

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Regulatory, Compliance and Corporate Services)	Date of Meeting:	28 February 2023
Subject:	Corporate Communications and Covid-19		
Report of:	Chief Legal and Democratic Officer	Wards Affected:	All
Cabinet Portfolio:	Regulatory, Compliance and Corporate Services		
Is this a Key Decision:	No	Included in Forward Plan:	No
Exempt / Confidential Report:	No		

Summary:

To advise of the deliberations of the informal meeting of the Committee held on 3 February 2023 in respect of Corporate Communications and Covid-19; and to seek formal approval of the recommendations made at the informal meeting

Recommendations: That the Cabinet Member – Regulatory, Compliance and Corporate Services be requested to approve the following recommendations:

That:

- (1) In respect of the need to connect with specific individuals, communities and groups across Sefton:
 - (a) the production of print-off information such as the Cost-of-Living flyer for elected members to distribute in their communities be supported and continued;
 - (b) the provision of elected members with regular e-shot updates on Council news stories and information be supported and continued;
 - (c) Sending press releases directly to elected members when they were sent to the media be supported and continued;
 - (d) the use of local area Facebook groups through group administrators who since COVID were happy for the Council to continue to post on the groups rather than do it for the Council be supported and continued;
 - (e) Investigating corporate use of messaging through Next Door

network which people used to share local messages with neighbours and communities be continued and supported; and

- (f) Accessing and using any statistical ward-based intelligence that could inform the Council of localised preferences so that the Council can tailor messages and the way they are delivered be supported and continued;
- (2) In respect of connecting better with young people across Sefton:
- (a) it was noted that feedback and research showed that young people were increasingly less likely to engage with traditional social media channels used by Sefton Council – Twitter/Facebook/Instagram. Therefore, the use of TikTok for that target age group be investigated; and
 - (b) It was noted that young people were also more likely to access information through video which would require the Council making more engaging, better-quality videos for them to be shared through the Council's corporate communications channels. This concept be supported;
- (3) In respect of recognising the level of people with restricted digital access:
- (a) the provision of regular e-shot updates (similar to those sent to elected members) to the Council's network of Community Gatekeepers who were in direct touch with their local communities or specific groups to spread important health and other messages such as financial reminders guidance be supported and continued;
 - (b) the production of print-off information such as the Cost-of-Living flyer for elected members to distribute in their communities be supported and continued;
 - (c) the provision of elected members with regular e-shot updates on Council news stories and information to disseminate to constituents be supported and continued; and
 - (d) the sending of press releases directly to elected members when they were sent to the media be supported and continued;
- (4) In respect of continuing improved Partnership working:
- (a) ongoing work through Sefton Health Information and Communications group and closer working with Sefton Partnership, including weekly updates be supported and continued;
 - (b) the use of the Sefton Health Info WhatsApp group to share

updates and news with Sefton Health Information and Communications group members be supported and continued;

- (c) the process of mutually alerting partners of messages and campaigns and sharing and boosting those messages through the appropriate channels available to the Council be supported and continued;
 - (d) Mutually sharing information in printed material and briefings be supported and continued; and
 - (e) the co-hosting Sefton Partnership health information on Sefton Council website be continued and supported;
- (5) In respect of relationships with colleagues:
- (a) it was noted that during the pandemic, the Communications team worked more closely with a broader range of departments and services and partner organisations and adapted the way it worked to ensure that each had its own Communications Officer acting like an agency Account Manager and providing the first point of call on proactive and reactive communications. This activity be supported and continued; and
- (6) In respect of relationships with media:
- (a) it was noted that using systems available to the Council to stay in contact with a broader range of local, regional and national media contacts who saw the Council as a proven reliable source of information about Sefton during COVID was successful. This activity be supported and continued;
 - (b) the promotion of Margaret Jones, Director of Public Health as a go-to source for Public Health matter articles, interviews and videos, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, be supported and continued; and
 - (c) the provision of an out-of-hours media contact service through a team on-call rota through budget continuation from April 2023 when current COVID funding ends be supported.

Reasons for the Recommendation(s):

The informal meeting of the Committee has no formal decision-making powers. Formal approval is therefore required by this meeting of the Committee.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected: (including any Risk Implications)

None.

What will it cost and how will it be financed?

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The implementation of all recommendations, other than 2 (a) and (b), can be contained within existing budgetary resources. Recommendations 2 (a) and (b) relate to connecting better with young people across Sefton; and the concept of the use of TikTok, and the requirement of the Council making more engaging, better-quality videos for young people to be shared through the Council's corporate communication channels, is recommended to be investigated and supported. The implementation of these recommendations may require additional resources. If so, the Corporate Communications Manager will seek the necessary approval for any additional funding.

