

Internal/External Communications Update

Committee name	Corporate Resources and Infrastructure Select Committee
Officer reporting	Emma Gilbertson, Corporate Communications
Papers with report	None
Ward	All

HEADLINES

Following a request from the Select Committee for information on communications, this report provides a general summary of the Council's communications channels and some of the activity delivered during the past year.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee notes the content of the report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Communications across a range of channels plays a key part in the effective delivery of services and priorities, and ensures that residents, businesses, partners, our workforce, and other stakeholders (including the media) are well informed about the work the Council does, the services it provides and how to access them.

Clear, accurate, meaningful, relevant, and timely communications, that is representative of the Council and its brand, is imperative in building a positive reputation that we are putting residents first.

The Council's core communication functions are:

- media relations
- campaigns and marketing
- publications
- social media
- website content
- internal communications
- design.

Corporate Communications works in partnership with teams across the Council to deliver external and internal communications.

Some of the key outcomes are:

- informed and engaged residents, businesses and partners who understand what the council does (in line with the Council Strategy) and how services can be accessed
- a well-managed and enhanced reputation and a strong and recognisable brand/identity
- contributing to organisational outcomes, supporting transformation and change programmes, generating income or savings, maximising access or managing demand, and driving behaviour change
- developing and promoting opportunities for residents, community groups and other stakeholders to engage with the Council and support decision making
- increased employee satisfaction and engagement
- evidencing impact through evaluation.

Communications channels are regularly evaluated, including sentiment and coverage for media relations; engagement for social media, e-newsletters and website content; the outcome of marketing ie. service sign-ups/attendance, income generated or behaviour change; and qualitative feedback from residents and services.

Media relations

Media relations includes effective management of reactive issues and a proactive approach to highlighting the council's good work through press releases.

Corporate Communications reactively deals with media enquiries from journalists on behalf of the Council. The service assists media outlets with their requests and enquiries, providing them with responses or statements and rebutting any inaccurate statements or coverage.

The team horizon scans and works with services to identify and prepare statements for issues that may pose a risk to the Council's reputation.

The service also delivers proactive media relations by sending press releases to the media and 'selling in' stories to outlets that highlight the Council's good work and by setting up interviews or filming opportunities.

The Council sends press releases via a media management system containing a database of journalists, and press release lists are created to target certain audiences (local, national or trade) depending on the release's content.

Press releases are also uploaded to the news section of the Council's website, publicised via social media and shared with all councillors. Press release stories are also often included in Hillingdon People and the Council's general e-newsletter, Hillingdon People Extra.

Coverage is regularly fed back to services and Corporate Management Team.

Media relations in 2023/2024

Number of media enquiries	262
Number of press releases	120
Instances of positive coverage (estimate)	770
Total number of news articles generated relating to the Council	2,100

On the whole, the Council's media coverage is mostly neutral to positive, and anecdotally, Hillingdon is acknowledged as having a good reputation.

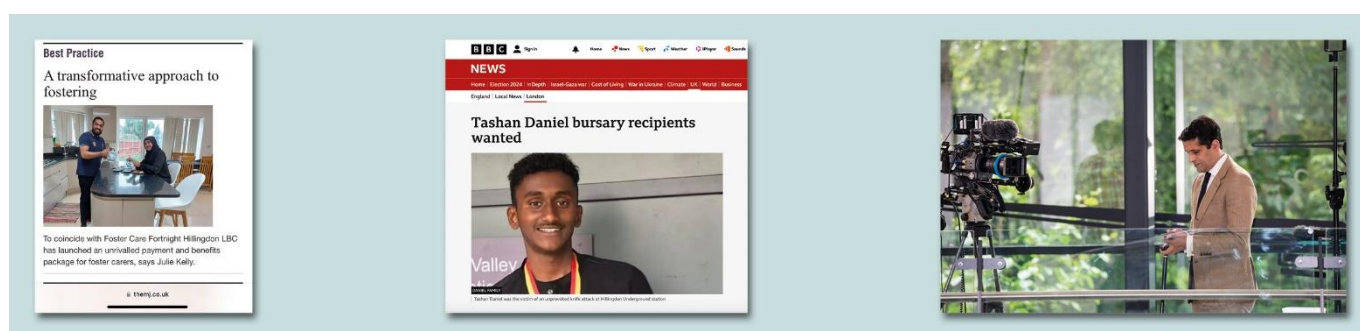
Nationally, local press is declining, while there are several local titles servicing Hillingdon, readership has reduced. London-wide is also a challenging space for media relations, given that all London local authorities and wider organisations are competing to get coverage for limited space. To succeed, stories need to be unique or best in London to stand out.

