

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10 September 2013

Report of the Chief Executive

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet

1 MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS – HERE & NOW

To review the benefits of Here & Now against alternative communication methods and the current associated costs of producing a quarterly newspaper.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 It has previously been agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should play a key role in the evaluation of a range of value for money reviews. The Committee has been asked to look at a series of service areas to evaluate the scope for change and the potential to generate savings. Members of Overview and Scrutiny have been split into review groups to tackle the issues. The review group looking at “Media and Communications – Here & Now” met on 7 August 2013 and is now able to present the findings for formal endorsement and recommendation to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

1.2 Here & Now

1.2.1 Here & Now is produced on a quarterly basis with a copy distributed to every household in the borough and to all borough councillors and employees. In addition, Tonbridge and Malling county councillors and MPs also receive a copy and a number of copies are sent to the Council’s leisure facilities. This equates to approximately 51,000 copies of each edition.

1.2.2 The Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity came into force on 31 March 2011 with local authorities required through the Local Government Act to have regard to the contents of the code in coming to any decision on publicity. The Code sets out a range of restrictions on the publicity aiming to increase transparency and reduce spending, including specific requirements for council newsletters so that they do not seek to emulate commercial newspapers in style or content. Where local authorities do commission or publish newsletters, newsheets or similar communications, they should not issue them more frequently than quarterly. In light of some councils not adhering to these

requirements, the legal status of the Code will be strengthened through its inclusion in the Local Audit & Accountability Bill currently going through Parliament. It is clear, therefore, that Government policy is now aiming to discourage the publication of Council newspapers. This would apply equally to Here & Now as currently printed but also to any other alternative format of council publication that might be considered.

- 1.2.3 According to LGA research, the average annual cost of a magazine or newspaper to a district council was £27,000 in 2008-09; in the same year Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council spent approximately £40,000.
- 1.2.4 The current Here & Now publication costs approximately £60,000 per annum, excluding staff costs. Of the £60,000 the total distribution costs are approximately £5,500 per edition– approximately £22,000 per annum. The remainder is spent on design and printing.
- 1.2.5 51,000 copies are produced every quarter with approximately 45,000 distributed by Royal Mail. An additional 4,600 copies are posted second class by Direct Mail by the distribution company LDS, directly located to homes in post code sectors that overlap other boroughs. This is done to avoid incurring extra printing costs and distributing Here & Now to homes outside Tonbridge and Malling. In addition all staff currently receives a copy thereby using the bulk of the 400 copies remaining from the 51,000 print run. Here & Now is also available on the Council website. The distribution dates have to be booked with Royal Mail well in advance and any changes to these dates would normally incur an additional £2k per edition.
- 1.2.6 There is currently limited evidence of the effectiveness of Here & Now. With this in mind a survey has been sent to the Residents' Panel asking specific questions about the publication. Interim results show that, of the 339 responses. 25.9% do not recall seeing Here & Now at all. However, of those who had said they had seen it, the majority had read some or all of it. Informal feedback has highlighted some concerns from residents about the content of Here & Now and its relevance. For example, residents in Tonbridge report they are less interested in articles about the Malling area and vice-versa.

1.3 Media and Communications Team

- 1.3.1 The LGA found that the average staff cost is 0.8FTE; while the Media and Communications Team has 1.41 FTE resources, it is not easy to establish how much of this resource is spent producing Here & Now. Discussions with the Media and Communications Team indicate that time spent on Here & Now is extremely variable – nearing deadlines it can equate to about 90% of their work load, however at quieter times, work on Here & Now would be minimal. As an average estimate, approximately 50% of the capacity within the team is directed at Here and Now. The total annual staff cost including on-costs in the Media and Communications Team is £60,652.

1.4 Technological Advances

- 1.4.1 Over past years, Here & Now has proved beneficial particularly regarding delivering key messages to residents, promotional items and signposting to events etc. However, there have been significant changes in the way people access media and many advances in technology since Here & Now has been in publication. The Council now makes far greater use of technology such as the website and texting. The benefits of these communication methods provide up to date information almost instantly and at very little cost.
- 1.4.2 There is currently a long lead in time between the print deadline and the distribution of Here & Now. In addition to long lead in times, a major limitation is that it is only issued four times a year; this makes it unsuitable for key information such as Welfare Reform where the changes are happening on an almost weekly basis.
- 1.4.3 There is also the issue of the large geographical area that Here & Now has to cover and the relevance of stories to all parishes in the borough. A local blogger questioned whether it is practical to use Here & Now to cover such a large area and still be effective.
- 1.4.4 A review of the Here & Now publication found that approximately 75% of the information was also available / advertised elsewhere in separate leaflets, newspapers, websites etc.

1.5 Interaction with local media

- 1.5.1 There have been many changes recently in relation to our interaction with local media organisations. Reporters are working in a fast-moving, challenging environment. Following financial cutbacks and advances in technology and the use of online/social media, the Media and Communications team have noticed the following issues:
- Requests to respond swiftly within media-set deadlines are becoming ever more insistent.
 - Reporters often leave their enquiries to the last minute but still expect a response in time for their print deadlines.
 - Reporters still demand a swift response even when print deadlines are not imminent because they want to post their stories online as soon as possible.
 - It is becoming increasingly difficult for Council service managers, who have limited capacity to fulfil the requirements of the media without increased support from the Media Team.

- There are fewer opportunities offered for radio and TV coverage of council-related stories as media outlets make cut backs to staff.

1.5.2 Currently capacity within the Media and Communications team makes responding to reporters/supporting officers across services increasingly difficult. Without the restraints of producing Here & Now, there would clearly be an opportunity for a more focussed and targeted approach to achieving the best possible outcome from local media groups. This is the “opportunity cost” of the Media and Communications staff not having capacity to develop proactive relationships with existing media outlets.