(A) Revenue Costs – see above

(B) Capital Costs – see above

Implications of the Proposals:

Resource Implications (Financial, IT, Staffing and Assets): None	
Legal Implications: None	
Equality Implications: There are no equality implications.	
Climate Emergency Implications:	
The recommendations within this report will	
Have a positive impact	No
Have a neutral impact	Yes
Have a negative impact	No
The Author has undertaken the Climate Emergency training for report authors	Yes
There are no direct climate emergency implications arising from this report.	

Contribution to the Council's Core Purpose:

Protect the most vulnerable: Appendices considered by the informal meeting of the Committee detailed how contact was made with Sefton's residents and communities to provide information on how to raise awareness of the dangers of Covid-19; the isolating not isolated campaign; multiple care home communications and engagement contacts; and help with vaccination and testing. Specific information was provided regarding hard-to-reach groups and Facebook group pages; and Sefton Older People's forum and help with coping with Covid-19. Information was also provided on surge testing, letters to staff, letters to partners, letters to local community (affected wards and areas surrounding test sites)
Facilitate confident and resilient communities: As above.
Commission, broker and provide core services: Appendices considered by the informal meeting of the Committee detailed a range of measures undertaken by the Council to update staff on Health and Safety issues.
Place – leadership and influencer: As detailed in the "Protect the most vulnerable" section above
Drivers of change and reform: None directly applicable to this report.

Facilitate sustainable economic prosperity: Appendices considered by the informal meeting of the Committee detailed action taken regarding Business Grants advice and promotion / Furlough scheme information; communications to businesses about reopening (e.g. health and safety advice); and the shop local/coastal campaign plan and budget
--

Greater income for social investment: None directly applicable to this report.
--

Cleaner Greener: Appendices considered by the informal meeting of the Committee detailed coastal campaign messages.

What consultations have taken place on the proposals and when?

(A) Internal Consultations

The Executive Director Corporate Resources and Customer Services (FD 7135/23) has been consulted and notes there are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

The Chief Legal and Democratic Officer (LD 5335/23) is the author of the report.

Assistant Director of Corporate Resources and Customer Services (Strategic Support).

(B) External Consultations

None

Implementation Date for the Decision

Immediately following the Committee meeting.

Contact Officer:	Paul Fraser
Telephone Number:	0151 934 2068
Email Address:	paul.fraser@sefton.gov.uk

Appendices:

None

Background Papers:

There are no background papers available for inspection.

1. Introduction/Background

1.1 At its meeting held on 14 June 2022 the Committee agreed to establish a Corporate Communications and Covid-19 Working Group; and that the aim of the Working Group was to assess the changes instigated by Corporate Communications in communicating with residents during the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact the changes have had and how such changes shaped the future of the Council communicating with its communities. The Scoping Document for the Working Group was approved at the meeting held on 14 June 2022.

- 1.2 Problems were experienced arranging Working Group meetings, and this was reported to the Committee at its meeting held on 10 January 2023. Accordingly, the Committee resolved (Minute No. 34 (3)) that that Corporate Communications and Covid-19 Working Group be no longer continued, and the topic be dealt with at a remote, informal meeting of the Committee.

2. Informal Meeting of the Committee held on 3 February 2023

- 2.1 An informal meeting of the Committee was held on 3 February 2023. The meeting was held remotely via Microsoft Teams.
- 2.2 The Scoping Document acknowledged that in the context of Council activity, the purpose of Corporate Communications was to inform (or even signpost and warn) our internal and external audiences (staff, stakeholders, partners and communities); and that many behaviour-change campaigns had also been delivered by the Corporate Communications Team; and It was therefore considered necessary to explore:
- The range of communications activity the Council was responsible for
 - The purposes and objectives of the communications activity
 - Who the intended audience was
 - The nature of any potential and actual impact (positive or negative), from the communications activity
 - The effectiveness of communications activity, such as changes in behaviour
 - How we influenced behaviour change in the community through standard channels
- 2.3 The informal meeting of the Committee considered information set out below, provided by the Corporate Communications Manager and the Consultation and Engagement Lead, that detailed how the above issues had been addressed:
1. List of press releases issued during Covid-19
 2. Sample of press releases (e.g., one from the very start of lockdown one, one as we came out of lockdown, one from second wave, one from surge testing/VOC, one from restrictions lifted)
 3. Isolating not isolated campaign assets
 4. Vaccination adverts on social media
 5. Surge testing, Southport, letter to staff, letter to partners, letter to local community (affected wards and areas surrounding test sites)
 6. Access to testing
 7. Sefton says thanks campaign / Sefton cares
 8. Business Grants advice and promotion / Furlough scheme information
 9. Communications to businesses about reopening (e.g. health and safety advice)
 10. List of hard-to-reach groups and Facebook group pages administrators
 11. SMBC Communications Cell Action tracker
 12. Sefton Older People's forum - coping with Covid-19

