilitate swifter navigation to information from Instagram
- 7.8. In the interest of community engagement and maintaining a high profile, the Town Council also 'likes', 'comments' and 'shares' public-interest matters posted by partner organisation profiles, however due to overstretched resources at this time, this area of our communications has seen a decline as priorities lie elsewhere. This will need to be addressed over the next weeks as this is an important part of maintaining our online presence in the town.
- 7.9. Despite the reduced input to social media our followers continue to rise, which is especially important this year when posts have been primarily to advise, reassure and thank the town, and only secondarily to entertain.

8. ANALYTICS

- 8.1. Website analytic reports continue to be sent to us with a breakdown summary from our website provider to see what users of the sites are visiting the site for.
- 8.2. As pages and campaigns are introduced, we request further analysis from the web provider to gauge success of the new features. For example, when we added a new 'banner' to appear at the top of every page of the website with the Covid-19 help link, we also requested the data of how many people clicked on the banner, to understand how effective it was.
- 8.3. We aim to identify patterns and trends from the data received, however shifted priorities and limited manpower this summer has meant less time could be spent on this element. We cannot give the time that it requires at present to drill into the data we currently have available to us.
- 8.4. In depth analysis in the future will help us understand what areas are of most interest to visitors to the site and assist targeting our campaigns.
- 8.5. The Senior Administrative Assistant (interim) has taken a qualification in Excel during her personal time throughout lockdown to assist with analysing data going forward but this requires a substantial piece of work initially to re-design the way data is collected and recorded, to better extract the information that is of most use.

9. BRANDING

- 9.1. Branding guidelines are to be reviewed later in the year as inconsistencies still exist across use of the LLTC brand palette.
- 9.2. Brand template review will lead to a large body of work. This was scheduled to take place after the Market Website Refresh project which was also put on hold during the Covid-19 pandemic.

10.0 INTERNAL PROCESSES

- 10.1 Internal processes had to be drastically reviewed this year.
- 10.2 With the team's reduced capacity currently resulting in 30 less hours per week, as well as remote-working impacting the way we plan and meet, our website, social media platforms and publications have taken priority over much of the planning, meeting, documenting and analysis work which used to take place.
- 10.3 To compliment the use of our digital content planner, a month's overview of proposed content was being planned up to three months in advance and presented to Heads of Service to share with their teams for input. This has had to discontinue as communication has had to be much more spontaneous to reflect quickly changing advice and guidance.
- 10.4 Individual stakeholder meetings are still held remotely for virtual events, however content is currently planned in the week(s) leading up to an event rather than months, as it was previously. This ensures that the event content reflects the situation at the time, given how quickly advice on what can be done outdoors and between households/bubbles has been changing.

11.0 CONTINGENCY PLANNING

- 11.1 Communication processes in the event of the death of a senior figure or any other national or international disaster were given a review in the early days of lockdown.
- 11.2 The updates website and social media communications process has been completed and graphics produced to enable a swift response should it be necessary.

12.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 12.1 With two members of our team on maternity leave and only one maternity cover in place, at a time when communication escalated in both volume and importance, this has been a challenging time but also a successful one.

- 12.2 The Town Council has been able to deliver information, advice, help and support using a multi-channel approach in an unprecedented time, increasing confidence in the Town Council and helping to facilitate an enviable level of community action and spirit throughout the community.
- 12.3 We have been able to quickly adapt in terms of methods of working to maintain delivery of information, entertainment and services.
- 12.4 We have used our channels to inform on Covid-19 matters, celebrate key national dates, deliver online events, and support the market and 'Keeping it Local' campaign to drive footfall back into the town and boost the local economy.
- 12.5 We have also used our channels to applaud the community response and give recognition to all for every contribution made throughout this strange time.
- 12.6 As a Team we have managed to maintain excellent internal communications enabling a business as usual approach to the way we function despite the upheaval of taking our offices home.
- 12.7 We are committed to meeting the continued expectation of the public to offer information and engagement across multiple and ever-involving platforms.
- 12.8 We respect that all members of the community are not online and many people face physical barriers accessing public information and therefore maintain our commitment to paper options.
- 12.9 With this in mind, officers continue to work to ensure that Leighton-Linslade Town Council is at the forefront of town communications using all appropriate channels and methods, and that all residents are reached, as we are entrusted to safely return them to the vibrant community of before.

Attachments:

- A. Websites overview**
- B. Social media overview**

End.