Given the decline and the crowded media space in the Capital, this increases the importance of the Council's other corporate channels and reaching further digitally.

Last year, coverage for releases was mostly local, with national coverage gained for the Council's ULEZ legal challenge, work at Heathrow Airport in seizing vapes, the success in once again securing the most Green Flag Awards in the country, and several prosecutions (blue badge fraud, housing fraud and an illegal HMO).

Many releases relating to housing, prosecutions and team successes have also garnered trade press coverage.

During the past two months, the Council has received London-wide coverage for its new foster carer payment and benefits package, the Tashan Daniel bursary scheme, and D-Day 80 commemorations, which saw BBC London present its early evening news programme from the Battle of Britain Bunker.



Campaigns and marketing

Corporate Communications liaises with services across the Council to plan, develop and advise on communications strategies and implement coordinated communications campaigns.

Public – 23 July 2024

Corporate Resources and Infrastructure Select Committee

The Council's campaigns predominantly raise awareness and market events or services, manage transformational change, and change or challenge behaviour.

Campaigns/communications projects in 2023/24 included the ULEZ lobbying campaign, Voter ID, a campaign to attract visitors to the Battle of Britain Bunker, the rollout of PayByPhone, publicity of the council's Coronation events, the Hillingdon Community Awards, foster carer recruitment, White Ribbon Day, and various changes/improvements for waste and recycling.

Communications is this year changing its approach to campaigns to deliver more strategic communications through the development of priority areas and priority campaigns.

Each campaign has a communications plan with measurable objectives, features bespoke content across a variety of targeted channels, a budget and will be evaluated.



Communications outside of the priority campaigns will be classed as business as usual.

Business as usual communications is short-term or one-off, requiring minimal asset or content creation and placement on one or a few channels.



Publications

The Council produces several publications.

This includes Hillingdon People magazine, which is produced bi-monthly and delivered to all households in the borough. The magazine covers a vast range of Council services and news, as

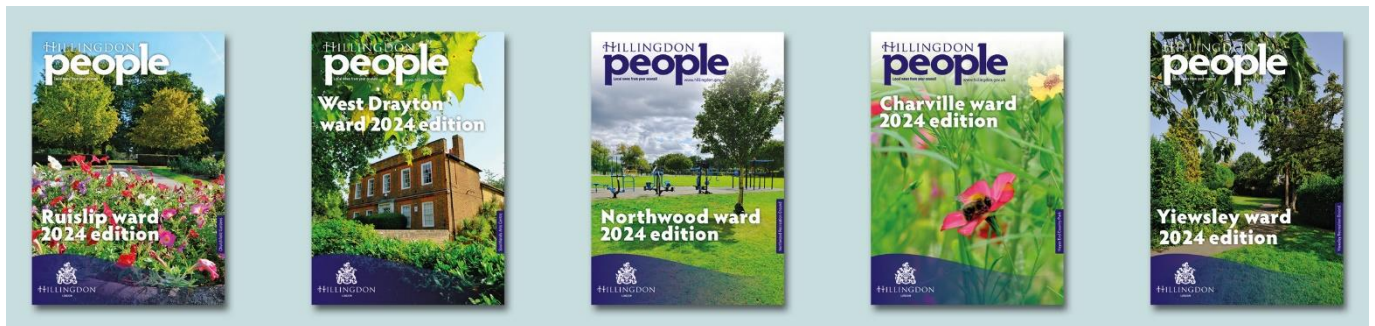
well as featuring residents' experiences of the services they access and where they have made a positive difference to their lives.

Given the decline in local media, it allows the Council to regularly reach all households highlighting the authority's work and plans, successes and achievements, how residents can access services, and how they can inform decision making through consultations.

Some design changes were carried out in 2023/24 to further align the magazine to the authority's strategic objectives.



This year, the Council also produced the Hillingdon People Local pamphlets which are produced every two years detailing some of the things that the Council has been doing across the borough and in each of the borough's 21 wards during the past two years.