13. SYMBOL report July 2021
14. Report from Communications Manager to IPC (June 2020 Weekly activity re covid communications)
15. Overview and Scrutiny presentation - use of social media October 2020
16. Coastal campaign messages
17. Shop local/ coastal campaign plan and budget
18. Staff FAQs
19. Covid-19 vaccinations FAQs for staff
20. Message from Chief Executive and Leader to staff
21. Sample Health and Safety updates for staff
22. Sample One Council Brief
23. Sample Dwayne's blog to staff
24. Case for Liverpool City Region Media Release (#LCRFightsBack)
25. Tiers announcement (Tier 3) for Liverpool City Region/ Leader email to members
26. Covid Vaccination Community Gatekeepers (list and pack, from CCGs)
27. Lists of links to videos and published documents
28. Multiple care home communications and engagement - e.g. letters to providers, FAQs issued

29. Accessible Communications Policy 2022-24

2.4 The informal meeting of the Committee also considered:

- How and what the Council had communicated with stakeholders (staff, residents and partners) during the pandemic
- How the Council communicated with hard-to-reach communities and what lessons could be learnt for maintaining and improving these channels in the future
- Accessibility of communications activity and channels
- How the Council communicated with young people, given that this audience did not want to follow the Council on social media, so what alternative communications channels should be used to get messages to this group

2.5 In accordance with the Scoping Document the informal meeting reviewed:

- Current Sefton Corporate Communications Activity
- Areas of good practise within the Council
- Good practise within other local authorities or similar organisations
- Areas for improvement within the Council's policies and practise
- Recommendations for improving the Council's policies and practise

2.6 The Communications Team Leader updated Members on changes to Sefton Council Communications team's ways of working as a result of lessons learned through the COVID pandemic.

It was noted that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic there was a huge need for communications to help keep individuals and communities safe, businesses

afloat and their employees protected. COVID-19's rapid emergence and the restrictions such as shielding that were put in place to restrict its spread, were initially led nationally with Sefton and other Councils helping to disseminate those messages on the Government's behalf.

As the pandemic progressed, particularly with specific testing and other arrangements for each area, the need for tailored communications increased and continued through periods of lockdown, tiered system and, eventually, the re-opening.

As well as general communication for people living and working in the Borough and those visiting it, there was also the need for specific messages for businesses including shops that were able to remain open, schools and information from Central Government and local area to the care sector. There was also the need to keep the wide range of people that were Council service users updated about how those services were being affected as well as reaching out to people in our communities who needed support or advice.

Accordingly, lessons were learned and ongoing changes to working made. It was not surprising, therefore, that these unprecedented conditions resulted in a number of lessons for the Communications team, the outcomes of which were being taken forward into the team's ongoing work. The key elements and solutions of these were identified and form the basis of the recommendations contained in this report.

2.7 Members of the Committee asked questions/commented on the following issues:

- Communities were reassured by the Covid-19 messages emanating from the Council; and vulnerable residents welcomed the direct contacts made with them by elected Members
- Was research undertaken to find out whether various groups were not reached regarding the dissemination of information and press releases
- It was acknowledged that the demise of the Champion newspaper group in Sefton during the pandemic was a loss as the free paper, delivered to all homes, was a great way for the Council to get information out to all households; and this particularly impacted on residents who did not readily use, or had no access to, ICT facilities. Concern was raised as to how such hard to reach digitally excluded groups could be reached
- The circulation of free publications to households in various areas, such as the Formby Trader, was referred to; and a suggestion was made that potentially such publications could fill some of the gaps left following the demise of the Champion group
- The evaluation process by which the Council identified where residents and businesses heard about news stories and press releases
- It was difficult to recall the fear factor in communities at the start of the pandemic; but local communities did greatly appreciate the continuation of services, such as the cleansing service, throughout the lockdown period
- It was considered that the Council did a great job disseminating information and advice to local communities during the pandemic.

However, the problem would, by its very nature, be getting information to hard-to-reach groups. The Accessible Communications Policy, and particularly easy read, was a positive step to combat such problems

- Networking arrangements in place to obtain best practice from Liverpool City Region authorities, the Local Government Association and the wider communications industry
- The potential to produce a step-by-step guide to ensure that if similar, major incidents occurred in the future then information would be on hand to immediately commence the communication of information and advice to local communities and businesses

2.8 The informal meeting endorsed the key elements and solutions highlighted by the Communications Team Leader and form the basis of the recommendations contained in this report.

3. Way Forward

3.1 As mentioned above, the informal meeting of the Committee had no formal decision-making powers. Accordingly, for decisions of the informal meeting to be actioned, formal approval is required by this meeting of the Committee.

3.2 It is therefore recommended that the decisions taken at the informal meeting held on 3 February 2023 be endorsed.