

THE REPORTER

BRIEFING NOTE FROM THE HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS TO TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES OSC 2 MAY 2013

Purpose of the Briefing Note

To update the Scrutiny Committee on developments regarding the council's newspaper The Reporter. This follows comments made by members when the committee considered the procurement proposals for the Reporter in September 2012.

Recommendations

- a) Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee accepts the information included within the report.
- b) The committee considers what comments it would like to make to the portfolio holder responsible for Communications, Transformation and Partnerships on future developments in relation to The Reporter.

Reasons

To keep the Scrutiny Committee informed of developments and actions following their previous consideration of matters relating to the council's newspaper the Reporter.

Background

In March 2013, contracts awarded to two separate companies for the print and distribution of the borough council's newspaper the Reporter expired. These contracts had been in place for four years. They were initially for a two-year period with options for negotiations with the contract providers for two separate 12-month extensions – both of which were taken up.

On 3 September 2012, Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a copy of a report which was to be considered by Cabinet on 19 September 2012 which confirmed a procurement process had taken place to recruit new service providers for print and distribution.

The report confirmed that although that process had resulted in a distribution provider being secured, only one company had come forward for the print element and because of this there were concerns that the council may not be able to demonstrate it would be getting value for money if it proceeded to appoint.

Cabinet were therefore to be asked to agree for a second print procurement process to go ahead at the earliest opportunity and for the results of that process to be reported back in due course.

This was done on 14 November with Cabinet accepting the appointment of new print and distribution providers.

Cabinet was told that trying a new approach on procurement had been very successful with nine print companies coming forward to supply tender documents. Cabinet noted that the agreement which had been secured with the Yorkshire Web print company would ensure an increase of around 30 per cent in the number of pages printed in the Reporter each year without the need to increase the Reporter print budgets.

Issues

At its meeting on 3 September 2012, the Scrutiny Committee raised a number of points which it asked officers to consider. Those points are addressed below and the information provided will hopefully enable members of the scrutiny committee to consider any further comments they would wish to make to the relevant portfolio holder.

Staffing

Members questioned whether there would be any impact on staff as a result of the new contracts agreed for 2013/14.

The Head of Communications can confirm that the agreements will not impact on staff. When the council took a decision to produce 10 editions each year, a freelance writer was brought in on a casual basis to produce additional material as and when required. This represented better value for money for the council as the freelance was self-employed and therefore the council did not have to meet any on-costs.

When the Government reviewed its guidelines on local authority publicity and said councils should produce no more than four publications each year, the agreement with the freelance was brought to an end at no cost to the council. All current research, writing, page design photography and advertising sales commitments for the Reporter are currently met in-house.

Different formats

Members asked whether producing The Reporter in a format different to a tabloid newspaper would help to reduce costs.

The most popular alternative to a newspaper format is an A4 magazine style format similar to Staffordshire County Council's "Your Staffordshire" magazine which residents in the borough should have delivered to their homes. Stoke-on-Trent City Council's "City Life" was produced in a similar A4 magazine format.

This type of format has been considered previously for the Reporter but was dismissed because production prices were actually higher than a tabloid newspaper.

Further research has recently taken place following the questions raised by scrutiny committee. And this has shown the price differential is still in the market place.

Quotes from service providers show that for 57,000 copies of a 16-page A4 magazine similar to "Your Staffordshire" would cost the borough council around £5,200 to print per edition or £20,800 a year.

The contract negotiated with Yorkshire Web – the council's new print provider - for 57,000 copies of a 16-page tabloid newspaper is around £2,000 per edition cheaper - equivalent to £8,000 a year.

There are several reasons for this. Principally, news print is still cheaper to buy than the higher grade paper which publishers of A4 magazines use.

Secondly, news print companies buy their paper in enormous volumes and can pass on some economies of scale to customers.

Thirdly, different finishing techniques are used for A4 magazines which can add costs. For instance, the county council's magazine is spine glued and rotary trimmed to a finished specific size.

