

## **Policy & Resources Committee – January 2021**

### **Marketing & Communications Update**

This update relates to the four-month period from September 2020 to December 2020.

#### **Summary**

- From October, the service's focus shifted from support for recovery and re-opening to managing COVID-19 communications and the impact of restrictions.
- Digital platforms have continued to be priority communication channels and the Council's Facebook page has shown the highest levels of performance to date, with statistics for November and December showing our posts reached over 700,000 people and engaged almost 67,000 users.
- Significant work to meet new regulatory accessibility standards for web sites resulted in the Council's site achieving an 8.1/10 score in a UK-wide index of councils, ranked 24<sup>th</sup> in the UK and 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 11 local councils here.
- A bespoke 'culture of compliance' video campaign on social media with the hashtags #BackToBasics #BackToBusiness directly reached 83,521 people (representing approximately 57% of the local population) and engaged 12,730 unique users of Facebook.
- The service developed the #WeLoveLocal concept to support shop local and shop safe messages, delivering a comprehensive and strategic communications plan for a radically different looking Christmas. Particular highlights were the switch-on video which premiered on Facebook and the 12 Gifts of Christmas competition which showcased local retail and achieved substantial reach and engagement over a sustained 12-day period in December.
- Internal communications, at both elected member and staff levels, continued to be a priority in the period.

#### **COVID-19 Response**

Throughout the summer period and into September, the service's focus had turned to supporting recovery following the easing of restrictions and the re-opening of the Council's own facilities and the wider economy.

The re-opening of our leisure centres received significant marketing and communications support, including delivery of the first part of a previously postponed membership campaign.

In the same period, the 'reconnect with...' concept continued to be used to support recovery messaging for the tourism sector and for town centres.

Plans for the opening of OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory were revised and refreshed, and the opening campaign re-worked in support of a new opening date of Friday 16 October 2020.

However, at that point, further pandemic-related restrictions came into force and the opening plans for OM had to be suspended and the service's work once again centred on COVID-19 related issues.

### **'Culture of Compliance'**

The service has had a strong role in promoting public health messages since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as communicating the impact of the pandemic on the Council's services. From October 2020, there was an increasing shift towards the promotion of a 'culture of compliance' and closer cooperation and sharing of approaches between the local government sector and central government.

This entailed not only sharing the core messages of 'Hands-Face-Space' but creating our own local, bespoke messaging, using Mid Ulster statistics on infection rates where possible and using authentic Mid Ulster voices.

As a specific example, the service delivered a 2-week video campaign on social media (19 October – 1 November). This was focussed on behaviour change, encouraging the general public to follow new restrictions (introduced on 16 October) and using local voices to engage residents and reinforce the importance of sticking with the guidance to help local businesses re-open sooner, with the hashtags #BackToBasics #BackToBusiness used throughout.

- In total, the video campaign directly reached 83,521 people (representing approximately 57% of the local population) and engaged 12,730 unique users of Facebook.
- The participation of a local GP, Dr Grainne Shaw, was particularly effective, accounting for almost 30% of the campaign reach. Dr Shaw was viewed as a trusted messenger and qualitative feedback from the practice also indicated that the positive reaction to the post on social media gave practice staff a real boost at an especially difficult time. Other participants also fed back how appreciated it was that they could be involved.
- Campaign tweets were seen a total of 8,255 times, and platform users interacted with tweets a total of 378 times.
- Engagement rates across campaign tweets were extremely high at 8.2% compared to the @MidUlster\_DC account averages of 1.6% in October and 1.2% in November to date.

### **Enterprise Week 2020**

The delivery of Enterprise Week during a pandemic radically altered both the traditional method of staging the events and the focus of activity.

Events moved from face-to-face delivery and interaction in a physical location to a virtual environment and the marketing and communications service delivered a supporting plan.

The plan continued the Council's 'digital first' approach, with a greater emphasis on video, while also using traditional media (press and radio) to support core messaging.

- Social media support for the week via Facebook achieved a reach of 98,795 with engagement of 4,802 and video views of over 22,000. Impressions on Twitter reached more than 47,000 with engagement of just over 1,200.
- The designated [www.midulstercouncil.org/enterpriseweek](http://www.midulstercouncil.org/enterpriseweek) webpage received 1,834 page views and ranked in the top 20 of our webpage views during this time, with business grants and business recovery webpages taking the top spots during this period.
- 11 pieces of editorial were carried in local press, with a Mean Advertising Value Equivalent of £36.5K.

### **Christmas 2020**

Christmas 2020 was always going to look radically different, particularly in relation to Christmas Light Switch On events, which this year took place with no public gatherings in place. This change needed to be communicated to residents, while managing expectations and discouraging any non-organised gathering of people in contravention of the regulations in place.

A structured and strategic approach to communications with a plan which encompassed a range of activity issues was developed and focussed on the concept of 'We Love Local', helping to reinforce both the shop local and shop safe messages.

