

Agenda Item 34.

TITLE	Covid-19 Communications and Engagement Response
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 September 2020
WARD	None specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Communities, Insight & Change - Keeley Clements

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The report details the communications and engagements response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee consider the key challenges, responses and conclusions set out in the report.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Covid-19 pandemic is having a significant impact on all our residents, businesses and communities. It has also had a transformative impact on the way WBC provides many of its services.

This report summarises how the council sought to support the community through the pandemic with timely and targeted communications.

Background

At the start of the pandemic, WBC set six objectives for its communications:

- Provide accurate information on Public Health and Government guidance and regulations
- Explain changes to WBC services and facilities
- Promote and explain the Wokingham Borough Community Response and other support available
- Help communities and individuals people cope with Covid-19 and lockdown
- Celebrate the contribution of volunteers and key workers
- Promote the role of WBC across the community

Although Covid-19 effected all residents, targeted communications and engagement was required for some groups who were identified as at greater risk:

- People with underlying health conditions
- BAME communities
- Older people

Communications channels used:

Channel	Target and purpose
Social media	All residents: to provide regular, timely communications to support all objectives
Printed flyer delivery	All residents, with particular target of those who are not digitally active
Weekly local newspaper advertisement	All residents, with particular target of those who are not digitally active
Media releases	All residents
Wokingham Borough Connect (email newsletter to 40,000 addresses)	All residents
Direct communication with voluntary and community sector	All residents, with particular target at vulnerable families, vulnerable adults and older people
Direct communication to BAME groups	BAME community: direct communication via the WBC community engagement and localities team
Direct communication with vulnerable	People with underlying medical conditions contacted directly via Adult Social Care and the Wokingham Borough Community Response
Elected members and town and parish councils	Elected members and town & parishes kept regularly informed in order to help them disseminate accurate messages

Social media

Social media has been the main channel for WBC Covid communication. This is because of the advantages it offered over other forms:

- Timeliness – WBC has needed to issue messages at very short notice throughout the Pandemic (for instance when Government guidance has changed with no warning). Social media can be produced quickly, published instantly and disseminated swiftly.
- Cost-effectiveness – the vast volume of Covid-19 messages that WBC had to issue (in particular during the peak of the pandemic) necessitated use of a low-resource channel – social media can be produced quickly by staff and is free to distribute
- Reach – although social media has its limitations and cannot be relied upon exclusively, its reach is extensive compared to traditional media.
- Appropriateness during lock-down – Social media had the ability to reach people in their homes when their movements were restricted by lock-down and without the need for physical contact – it is a socially-distanced form of communication in contrast to printed material

Printed flyer distribution

A flyer detailing how people could access support from the Wokingham Borough Community Response was distributed to residents across the borough. Due to the short-timescales a Royal Mail delivery was not possible (lead-time is about three weeks) therefore a delivery company supported by volunteer deliver through town and parish councils was used. The flyer provided information on how people could get support and how people could volunteer to help in the Community Response.

Weekly advertisement in local newspaper

From April 22 to June 30 (16 weeks) WBC took out weekly adverts in The Wokingham Paper. These varied from wrap adverts (front, inside front, back and inside back), double page spreads and single pages depending on the messages being delivered. The channel was one of the ways we aimed to reach those people who are not active on social media.

Media releases

Given the fast-changing nature of the WBC's response to the pandemic in its early stages, traditional media release were not always the most effective way to communicate updates and the local media was kept informed through regular one to one contacts from the Communications, Engagement and Marketing (CEM) team and Executive members. However, in other areas (such as promoting the community response, WBC support to residents and businesses and planned services changes, news releases were issued.

Wokingham Borough Connect (direct email bulletin to database of approx. 40,000 addresses)

Thanks to the relaxation of GDPR, WBC was able to collate its email databases (all those who have signed up to receive information on any subject) into a single Covid-19 list of addresses in order to provide them regular updates. In line with industry best practice, the bulletins are kept brief and factual with links provided to more information.

Direct communication with voluntary and community sector groups

The CEM team regularly attends the Covid-19 Voluntary Sector Action Group meetings to ensure two-way communication of keep issues. Updates are provided through this meeting for dissemination to the wider voluntary and community sector.

Direct communication with BAME community groups

When it became apparent that there was a national trend of higher Covid-19 rates among the BAME community, WBC instigated weekly direct contact (via the Communities and Localities team to provide information directly to BAME community groups and to receive feedback.

Direct communication with vulnerable people

WBC Children's Services and Adult Social Care maintained direct contact with vulnerable people (including those with underlying health conditions who were shielding) in order to

provide information and ensure essentials such as medicine and food could be delivered via the community response

Town and Parish Councils and elected members

Regular updates have been provided (via the leader of the council) to elected members and town & parish councils to give an overview of the Covid-19 situation and allow for accurate information to be disseminated.