Other publications include:

- culture and heritage brochure
- adult learning course leaflets
- digital school admissions brochure
- digital council tax guide and printed insert included with annual bills
- e-newsletters (Hillingdon People Extra, culture and heritage, waste and recycling, adult learning and tenants and leaseholders).



The quarterly culture and heritage brochure promotes events in theatres, libraries, museums and archives, and sport and physical activities. During the past year, the print run has been reduced in line with the council's channel shift agenda, with residents encouraged to instead subscribe to a new culture and heritage e-newsletter or access content on the Discover Hillingdon events and activities portal on the council's website.

Corporate Communications continues to develop digital marketing content. A variety of publications are now either digital only or their format has been changed. This includes the annual school admissions guide (digital only), council tax guide (digital only with a printed A5 leaflet included in bills signposting to the guide and to sign up for online billing) and adult learning brochure (now three small A5 leaflets).

Following the successful introduction of a new and more efficient e-newsletter system in December 2021, the service produces five e-newsletters. Each has high open rates and click through rates well above average for the sector (34 per cent open rate and 2 per cent click through rate).

Hillingdon People Extra is produced bi-monthly and has 35,000 subscribers and an average open rate of 52 per cent.

In 2023/24, Corporate Communications took on the production of the culture and heritage e-newsletter from Cultural Services, moving it from an inefficient system to the corporate platform and redesigning it. The newsletter is produced monthly with 31,075 subscribers and has an average open rate of 49.3 per cent.

Targeted e-newsletters linked to campaigns are also produced for waste and recycling (quarterly) and adult learning (termly). Both have high open rates (79 per cent and 69 per cent respectively) with 6,506 subscribers for waste and 2,377 for adult learning.

In June, the Council launched a new quarterly e-newsletter for tenants and leaseholders, which has 5,100 subscribers and had an opening rate of 57 per cent for its first edition.

Corporate Communications will continue to promote these e-newsletters to build up their subscriber base, and a families e-newsletter is currently being planned.

Social media

The Council uses various social media channels to proactively promote Council services and share Council news, and to engage with/share/amplify news from others, including partners, emergency services, government departments, businesses and residents.

The core social media channels are Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, while the Council also uses LinkedIn, Nextdoor and YouTube.

The table below highlights the Council's social media channels, their following (including a comparison to other London boroughs), how followers have changed during the past two years, and some detail on the number of posts/reach/reactions for 2023/24.

Channel	Following	Change	Average posts per month (including reshares)	Average reach per month	Average reactions per month
Facebook (London Borough of Hillingdon)	13K likes and 15K followers (8 th out of 32 London boroughs)	Increase of 2K in the past two years.	80	130,000 each month	18,600 likes, comments and shares
X formerly Twitter (@Hillingdon)	50.1K followers (2 nd highest of 32 London boroughs)	Increase of 2K in the past two years.	97	98,400 each month	1,180 comments, retweets, likes and mentions
Instagram Hillingdon Council	4,980 followers (21 st out of 32 London boroughs)	Increase of 1.5K in the past two years.	29 (excluding stories)	29 (excluding stories)	665
LinkedIn	11,971 followers (24 th out of 32 London boroughs)	Increase of 2.5K in the past year.	7	1,6350 each month	295
Nextdoor	47,000 members across 22 localities.	Decrease of 10K during the past year (they changed algorithm).	30	17,000 each month	100

	Introduced in 2021.				
YouTube	2.18K subscribers (9 th out of 32 London boroughs)	Increase of 250 in the past year	234 annually (mostly council meeting live streamed)	144,500	2,225 watch time

LinkedIn has been used more proactively in recent years to celebrate Council successes and achievements in various fields (and in partnership with others) and build up Hillingdon’s employer brand. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council also created an account on Nextdoor to share health messaging in localities, and this is now a useful tool for campaigns targeting certain areas.

The Council has plans to introduce a WhatsApp channel in 2024 to extend the authority’s reach in informing residents, businesses and other stakeholders about the work the Council does and the services it provides, as well as exploring the creation of TikTok campaigns to reach younger audiences, as necessary.

Corporate Communications continues to make social media more visually engaging through the use of real people imagery and videos (animation and real life) which perform best on Instagram and Facebook (as well as reels, stories and lives), evaluating what works and responding more to social media comments relating to proactive posts to create more two-way conversations which humanises the Council, increases the opportunity for social listening and counters misinformation.