A full evaluation of the complete Christmas campaign will be delivered in due course. However, the highlights were:

- A 'click for Christmas' video featuring the Chair and Santa switching on the Christmas lights across Mid Ulster which premiered on Facebook and across 2 posts reached 40,000 people with an engagement rate of 4,500.
- The '12 Gifts of Christmas' competition, promoting the shop local message, showcasing local retailers and offering a package of prizes. This generated significant reach and engagement over a sustained 12 day period and a huge amount of positive responses from competition entrants who talked about was so special to them about their shop local experiences. This first post to launch the initiative was the top performer on Facebook in December.

### **Digital Platforms**

In a fast-moving environment, the Council's digital platforms were of paramount importance for reflecting changes and updates to services and engaging with customers both with speed and accuracy.

#### *Web Site*

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Council's website has functioned as key source of online coronavirus-related content, which has adapted and changed in line with the changes to the restriction-recovery-restriction cycle and the changing range

of support schemes available to support people individually impacted by the pandemic and businesses directly affected.

However, the service also contended with a significant change in accessibility standards from September 2020 and considerable resources were allocated to ensuring that the Council's website was exceeding compliance standards.

The concentration of effort showed a remarkable result. Based on the Sitemorse index (Q4 2020) which compares the performance of Councils across the UK, Mid Ulster's score rose to 8.1/10, resulting in an upward movement of 146 places to be ranked 27<sup>th</sup> in the UK and 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 11 councils here.

#### *Social Media: Facebook*

Significant work has gone into developing the Council's corporate Facebook page as a 'go-to' and trusted source of information and a means of engaging with local residents since its launch in August 2018.

The page now has just under 10,000 followers and, as intended, has out-performed and now replaced the legacy town Facebook pages (Visit Cookstown, Visit Magherafelt and Discover Dungannon) which were unpublished in November 2020.

A snapshot of the levels of reach and engagement across the page in November and December 2020 demonstrates the impact of the channel in the Council's marketing and communications activity.

#### **Overview: November and December 2020**

	Nov 2020	Dec 2020 (to 21/12/20)
No of posts	78	87
Reach	444,554	267,438
Engagement (comments, shares, likes)	40,874	25,937

#### **Top 5 posts: November and December 2020**

Date	Topic	Reach	Engagement (comments, shares, likes)
3 Nov	Mid Ulster has highest COVID-19 infection rate: Not a league table anyone wants to top	31,700	5,500
5 Dec	First post to announce 12 Gifts of Christmas competition	29,600	4,900

1 Nov	#BackToBasics #BackToBusiness GP Video	24,800	4,200
13 Nov	10p parking present for Christmas	24,100	2,800
6 Nov	Closure of Meadowbank play park as a result of a mobile COVID-19 testing unit	22,400	4,200

- Reach and engagement are at their highest levels to date.
- November's statistics are substantially greater as a result of 7 individual and high-performing posts which collectively reached 195.2K people.
- Encouragingly, the top 5 posts show that a variety of topics are appealing to local people, emphasising again that content which adds value, seeks to engage and is locally-relevant and people-focussed performs best.
- While one of the top five posts provoked a negative response about facilities generally in Magherafelt and the surrounding area, it nonetheless gave an opportunity for the Council to respond and engage in conversations with local people about what facilities were available and what facilities were included in new plans.

### Internal Communications

Timely internal communications continued to be as critical as external activity in the period under review.

Nine elected Member briefings were issued in the period under consideration to ensure, insofar as possible, that all councillors were receiving up-to-date and accurate information on a broad range of issues, building on their own knowledge base and facilitating informed onward communication with their constituents.

A total of 5 briefings and an issue of In Focus also went out to staff. At all stages, while briefs must convey key corporate messages to staff, where possible, communications were personalised to spotlight the people behind the services.

### Core Service Activity Levels

*News releases issued from September to December 2020.*

*Note: news releases are not an end in themselves and are often simply the core script. Further creative content and messaging evolves to suit different audiences and translates into activity across channels.*

	No issued	Breakdown by service area:
<b>Sept 2020</b>	14	Leisure & Outdoor Recreation 5; Economic Development 3; Chair's Business 2; Community

		Development 1; Tourism 1; Planning 1; General Council 1.
<b>Oct 2020</b>	14	General Council 4; Leisure & Outdoor Recreation 3; Economic Development 2; COVID-19 2; Planning 1; Environmental Health 1.
<b>Nov 2020</b>	14	Economic Development 3; COVID-19 2; Environmental Health 2; Community Development 2; Environment & Property 2; Chair's Business 1, Planning 1; Tourism 1.
<b>Dec 2020</b>	10 (to 21/12)	Chair's Business 4; Leisure & Outdoor Recreation 2; COVID-19 1; General Council 1' Economic Development 1, Environment & Property 1.

### *Media Enquiries*

	<b>No received</b>	<b>No answered in 4hrs</b>	<b>Fastest response time</b>	<b>Slowest response time</b>	<b>Top Topic(s)</b>
<b>Sept 2020</b>	30	24	Immediate	6hrs 53mins	OM opening; Planning issues
<b>Oct 2020</b>	29	20	5mins	2days 4hrs 20mins	VAT case; COVID-19
<b>Nov 2020</b>	21	18	15mins	2 days 2hrs 52mins	Christmas events; COVID-19
<b>Dec 2020</b>	18 (to 21/12)	12	Immediate	1day, 5hr 54mins	COVID-19; New CE

Ursula Mezza  
21 December 2020