ANALYSIS OF ISSUES

Key challenge: volume and range of issues:

At the height of the first wave, the number of issues that required communication was unprecedented: new government guidance and regulations, public health messages, WBC service updates, support schemes available all required regular promotion alongside specific issues such as PPE shortage, care home cases and indirect Covid related issues such as increases in domestic abuse, fly-tipping and mental health issues.

Response:

From Mid-March to June, the CEM team suspended all non-covid communications and increased its volume of social media posts (from an average of four per day to six) in order to ensure all issues could be covered. The team also adopted an informal shift pattern to ensure emergency communications and social media were monitored from 7am to 7pm and that sufficient resource was available at weekends. The reach of our social media posts during the pandemic has increased:

- Year-on-year average daily reach of Facebook posts March to August 2019: 6,700
- Year-on-year average daily reach of Facebook posts March to August 2020: 13,000

Weekly adverts were also taken out in the local paper in order to ensure key messages were communicated accurately.

Key challenge: Reaching residents who do not access social media

As outlined above social media has been the optimum method of communication during the pandemic. However, an estimated 30% of residents are not active on social media and therefore other methods needed to be deployed.

Response:

The local paper adverts helped but from April 17 the council was also able to directly email about 40,000 people via 'Wokingham Borough Connect' e-bulletin.

WBC has also used signage and poster to reinforce messages where appropriate – such as to promote social distancing in public spaces and mask wearing in shops and other buildings.

Key challenge: Getting messages to harder to reach groups

The key target groups for our Covid-19 communications included those who are harder to reach with standard communications, such as younger people and some members of the BAME community.

Response:

It is reasonable to assume that many members of the BAME community are reachable via our social media, however, due to the higher national infection rates, additional communication was provided through weekly contact from the community engagement / localities team to BAME community representative groups.

Younger people have been targeted through innovative use of social media including through expanded use of Instagram and initial use of TikTok.

Key Challenge: Conflicting priorities and messages

WBC communications has attempted to keep to national and guidelines and consistent messaging in order to provide residents with clear advice and information. At times, this has presented issues with conflicting priorities and/or messages, such as:

PPE – there was a national shortage in the early stages of the pandemic. WBC communications was asked to support a public appeal for PPE in order to ensure that local supply was maintained

Care Homes – WBC introduced measures to protect its care homes that went beyond Government guidance. This presented a communications challenge to highlight the positive, proactive support put in place without raising unnecessary fears in the community

Town / village centre recovery – as shops and other businesses have been allowed to re-open, WBC has had the potentially conflicting priorities of encouraging people to support them while minimising the risk of outbreaks

Test and Trace – the national shortage of lab capacity has led to difficulties for people attempting to access tests in many parts of the country, including Wokingham Borough. This issue has been exacerbated by people seeking tests when they do not need to according to government guidance. WBC communications has had to balance the need to encourage people to get tested when they need to (but only when they need to) with an overall desire to maintain public confidence in the system

Response:

WBC priority has been to protect and support for its own residents and so has been prepared to issue news release and public statement that challenge the government to rectify shortcomings. However, these have been balanced by the need to maintain public confidence and to demonstrate that the council was proactively seeking solutions. For example, WBC launched an appeal for PPE, but made it clear that our stocks were

always sufficient for need and that it was lobbying for more. Similarly, WBC did not simply publicise the issues being faced by care homes; these were placed in national context with a focus on the measures being put in place

CONCLUSION

In summary, the pandemic has presented unique challenges to WBC due to the volume of communication required under a single topic and the importance of that messaging: Covid-19 has touched everybody’s lives in fundamental ways and WBC has been one of the key organisations responsible for leading the community safely through the crisis.

The communications response to Covid has shown WBC is able to directly reach a large audience (approximately 24-26,000 actively opening the weekly e-bulletins and daily Facebook reach of 16,000 views a day at the peak of the first wave) and can provide information, advice and signposting to support across a wide-range of issues.

Communications to specific groups is more challenging and, where WBC has successfully achieve this during the pandemic, it has been through direct personal contact to community groups / contacts.

Younger people also remain a challenge for WBC communications and although progress has been made during the pandemic to develop channels that may be more attractive to this demographic (such as TikTok and Instagram) there are opportunities to develop these further and to explore alternative methods to build more engagement with this demographic.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	n/a	Yes	R
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	n/a	Yes	R
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	n/a	Yes	R

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
n/a

Cross-Council Implications
n/a

Public Sector Equality Duty	
Due regard has been given to WBC's duties under the Equality Act	
Reasons for considering the report in Part 2	
n/a	
List of Background Papers	
None	
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