

## **Policy & Resources Committee – June 2020 Marketing & Communications Update**

This update relates to the 2 month period from March 2020 to April 2020.

### **Summary**

- In mid-March, the focus of the marketing and communications service switched almost entirely to managing COVID-19 communications, characterised typically in the early stages by reaction and response to events as they unfolded and then shifting to planned, proactive and positive communications as the situation stabilised.
- Digital platforms were priority communication channels during a fast-moving and continually evolving period.
- Traffic to the Council's web site reflected the radically new external context and new customer information needs, with leisure-related pages dropping dramatically from their traditional position as 'most viewed' and largely accounting also for the drop in the overall page views (from 516,999 to 335,635).

However, core service pages on bins and recycling (36,462 page views in the period) and the dedicated coronavirus suite of pages (9,913 page views), together with staff-specific content, then became the most viewed pages.

- Analysis of corporate social media channels (Facebook and Twitter) show significant levels of reach and engagement, with amplification, applause and conversation rates for the Council's Facebook page at their highest rates to date. In the top 4 Facebook posts alone in March, reach stood at over 180,000 and engagement at almost 50,000.

The metrics serve to demonstrate the Council's position as a trusted source for timely and accurate, if not always welcome, information during a crisis.

- Private messages to Facebook, which almost exclusively related to COVID-19 issues, more than doubled in both March (67) and April (70), when compared to the previous 4 month average (29).
- The service also led content planning and delivery of the leisure Facebook pages, with reach and engagement higher in March and April for 5 of the 7 pages than in the first 2 months of the year.
- The volume of media enquiries managed by the service reached an all-time high, with 32 received in the last week of March alone and a total of 69 responded to in April.
- Internal communications, at both elected member and staff levels, were a priority in the period and 20 briefings were issued in March and April.

## **COVID-19 Response**

From mid-March, the marketing and communications service's focus turned almost exclusively to managing communications as the pandemic was declared and Council services contracted substantially over a 2 to 3 week period.

The Council's role in an emergency or crisis situation, however, spans its function as a direct service provider to also embrace its position as a civic leader and both elements were being balanced during this immediate, reactive crisis period. Given the pace at which the situation evolved, during these weeks demand on the service was consistently high, with time-pressured response times.

## **Period of Stability**

Stability, in the sense that the service delivery and community response mechanisms were unchanged for an extended period, came in mid-April and allowed the service's focus to move from a crisis response to one which was more planned and proactive. At this time, it became possible to begin to shine a spotlight on both the essential work being undertaken by the Council and the innovation being demonstrated by the organisation, particularly from those services which were closed.

Leisure's virtual swimming academy and fitness videos, the online programme of performances and educational/creative activities from Culture and Arts, as well as the webinars, online forums and business resilience from Business and Communities were all among the work promoted in the media and via social media during the this stage of the pandemic.

Essential services were also showcased, beginning with bin collection crews and the many thank you notes and pictures they received, to encompass all those employees, visible and behind the scenes, who continued to deliver during the lockdown.

Stability also allowed the Council's community support measures, from emergency funding to the distribution of food boxes, to be increasingly profiled.

At the same time, the service continued to identify other appropriate opportunities to demonstrate the Council's civic leadership role, from the Chair's support and endorsement of issues to 'clap for carers' to designated days and weeks for mental health and accident prevention. This also included positioning the issues of strategic importance, from the broad impact of the pandemic on the Mid Ulster economy to the specific financial issues faced by the Council.

## **Recovery**

While the period under review relates to March and April, by May communications priorities began also to move towards recovery with the resumption of some services, notably recycling centres, and significant preparatory research and work to inform plans for the recovery of leisure facilities and town centres, as well as for internal purposes.

## **Internal Communications**

Timely internal communications are as critical as external activity, and in the crisis period regular member and staff briefings were the primary method for quickly disseminating updates on emerging issues.

10 elected Member briefings were issued in March and April 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.