The service also uses paid social media (paid for adverts on Facebook and Instagram) for certain marketing campaigns, focusing on either the whole borough to reach a wider audience, or targeting areas or certain demographics depending on the objectives and target audience. These have proven effective during the past year for promoting various initiatives, such as the Council’s fostering offer, family hubs, Tashan Daniel bursary scheme, adult learning courses, housing buy-back scheme, summer activities programme, annual pantomime, school place application deadlines, and Hillingdon in Bloom competition.



Resident queries on these platforms are handled by the Council’s Contact Centre.

Website content

In April 2024, the Website team moved from Corporate Communications (Central Services) to the new Digital and Intelligence directorate.

While the website function was part of Corporate Communications between 2019 and 2024, the team delivered a new Council website which improved the user journey in comparison to the previous website, created a more transactional platform and reduced content by approximately 60 per cent. A new SharePoint intranet for staff was also delivered in April 2022, streamlining content by 80 per cent and linking functionality to other Microsoft tools.

The team will continue to work closely with Corporate Communications to ensure consistency, accuracy and timeliness in content production.

Internal communications

Internal communication channels created by Corporate Communications, include:

- the weekly All Staff and CEO jottings emails
- managers' round-up email
- intranet news and blogs
- posters and other visual collateral.

Annual engagement activities, supported by Communications, include the Hillingdon Hall of Fame (employee recognition awards), Long Service Awards, and a Celebrating Learning event. In 2023/24, there were 120 nominations for the Hall of Fame awards.

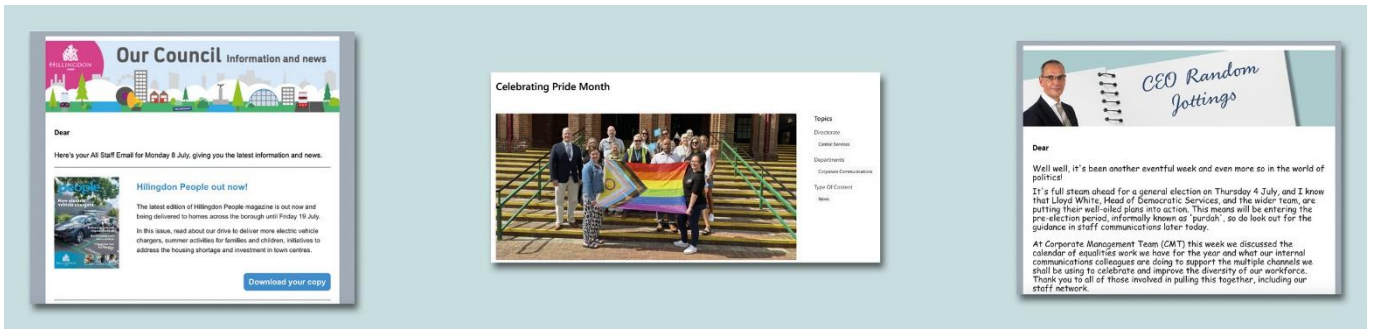
Corporate Communications also supports the delivery of the annual staff survey, publicity of schemes, such as 'Bright Ideas', 'Showcase series' and 'Interviews with', and the council's EDI, wellbeing, and learning and development programmes with the production of a range of intranet news articles.

In 2023/24 Corporate Communications stopped producing the staff newspaper *teamHillingdon* to instead focus on delivering real-time news on the council's intranet, with more than 130 intranet articles produced.

All of the Council's internal e-newsletters have high open rates consistent with the industry average for this format (68 per cent) and high click rates.

The All Staff Email has an average open rate of 68 per cent and click through rate of 11 per cent, CEO Jottings has an average open rate of 68 per cent, and the managers' round-up email which includes targeted advice and information for this part of the workforce, has an average open rate of 73 per cent.

In 2023/24, Publications and Internal Communications helped to create and launch new values across the organisations and a new 'Our Council' section on the intranet which highlights key information to help staff to work together, feel engaged and listened to, and the refurbishments currently underway at the Civic Centre.



Design

As well as producing campaign concepts and a range of collateral for printed and digital channels, the Council’s Design team also carries out business as usual design work which includes some signage for corporate property, livery, exhibitions and displays, forms, certificates, strategies, learning resources and toolkits.

RESIDENT BENEFIT

None at this stage.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None at this stage.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

None at this stage.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL