

**Publications Advisory Panel.
8 March, 2007.**

APPENDIX 1

Harrow People

This report follows a request from members of the Publications Advisory Panel at their last meeting on 7 November 2006. Members considered the financial difficulties of Harrow People, particularly in the context of the council's current financial position. They agreed that it could be beneficial to work with partners in the production of a regular magazine and asked for a feasibility report looking at such a possibility. They additionally indicated that a regular publication, possibly up to 13 editions a year, would be desirable.

Executive summary

There is widespread agreement from public sector bodies that a regular publication for the residents and businesses of Harrow would be beneficial. In the current financial climate however, there is little willingness or ability to commit significant finance.

In order to meet the expectation, while at the same time taking a low-risk, altruistic view of the future, this report recommends that a new-look publication on a monthly basis could be produced. However, it concludes that such a publication is not immediately viable and suggests a number of courses of further action for members to consider.

A mock-up design of such a publication will be produced for members to consider at the panel meeting.

The need to communicate

There is ample evidence to show that the more local authorities communicate with their customers, the more favourably their customers react. Even if the news is bad, evidence shows that at least people appreciate receiving it. (IDeA communications report 2004).

The Connecting with Communities report, which involves detailed research commissioned by the Government in 2005, shows that raising awareness of council services generally leads to higher levels of satisfaction. It says: "Communications is a fundamental component in how residents judge the image of their council."

In Harrow, as part of its research into the desirability of a Residents Information Pack, the Overview and Scrutiny report to the February 2007 Cabinet said :“We do consider Harrow People to be an effective and valued source of information for local people.”

The MORI residents survey, commissioned by the council and published last summer, showed an 11 point increase in satisfaction levels when people were asked if they felt adequately communicated with. This was the biggest single increase in all of the council’s performance measures, and drew the comment from the MORI analysts that “whatever we were doing, we were doing right”.

What we were doing was producing a monthly edition, for the first time, of Harrow People.

Sadly, a sample review in the autumn of 2006 showed a significant drop in customer satisfaction levels, and although this is largely thought to be due to other factors, the ending of a monthly edition of Harrow People coincided with this fall.

How people learn about their local services

The way people receive their information is changing rapidly, and consequently presenting difficult challenges for public sector communications.

Throughout the country newspaper circulations, both nationally and locally, are in decline and media groups are looking increasingly to the web and other digital forms of communication to find a readership.

The position is the same in Harrow. The circulation of the Harrow Observer has declined steadily in recent years and it now sells just under 9,000 in the borough. In a borough with a population of over 210,000 it is clearly not being read by everyone. The Trinity Mirror group, which owns the Observer, has put the newspaper up for sale along with other titles it owns in west London.

The Harrow Times circulates 76,000 copies throughout the borough - but not to every part of it - and there is no evidence as to how many people read the paper and how many throw it away as a “freebie”. However, there is evidence that free newspapers are holding their own, certainly in advertising revenue, as the rise of Metro, London Lite and The London Paper show.

Both Harrow newspapers are rapidly developing their web sites and concentrating on “breaking news” to attract new readers. This development is only a few months in development so it is too early to say what, if any, impact it is having.

Harrow is not specifically served by any radio station – the nearest “localised” station being Sunrise Radio, based in Ealing, which concentrates on the west London area. There are no specific news/feature magazines for the borough, nor any community TV station.

There are a number of well-read and appreciated community newsletters, often produced by residents’ associations, but they are not designed nor intended to be borough-wide and consequently are of limited scope.

The whole issue of where residents obtain their information in today’s information-saturated society is a complex one. It is important that the council knows however, so that it can plan an effective communication strategy and be able to target specific information at specific groups. This information will also be of use to our partners. A review and information audit has been commissioned and the results will be known in the spring.

Harrow People

Whatever the outcome of the communications review, it is likely that the distribution of an easy-to-read, factual free magazine containing relevant news and information will be welcome.

Harrow People, the council’s magazine, remains the only publication delivered to every home and business in the borough. It delivers 87,000 to every home; 6,000 to every business and the rest are placed in public areas, including libraries. It is overwhelmingly well received. In the last readership survey, in January, 2006, more than 90 percent expressed satisfaction with the editorial and design. The figure was similar for 2005.

This is not too surprising. Surveys conducted nationwide (Statistical review ODPM et al) consistently show that council magazines are in the top three when people are asked how they prefer to learn about council information.

Websites are naturally in the ascendancy, and Harrow Council’s website is no exception. The number of individual users now totals 30,000 plus a month, but many of these are customers completing transactions and not necessarily reading the news and information pages.

We are a long way off – if ever – being a completely web-informed society, and current thinking is that websites will eventually support and enhance a more targeted printed media.

Most London boroughs produce their own council magazines on a monthly basis, often heavily subsidised. Harrow’s neighbours act as follows : Brent (monthly); Hounslow (monthly) Hillingdon (monthly); Ealing (monthly); Barnet (bi-monthly); Hertfordshire (quarterly).

In Tower Hamlets the council produces its own weekly newspaper East End Life, with a budget of £350,000 and a staff of ten, much to the chagrin of the local newspaper the East London Advertiser which is considering a legal challenge on the basis that local authorities are “not in the newspaper business”.

This is an extreme development but it is being watched keenly by public sector communication professionals as well as local newspapers. It arose through a familiar scenario. Tower Hamlets Council felt it was not being treated fairly in the editorial columns of the local newspaper and consequently felt it was not getting its message over as it wished.

The council's partners

Local authorities have long produced their own publications, but the culture is relatively rare with many other public sector organisations such as the police or health trusts or within the voluntary sector. Strangely, perhaps, communications has not yet caught up with the closer, cross-working relationships our public and voluntary services now engage in.

The idea of a regular publication featuring news and campaigns from all of Harrow's front line services has been warmly received. Chief Inspector Richard Freeman, who has taken over as head of Harrow Police until a new commander is in place, feels there should be a magazine that's “a true partnership production”. Richard Milner, director of operations for Harrow PCT said “In terms of concept we would certainly be interested”. Informal discussions with voluntary groups elicited a similar response.

The principal attraction for our partners is that they are able to sell the message they wish to give to a *mass audience* and *In a way in which they have an element of control,*

In Harrow our newspapers are generally supportive of public sector initiatives but they argue, probably justifiably, that it is not the local newspaper's job to be the mouthpiece for Harrow Council and its partners. Therefore, they will often present stories in a manner or design that the council and its partners would not ideally wish to see.

This is not a criticism. It is a fact of life. A good example is the key priority to reduce the perception of crime. A newspaper may report a new initiative to reduce the perception of crime but in the same issue run a story more predominantly about a major crime that has taken place. Consequently the message is diluted and, even worse, sends mixed messages to a confused reader. But it is a newspaper's job to report the news.

A council/partnership publication on the other hand can produce the perception of crime initiative without the distraction of “breaking news” and thus leave the reader with the clear message that although crime undoubtedly exists, something positive is taking place to combat it.

Editorial control

One significant issue to be faced if a “partnership” publication is to be followed, is how such a publication will be edited.

Naturally, if partners and voluntary groups are to participate in such a magazine, either financially or with time and effort, they will want to have some influence in the way their contribution is presented.

Yet the history of publishing teaches one clear lesson: it is not possible to edit by committee.

There are two possible strategies to follow:

The first is that any such publication is not a “full partnership” publication, but remains a council magazine, under council editorship, with pages sponsored and contributed to by sponsors.

The second is an independent editor meeting with an editorial panel on a regular basis and being reviewed by the panel on an annual basis. The panel would comprise members from the various partner organisations who would contribute the ideas and campaigns they would like to include in future editions.

The first option has already occurred to some extent with the current Harrow People. The January 07 edition, for instance, included a page from written and overseen by Harrow Police who contributed £1,000 for the page. A third of a page was written and overseen by Harrow in Business who contributed £400.

General financial issues

Informal discussions have shown that the idea of partnership publication for Harrow is widely supported in principle by a number of Harrow councillors, Harrow Police, Harrow Primary Care Trust, and representatives of voluntary and special interest groups.

In addition, the idea of such a publication has received interest from commercial enterprises, including both St Ann’s and St George’s managers, Harrow in Business and organisations such as housing associations.

Services within the council, particularly those with campaigns to promote, such as recycling, road safety, electoral services, will also be able to add financial

support. There is particular interest from Cultural Services, who see a regular Harrow publication reaching the entire population as essential to supporting events at the Arts Centre and Museum.

Some of these groups have suggested specific amounts of money, but for the majority it is difficult to commit specific sums as, often, marketing budgets are made available for specific projects.

An area of growing interest is “shared advertising” with other council magazines. There are a few examples of larger organisations approaching a number of council magazines to advertise in all of them at the same time in order to reach a mass audience. LB Brent is currently proactively exploring potential in this area.

Another area of potential income is to deliver other public sector leaflets with the Harrow publication. A recent example of this was the delivery of the Harrow Police “Meet the Harrows” leaflet in January 2007, which helped alleviate our distribution costs.

The budget available within the council for council publications and “other publications” in 07/08 is in the region of £30,000.

Jobs advertisements and public notices

An important area for potential revenue – and where the authority normally spends significantly on local newspaper advertising – is in the area of recruitment advertising and public/planning notices.

Expenditure on recruitment advertising has reduced considerably in the past year, mainly due to the freezing of filling posts, so it is difficult, and probably unwise, to estimate an income in this area. In addition, although many council vacancies can be advertised in the type of magazine considered here, a monthly publication is not always desirable, particularly if the post needs to be filled reasonably urgently.

Similarly, the regulations surrounding the publication of public notices/planning notices/highways orders etc presents something of a minefield. The authority spends an estimated £40k a year (based on an average half a page a week in a local newspaper) on such notices. However, in some instances, a weekly publication is necessary because of notice of appeal or consultation is time-linked. The law is not specific in every case about publication of public notices, other than to say that generally that public notices should be printed in a “newspaper circulating in the vicinity of the local authority”. The definition of a newspaper is not specified, but the assumption seems to be (source Newspaper Society) a publication produced at least on a weekly basis.

A number of local authorities have researched – and abandoned - the idea of publishing public notices in areas other than in local newspapers, particularly now that websites are more readily used. It appears however, that local authorities are waiting for someone to become a “test case”, and the only example that can be found of a local authority publishing its own public notices is in Tower Hamlets which, as mentioned earlier, produces its own weekly newspaper.

Income and expenditure

The current A4, full-colour 20 page edition of Harrow People costs £11,000 to print and £5,500 to distribute. The editorial and design is performed “in house”, but the estimated officer time for design and editorial is £4,000.

The total cost therefore of one edition is £20,500.

The production of a monthly edition would be £246,000

The current budget for Harrow People is £23,000 offset by £34,000 income. However, income receipts have not always been received and a net overspend has occurred on the publication. The Panel is asked to consider options that would not only maintain a publication within the borough, but also actioned within an approved budget. The Communications budget also contains a sum of £30,000 for expenditure on general council publications and it is suggested that this be made available for the periodic publication now under discussion.

In addition, based on informal discussions with interested parties, projected sources of funding and income for a new publication are estimated as follows:

Council campaigns (recycling, electoral services, etc)	20,000
Cultural services	10,000
Police	10,000
Other public sector	5,000
Harrow business/retail	8,000
Housing associations	6,000
Shared advertising	2,000
Jobs advertising	2,000
Income from additional distribution	1,000
TOTAL	£64,000

If these additional funding sources are realised, together with the net publications budget, this would make available estimated annual funds of £83,000 for a periodic publication. This is on the basis that the projected funding set out above is realised annually.

A way forward

Although the income estimates outlined above are deliberately cautious, it is clear that a Harrow People produced in its existing format on a monthly basis would be unviable.

Therefore, if the expectation and desire for a monthly publication is to be met within the practical budgetary constraints, a very different publication from that currently existing would need to be considered.

A “mock up” of a publication to be presented at the Publications Panel would cost approximately £4000 to print; £5,500 to deliver and approximately £700 to write/design – an annual cost of £122,400. This is in excess of the estimated provision that may be available, assuming the funding and income levels set out above are realised.

The mock up represents the very least that could be produced as a monthly publication. Consequently, financial viability is still in question.

The Panel is asked to give further consideration to the following options:

1. Should a two-monthly publication be pursued for the period of one year (projected expenditure £61,000 less other projected funding sources of £51,000 – ie £19,000 budget plus 50 per cent of expected funding sources set out above. This option results in a shortfall of £10,000.
2. Should a magazine launch be postponed until September and in the meantime a sales representative be employed on a commission basis to reach an income target? This option may require initial consultancy costs prior to income generation and would have to be met from the existing approved Communications budget. A further report would be made to the panel on the results of such a commission to enable a conclusion to be reached on the way forward.
3. Should a magazine based on the mock up be published on a monthly basis in the expectation that income will increase sufficiently to cover costs by the end of the financial year? This could be a risky approach when viewed against the current issue of poor income recovery and the need to keep within approved budgets.
4. Should a magazine launch be postponed until September to give time for the Harrow Strategic Partnership and other bodies to properly consider their financial support to such a publication and to the management arrangements for any such magazine. A further report would be made to the Panel on the results of such consultation to enable a conclusion to be reached on the way forward.