The same number of briefings issued to staff, with the emphasis moving back to a normalisation of staff communications via the production of the regular staff newsletter in early May and further printed and digital content in development to support recovery messages. At all stages, while briefs must convey key corporate messages to staff, where possible, communications were personalised to spotlight the people behind the services.

## **Media Enquiries**

Unsurprisingly, the level of media enquiries during March and April was significantly higher than normal.

In March the service managed responses to 50 enquiries, 32 of which came in the last week of the month (23 – 31 March) as the lockdown took hold, and in April 69 enquiries were received and responded to, the highest ever monthly total.

Only March 2019 and April 2019 when the service was managing responses to the Greenvale Hotel tragedy, have reached close to the same volume, when 57 enquires were handled in each month.

## **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 mid-March the development of bespoke, online coronavirus-related content became increasingly important and Mid Ulster was one of the first, if not the first, to create a specific online page to signpost members of the public to those community organisations offering support services.

The service subsequently also developed and continuously updated other signposting content, with a particular focus on avenues for business support, food boxes and food banks and health and well-being.

While traditionally the most visited pages on the web site relate to leisure and bins, in March and April, there was a definitive shift in visitor content focus, with a steep decline in leisure page views, accounting for an overall decline in web site traffic.

However, this change reflects the closure of the leisure facilities and the almost complete loss of traffic to the pages, and shows the visitor focus moving to those pages with bins and recycling information and with coronavirus advice.

### 1 January – 29 February 2020

| Website Page Views                    | Total Page Views | Unique Page Views |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Views</b>                          | <b>516,999</b>   | <b>336, 594</b>   |
| <b>Top 10 Pages visited</b>           |                  |                   |
| 1. /Home Page                         | 88,445           | 63,512            |
| 2. /Leisure                           | 34,120           | 16,708            |
| 3. /Staff Intranet                    | 26,568           | 17,445            |
| 4. /Staff Intranet Apps               | 16,691           | 13,640            |
| 5. /Bin Collection Calendar           | 13,507           | 8,891             |
| 6. /Jobs                              | 11,627           | 6,466             |
| 7. /Leisure - Swimming                | 9,559            | 5,643             |
| 8. /Leisure - Classes - Greenvale LC  | 7,858            | 2,954             |
| 9. /Leisure - Classes                 | 7,723            | 4,887             |
| 10. /Leisure - Classes - Dungannon LC | 7,537            | 3,629             |

### 1 March – 30 April 2020

| Website Page Views                   | Total Page Views | Unique Page Views |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Views</b>                         | <b>335,635</b>   | <b>225,766</b>    |
| <b>Top 10 Pages visited</b>          |                  |                   |
| 1. /Home Page                        | 72,793           | 49,181            |
| 2. /Bin Collection Calendar          | 18,284           | 12,356            |
| 3. /Staff Intranet                   | 14,800           | 10,090            |
| 4. /Staff Intranet Apps              | 11,384           | 9,038             |
| 5. /Coronavirus Advice & Information | 9,913            | 6,457             |
| 6. /Recycling Centres                | 7,648            | 4,512             |
| 7. /Leisure                          | 7,365            | 4,037             |
| 8. /Bins & Recycling                 | 6,122            | 4,057             |
| 9. /Contact us                       | 4,499            | 3,005             |
| 10. /Bin Collection Day              | 4,408            | 3,191             |

#### *Social Media*

The Council's Facebook page has functioned as a key channel during the pandemic and activity was substantially higher in March and April when compared to January and February, as more residents used the page as a source of information. The peak of activity was in March following the contraction of services and the closure of leisure, arts and cultural centres and recycling centres.

As changes stabilised in April, engagement metrics fell slightly but still not anywhere near pre COVID-19 levels. Posting on the account by the service continued apace with activity increasing exponentially month on month in the first four months of 2020.

|                     | January   | February  | March        | April      |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|------------|
| <b>No. of posts</b> | <b>43</b> | <b>47</b> | <b>75</b>    | <b>105</b> |
| Comments            | 131       | 229       | <b>469</b>   | 382        |
| Shares              | 421       | 678       | <b>1779</b>  | 1232       |
| Likes               | 826       | 975       | <b>3335</b>  | 2972       |
| New Followers       | 460       | 629       | <b>1021</b>  | 632        |
| Conversation Rate   | 3.05      | 4.87      | <b>6.25</b>  | 3.64       |
| Amplification Rate  | 9.79      | 14.43     | <b>23.72</b> | 11.73      |
| Applause Rate       | 19.21     | 20.74     | <b>44.47</b> | 28.20      |

Conversation, amplification and applause rates are all over twice as high in March as visitors sought information on and reacted to announcements.

However, of the top five Facebook posts which drew the highest number of comments in March, only one was overwhelmingly positive (the re-purposing of Meadowbank Sports Arena for Bloc Blinds), with much of the conversation in other posts showing negative reactions to closures, particularly with regard to cemeteries and recycling centres.

Nonetheless, the metrics show that, regardless of positive or negative responses to developments which were largely beyond the Council's control, visitors were using the page as a go-to place for information which helps to cement the Council's role as a trusted source for information, particularly in times of crisis or emergency.

#### **Top Five Facebook Posts (1 January – 30 April) Using Engagement Metric**

| <b>Post</b>                                       | <b>Reach</b> | <b>Engagement</b> | <b>Comments</b> | <b>Shares</b> | <b>Reactions</b> |
|---|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------|
| Bloc Blinds Meadowbank repurposing 31 March       | 110,607      | 22,229            | 191             | 570           | 1,727            |
| Cemeteries Closure due to EO Regs 30 March        | 29,633       | 11,153            | 101             | 148           | 141              |
| Cemeteries Reopening due to EO directive 24 April | 26,031       | 5,115             | 102             | 155           | 341              |

|  |        |       |    |    |     |
|--|--------|-------|----|----|-----|
| Fly-tipping Incidents<br>2 April           | 15,393 | 7,455 | 59 | 45 | 148 |
| OM Opening<br>– 2 months<br>to go<br>3 Feb | 14,652 | 1,334 | 40 | 26 | 149 |

### Facebook Private Messages

|            |            |            |          |          |          |          |
|------------|------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| April 2020 | April 2020 | March 2020 | Feb 2020 | Jan 2020 | Dec 2019 | Nov 2019 |
| <b>70</b>  | <b>70</b>  | <b>67</b>  | 25       | 40*      | 24       | 28       |

\*In January 2020, private messages spiked as a result of a route change to bin collections.

The Council's Twitter account mirrors the trends observed on Facebook:

|                         | January   | February  | March        | April     |
|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| <b>No. of posts</b>     | <b>69</b> | <b>49</b> | <b>71</b>    | <b>91</b> |
| Comments                | 18        | 21        | <b>54</b>    | 46        |
| Shares                  | 138       | 281       | <b>521</b>   | 367       |
| Likes                   | 429       | 373       | <b>1025</b>  | 827       |
| New Followers           | 83        | 76        | <b>144</b>   | 99        |
| Average Engagement Rate | 1.0%      | 1.4%      | 1.6%         | 1.8%      |
| Conversation Rate       | 0.26      | 0.43      | <b>0.76</b>  | 0.51      |
| Amplification Rate      | 2.00      | 5.73      | <b>7.34</b>  | 4.03      |
| Applause Rate           | 6.22      | 7.61      | <b>14.44</b> | 9.09      |

### Twitter Direct Messages

|            |            |          |          |          |          |
|------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| April 2020 | March 2020 | Feb 2020 | Jan 2020 | Dec 2019 | Nov 2019 |
| <b>13</b>  | <b>7</b>   | 2        | 1        | 2        | 5        |

### Leisure Facebook Pages

Marketing and Communications has also been leading the content planning and delivery for the leisure-related social media channels.

Despite the closures of the facilities, analysis indicates that engagement has either been maintained, or in the cases of Greenvale and Maghera Leisure Centres, Mid Ulster Sports Arena and Meadowbank Sports Arena, increased.

In addition, prior to the pandemic and the closures, the service had also been involved more directly in developing content and posting on both Cookstown and Dungannon Leisure Centres pages (#MeetTheTeam campaign in Cookstown as part of the work completed by the service to profile the Fitness Suite refurbishment resulted in extremely high engagement figures over the period; the campaign for the reopening of Dungannon Leisure Centre which included posting content as well as responding to a substantial number of online comments) and this is reflected in the high engagement rates from 30 January to 15 March).

|                                | Conversation | Amplification | Applause | Posts | Comments | Shares | Likes |
|--------------------------------|--------------|---------------|----------|-------|----------|--------|-------|
| <b>Cookstown LC</b>            |              |               |          |       |          |        |       |
| 30 Jan – 15 Mar                | 3.89         | 4.47          | 31.08    | 36    | 140      | 161    | 1119  |
| 16 Mar – 30 Apr                | 3.74         | 5.44          | 18.59    | 39    | 146      | 212    | 725   |
| <b>Dungannon LC</b>            |              |               |          |       |          |        |       |
| 30 Jan – 15 Mar                | 6.49         | 3.97          | 28.97    | 39    | 253      | 155    | 1130  |
| 16 Mar – 30 Apr                | 1.84         | 4.68          | 10.97    | 38    | 70       | 176    | 417   |
| <b>Greenvale LC</b>            |              |               |          |       |          |        |       |
| 30 Jan – 15 Mar                | 2.36         | 1.11          | 10.89    | 56    | 132      | 62     | 610   |
| 16 Mar – 30 Apr                | 4.92         | 6.21          | 23.21    | 38    | 187      | 236    | 882   |
| <b>Maghera LC</b>              |              |               |          |       |          |        |       |
| 30 Jan – 15 Mar                | 0.54         | 0.46          | 4.54     | 28    | 15       | 13     | 127   |
| 16 Mar – 30 Apr                | 1.39         | 2.61          | 6.03     | 36    | 50       | 94     | 217   |
| <b>Mid Ulster Sports Arena</b> |              |               |          |       |          |        |       |
| 30 Jan – 15 Mar                | 0.85         | 2.04          | 4.52     | 27    | 23       | 55     | 122   |
| 16 Mar – 30 Apr                | 0.74         | 1.59          | 5.26     | 27    | 20       | 43     | 142   |
| <b>Meadowbank Sports Arena</b> |              |               |          |       |          |        |       |
| 30 Jan – 15 Mar                | 0.14         | 0.55          | 1.05     | 22    | 3        | 12     | 23    |
| 16 Mar – 30 Apr                | 0.86         | 1.71          | 4        | 28    | 24       | 48     | 112   |
| <b>Moneymore Rec Centre</b>    |              |               |          |       |          |        |       |
| 30 Jan – 15 Mar                | 0.11         | 0.11          | 0.53     | 36    | 4        | 4      | 19    |
| 16 Mar – 30 Apr                | 0.062        | 0.5           | 1.06     | 16    | 1        | 8      | 17    |

*Note: for the sake of accurate comparison over time, the evaluated timescale is 46 days pre COVID 19 closure and 46 days post COVID 19 closure.*

## Core Service Activity Levels

News releases issued in March and April 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.*

|                   | <b>No issued</b> | <b>Breakdown by service area:</b>  |
|-------------------|------------------|--|
| <b>March 2020</b> | 20               | COVID-19 9; Economic Development 2; Planning 2; Environment & Property 2; Chair's Business 2; Public Health and Infrastructure 1; Leisure 1; Corporate 1 |
| <b>April 2020</b> | 21               | COVID-19 9; Public Health and Infrastructure 4; Environment & Property 3; Chair's Business 3; Economic Development 1; Culture and Arts 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>March 2020</b> | 50                 | 39                         | Immediate                    | 9hrs<br>10mins               | COVID-19            |
| <b>April 2020</b> | 69                 | 7                          | 19mins                       | 14hrs<br>13mins              | COVID-19            |

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22 May 2020