

Meeting:	Publications Advisory Panel
Date:	November 7, 2006
Subject:	Harrow People
Key Decision: (Executive-side only)	No
Responsible Officer:	Peter Brown
Portfolio Holder:	Cllr Paul Osborn
Exempt:	No
Enclosures:	None

SECTION 1 – SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To consider and comment on the future direction of council publications

SECTION 2 - REPORT

The Harrow People, Harrow Council's magazine, is delivered to every home and business in the borough. It is produced by the council's Communications Unit. It is the only publication in the borough that reaches every household and business.

There is evidence that the magazine is popular and well-read. Indeed, a readership survey in December last year produced a 90 per cent approval rating (albeit that respondents were encouraged to take part in the survey by a prize draw for a free meal at a local restaurant!).

Research conducted nationally by MORI consistently shows that residents cite council publications as one of their top three preferred sources of council information. An independent report commissioned by the Government shows that raising awareness of council services generally leads to higher levels of satisfaction.

The residents' satisfaction survey conducted for Harrow Council by MORI this year showed an 11 per cent increase in satisfaction levels when people were asked if they felt adequately communicated with by the council. This significant increase was put down to the fact that the Harrow People began monthly publication last year.

The magazine has a budget of £24,000 pa. It costs approximately £13k to print and £5.5k to distribute. It earns additional income from advertising but of late this has been difficult to attract, particularly since the council recruitment freeze. Consequently there is sufficient funding to publish one further edition in this financial year, and that is planned for January as part of the council tax consultation.

Reductions in personnel in the Communications Unit, for financial reasons, mean that the editorial resource for producing the magazine is severely stretched.

There are a number of options for consideration when looking at the position for the next financial year and beyond:

Scrap the magazine altogether

The web refresh project will provide a more accessible, improved website which will give the Communications Unit web team increased flexibility. News items, campaigns, council adverts etc will be placed on the website in any event.

The obvious advantage is one of cost saving. The disadvantage is that not everyone knows how to use websites or, even if they do, would not necessarily look at the council website unless they had specific reason to do so.

Reach an arrangement with the local papers

This idea has been informally discussed with the local newspapers and was tried out a couple of times in the Harrow Observer. It involves the local paper setting

aside six or eight pages every four or six weeks which is purely for council news. They use 50 per cent of the space for advertising (they keep the income) and give us the remaining 50per cent of space for us to fill as we wish, with a guarantee they will not interfere with the editorial content. In other words, it's a council advertorial.

The advantage again is cost: apart from officer time, there is no financial outlay. The disadvantage is that not everyone reads local papers. The circulation of the Harrow Observer in Harrow is less than 8,000 (with a population of over 200,000 that's a poor penetration). The free Leader newspaper circulates to around 70,000 and the Harrow Times to around 75,000. Issues surrounding favouring one newspaper in preference to another may also need to be considered.

Continue as a monthly publication produced "in house"

This would involve considerable additional budget to allow for printing and distribution as well as additional resource to cover editorial and design services. A resource to generate advertising income would also need to be considered.

Continue as a two-monthly publication produced "in house"

Same points as above, but to a lesser degree. Although costs would be lower, the appeal to advertisers of a less regular publication is less attractive.

Continue as a quarterly publication produced "in house"

This reverts to the Harrow People position of five or so years ago. The considerations mentioned in the two monthly option also apply.

Outsource entirely

There are a number of companies or consultants who would produce a magazine for a set fee. Some may consider producing the magazine on a commercial footing (ie a small fee from the council and they take any profit from advertising) as the product has a goodwill value. Tender arrangements would need to be made.

Look for partners in Harrow

All public bodies in Harrow need to publicise messages and campaigns for the public. The police and health trusts in particular struggle to get their positive messages across, but voluntary groups and other community services also frequently need to appeal for help or promote a message in an effective and efficient way.

Initial soundings with the police indicate they would be willing to look at any such proposal and about a year ago the health and hospital trusts locally were initially interested. Further exploration of this option would need to result in a business plan that would be acceptable to all parties. Any publication produced under such an arrangement would probably change the "flavour" of the magazine from a "council" publication to a "public sector" style community magazine.

Look for partners in west London

Many local authorities are reviewing their council publications. Some are considering publishing 13 times a year so they can register as a newspaper and consequently publish their own public notices and planning notices, saving advertising costs in the local press.

Others are considering the type of options outlined above. Across London some boroughs have a two-monthly distribution; others a monthly publication; at least one has a fortnightly and one has a weekly.

A neighbouring authority contacted Harrow informally a few weeks ago wondering if we would be interested in a sharing of advertising. The theory is that if all six west London authorities placed the same ads in their publications where appropriate, the combined circulations (over half a million) would be more attractive to certain advertisers than simply advertising in one borough publication at a time. If such an arrangement came to fruition it could lead to increased income and shared editorial costs, thereby reducing expenditure. However the idea is only in a very early stage.

Different format

While the panel is considering options for Harrow People, it may be appropriate to consider the format of any future publications.

The current A4, full colour format is attractive but not the most cost efficient. It also means we are unable to produce the magazine on recycled paper. A newspaper format would be cheaper, even with fully recycled paper, but the quality of production would not be so high.

Distribution

Members may also want to consider distribution. Letterbox Distribution currently deliver the magazine to 90,000 households, 3,000 businesses and the remainder (7,000) as a “bulk drop” to council outlets, libraries and some supermarkets. They are the best of the bunch of distributors we have used over the years, but even then they cannot guarantee 100 per cent delivery. They aim – and seemingly achieve – for a 93 per cent delivery, which is higher than other delivery systems. We receive far fewer complaints of non delivery or “dumping” than we used to.

Delivery costs up to £5,500 – a figure that could drop dramatically if bulk drops only at supermarkets and other well visited outlets were used, however there are clear risks associated with such a move.

SECTION 3 - STATUTORY OFFICER CLEARANCE

Chief Finance Officer

Name: Myfanwy Barrett

	Date: 2/11/2006
Monitoring Officer	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Name: Hugh Peart
	Date: 3/11/2006

SECTION 4 - CONTACT DETAILS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

Contact: Peter Brown

Background Papers: *None.*