Advertising

Members questioned whether the number of external advertisements had increased or decreased in recent years.

Figures show revenue from external sources in the last three financial years as:

2012/13 - £8,208

2011/12 - £16,834

2010/11 - £9,838

Some analysis of the figures has taken place and this would suggest a gradual reduction in the placement of advertisements by external parties.

In 2010/11, the council was involved in an agreement with a private company which sold advertising space on its behalf. Revenues were split on a 50/50 basis which means the total revenue for that year was £19,676.

That company ceased to trade at the beginning of the 2011/12 financial year and the sale of advertising space and the associated graphics work was taken in-house despite a reduction in staffing levels in the Communications Department and concerns over a lack of expertise in this specialist sales area.

Sales did fall and it can be seen that revenue went down by around 20 per cent and this downward trend has continued in the current financial year.

It should be noted that four publications a year adheres to the Recommended Code of Practice on Local Authority Publicity which was revised by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in 2011.

Online v hard copy

Members asked whether there could be a greater focus on an online Reporter and if this could help to reduce the number of printed copies produced for each edition.

The Reporter is placed online after each edition is produced. Page turning technology is used to make this a very user-friendly experience for residents.

There are a number of difficulties with trying to focus on reducing hard copies and encouraging residents to get Reporter news purely online.

They are:-

- a) Management of a delivery database – this would be a huge task with almost 55,000 addresses in the borough. Maintaining an up-to-date resource for which homes have opted for online news alone would be a monumental task as it would have to be refreshed four times a year.
- b) A different delivery mechanism would have to be introduced which would involve the council paying for hard copies to be delivered as second class mail. This would cost far more than the current system which involves the council using the Royal Mail “walk sort” arrangements where all postal staff deliver en masse to homes in the borough during a six day delivery window.
- c) Costs – the staff costs and distribution costs associated with this idea would far outweigh any financial savings. Members should bear in mind the new Reporter contracts recently negotiated will mean that in the year ahead it will cost around £5,800 to print and then deliver a Reporter to all homes in the borough.

Change of design style

Members questioned whether the style of the Reporter could be revamped.

Over the years the look of the Reporter has changed significantly as you can see in Appendix A which accompanies this report.

This continual development and re-design is often only really noticed once editions which reflect changes of style and design are placed alongside each other.

Since the Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee raised the issue at its previous meeting there have been further changes to reflect comments and indeed, these have been noticed by some senior elected members who have contacted the Communications Department to pass on their comments and favourable views over how the council's newspaper currently looks.

Some of the most recent production changes include:-

- A change to the type of news print used for the Reporter. The new type of print is 60gsm and is 100 per cent recycled improved news print.
- A review of working practices in the Communications Department to increase the time devoted to design/production processes. This has resulted in an improved design quality on pages which helps the reader access information.
- Increased training and new working practices for the in-house photography.

Some of the most recent style/design changes are intended to give a cleaner, modern up-to-date look to pages. They include:-

- * Fewer heavy boxes around content and the removal of boxes around photographs; greater use of subtle tints and colour blocks to differentiate new items. This creates a lighter, more cohesive look.
- * A fine rule is used to separate certain features and advertisements.
- * Cut-out photographs with pull quotes used to highlight and break-up text.
- * A cleaner masthead and "inside panel" introduced together with re-designed "footers" that link pages and promote key messages.
- * To create a more consistent feel, headlines are restricted to 60pt and straplines (in colour) are 18pt.
- * A cleaner, easy to read font family was selected to give variety and emphasis - bold and medium sans and sans serif fonts are used for text. The general size used is eight and a half point to give more characters to a line and therefore more text to a page whilst remaining very legible and easy to read. Introduction paragraphs to main stories are in 10pt.
- * The overall colour scheme uses blue and green to reflect the council's own corporate colours. The use of actual corporate colours are reserved for council ads and logos etc.