1.5.3 On this basis, the freeing up of staff time in the Media and Communications team, should the decision be taken to abandon Here & Now, would provide scope to develop a more positive relationship with local media and would enable the team to provide additional support to service managers when dealing with press enquiries thus enabling them to focus more on service delivery.

1.6 Other Authorities

1.6.1 Nine of the twelve Kent authorities are currently making use of Twitter and Facebook so that the public can keep up with events in their borough. These methods, including use of apps and websites, are becoming more and more popular and are considered a normal method of communicating by young people in particular. There may be some people (possibly older people) who struggle with new technology and may prefer to deal with paper documents. For these people there may be a need to provide alternative arrangements to keep them informed of some specific issues and this could be through the radio, direct contact, Tonbridge and Malling Seniors Forum, Parish magazines and notice boards, leaflets, posters and other advertising media.

1.7 Alternative Methods of Communication

1.7.1 The Media and Communications Team are currently restricted by the amount of staff resource required to complete each edition of Here & Now. This provides very little capacity within the team to further develop and utilise modern communication methods. However, an exercise was carried out detailing some alternative methods of communicating information and if there would be any associated costs to consider:

Method of communication	Costs associated
Press releases Supported by developing improved relationships with the media such as the KM/Courier/radio/other websites	Staff time Cost of using other media
Advertising	Staff time Design cost of advert Fee for placement varies dependent on location etc.

Thematic promotions to target groups e.g. banners, posters and leaflets	Staff time Design cost of materials Printing costs Distribution costs (postage / hand delivery)
Websites (Council website has now been adapted to run off Smartphones)	Staff time / training Web hosting
Parish council newsletters/notice boards	Staff time Depends on what is being placed – possible design/printing costs
Community Groups	Staff time
Direct e-mailing/mailings with schools, sports clubs, community groups, businesses, vulnerable groups, housing associations, CAB	Staff time
RSS feeds to website	Staff time (no revenue cost)
Development of My Account (information provided from our website, relating to a specific property – e.g. bin collections)	Staff time (no revenue cost)
Developing a T&M news app	Staff time Developer time / app purchase Publicity for launch of app
Gateway/Customer Services	Staff time Depends on what is being placed – possible design/printing costs
Local Advice Surgeries	Staff time (no revenue cost)
Partner organisations	Staff time (no revenue cost)
Twitter	Staff time (no revenue cost)
Facebook	Staff time (no revenue cost)
Educational workshops	Staff time
Electoral registration form/polling cards	Staff time Design cost of materials Printing costs

1.7.2 There are many alternatives including sending out information, for example, with the Council Tax bills or use of the radio in addition to the above which could be considered to reach those who are not technologically minded. There is also an opportunity to adapt our communication methods, focusing more on themed and targeted information sent direct to the relevant audience, rather than sending all information to all residents, regardless of whether it is relevant to them.

1.8 Legal Implications

1.8.1 The legal status of the Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity will be strengthened through its inclusion in the Local Audit & Accountability Bill currently going through Parliament.

1.8.2 Whilst not envisaged at this stage, should it become relevant at any point in the future, in accordance with the Council's Reorganisation, Redundancy and

Redeployment Procedure, any staff who may be impacted by future recommendations arising from the review, resulting from recommendations set out in this report, would be consulted about any likely changes.

1.9 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.9.1 A summary of potential cost savings are provided as follows:

- Total distribution costs – approximately £22,000 per annum
- Total design and printing costs – approximately £38,000 per annum

1.10 Risk Assessment

1.10.1 N/A

1.11 Equality Impact Assessment

1.11.1 See 'Screening for equality impacts' table at end of report and Annex 2

1.12 Recommendations

1.12.1 Following a discussion of the issues set out in the report to the Review Group, as summarised above, the following recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were agreed:

1. Due to the high costs of production and distribution of Here and Now, the limitations of the long lead in time, and the diversion of the staff resources in the Media team, and the need for the Council to identify cost savings to meet the targets set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy, Here and Now be discontinued from April 2014.
2. An exit strategy for Here and Now be prepared and reported to the appropriate Advisory Board setting out proposals for dealing with future Council publicity, press and media relations based on the following strands:
 - the need to free up the Council's media resources to establish closer and proactive relationships with local media and to enable them to provide increased support to Members and service managers across the Council on all media issues
 - to explore opportunities to direct resources towards the use of new technology including online/social media, and to undertake more targeted marketing to residents and others to get the right messages out to residents in the most appropriate format
 - That appropriate training on the use of online/social media be organised for Members and staff

3. An equalities impact assessment of this change in approach be prepared and be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee alongside these recommendations (Annex 1)
4. Consideration be given to additional engagement with local media, for example, to organise a future visit to the Kent Messenger radio studio to learn more about the technology used and any opportunities for the Council to further enhance our ability to communicate with residents

Background papers:

contact: Gill Fox

Nil

Julie Beilby
Chief Executive

Screening for equality impacts:		
Question	Answer	Explanation of impacts
a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community?	Yes	There may be some residents for whom the change from printed copy of Here & Now is a challenge as the proposed alternatives could be less immediately accessible to them. However, there is no intention to move all communication to the internet, but to use a range of communication methods to best suit the audience. Many may find the change in communication methods provides greater benefits to them. A full EqIA is attached as Annex 1 to this report.
b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality?	Yes	As above
c. What steps are you taking to mitigate, reduce, avoid or minimise the impacts identified above?		As above

In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above.