

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
CORPORATE AND PARTNERSHIPS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE

31st January 2011

REPORT ON PROGRESS ON OPTIONS FOR RESIDENT
COMMUNICATIONS

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide an update to the committee on progress made on exploring future options for resident communications and replacement for the council's newspaper NYTimes.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The Scrutiny committee reviewed a range of options for the council's resident newspaper at its meeting on 15th November 2010. The committee were provided with background information on NYTimes and its purpose, along with details of the government's consultation on the code of practice on local authority publicity.
- 2.2 The committee has been asked by full council to review the progress of the review of the production and distribution of NYTimes, prior to a decision by the Executive on its future.
- 2.3 The committee's previous meeting had requested a refinement of the possible options for future resident communications and replacement for NYTimes. These were to look at reducing its frequency and move to an online publication; reductions in format and pagination and finally exploring closer links and partnerships with local newspapers – or a combination of all of these options.
- 2.4 The primary purpose of NYTimes is to inform and consult the residents of North Yorkshire on county council services, as well as provide information on events and activities with specific local interest. The council has also been able to advertise vacancies and publish statutory notices, where that can be done lawfully.

3.0 Code of local authority publicity

- 3.1 The government has undertaken a consultation on revisions to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, which incorporates guidance on resident communication and council newspapers. It was expected that the guidance would be implemented

from 1st January 2011. The consultation closed in November, with a short Select Committee inquiry now underway, but, as yet, DCLG have not indicated when any new code would be published.

4.0 Review of NYTimes - costs

- 4.1 In light of the council's current significant budget pressures and the need to deliver significant levels of savings, the review of resident communications and NYTimes has focused on options which can deliver more significant levels of savings.
- 4.2 Removal and changes to NYTimes, will result in the council facing additional costs, which previously didn't exist. These costs occur as a result of display (or marketing) adverts and recruitment and some public notices, previously advertised in NYTimes, being placed in alternative publications, (usually local newspapers).
- 4.3 Potential costs from having to use local newspapers as an alternative, could amount to as much as £100k over 12 months, given that some adverts and notices will need to be included in more than one, to achieve the necessary coverage in geographical terms. An example in relation to public notices is the schools admissions notice, which would need to go in approximately nine local newspapers as it needs to cover the whole county, at a cost of potentially £46k.
- 4.4 Investigation into alternative options has taken into account these costs. Appendix A outlines approximate costs for the options considered.

5.0 Options - format, frequency and pagination

- 5.1 Whatever the frequency and pagination of any publication, it could be published in a number of formats. These include, but are not limited to: tabloid paper, A4 magazine, A5 magazine.
- 5.2 Within these formats, different weights and finishes of paper and types of binding can be used to create a variety of products. Newsprint is probably the cheapest option and it could be used with any of the size options.

Annual publication

- 5.3 An annual publication would require careful timing and consideration could be given to two alternative timings;
 - publishing in March, following the budget decisions (covering details of spending plans and priorities for the coming year, innovations in services, major developments and capital projects, as well as looking back at achievements from the preceding year), or;

- publishing in the Autumn, allowing consultation on the coming budget (as well as publishing the statutory information on winter highways maintenance, schools admission information, etc).

5.4 An annual publication could also contain general information – such as how to contact the council and details of councillors – and updates about the council’s key services and objectives, (for example, road safety, recycling, adult care, adult learning). It obviously couldn’t meet the requirements for statutory notices, specific job vacancies or event listings.

5.5 An annual publication could benefit from a substantial number of pages, while still giving a considerable overall reduction on the number of pages annually in NY Times. The number of pages could be multiplied if the size was reduced to A4 or A5. The change in format would affect the nature of the publication, with the smaller size suited more to a kind of ‘county council handbook’, a ‘guide to services’.

Bi-annual publication

5.6 A twice-yearly publication would allow similar content to an annual publication, but could be timed to offer maximum scope for accommodating time-sensitive information and consultations. For example;

- Spring/summer; budget spending decisions and impact, spring/summer recycling/composting campaign, road safety campaigns, literature festival promotion, CultureShock promotion, fostering and adoption campaigns.
- Autumn/winter; budget consultation, highways winter maintenance information, school admissions guide, adult learning courses, school meals service, families information service.

5.7 As with an annual publication, general information and updates about key services and objectives could be included (contact information, guide to councillors, etc.).

5.8 A bi-annual publication could be designed with four, eight, 12 or 16 pages, though as something that is published only twice a year, a higher number of pages would provide greater scope.

Quarterly publication

5.9 A quarterly frequency would allow a degree of topicality, in that it could usefully look back over the preceding three months and forward to the next three months. For consultations and recurring content scheduling

would still be an issue, but, again, publication dates could be arranged to allow maximum scope for consultations and time-sensitive content.

- 5.10 A quarterly publication could see issues in February, May, August and November, to accommodate key information and events, (for example consultations, service changes, policy changes, campaigns, festivals, etc.).
- 5.11 Other time-sensitive and recurring issues could be covered, for example - recycling initiatives, Learning Disability Week, Family Learning weeks, volunteering, encouraging school meals take-up, encouraging voter turn-out at local and national elections, recruitment (apprenticeship scheme, admin and clerical pool, social workers).
- 5.12 A quarterly publication could reasonably be designed with four, eight, 12 or 16 pages. The higher the number of pages, the wider the focus of the publication.

6.0 Electronic publication

- 6.1 Options for an electronic publication are considerable and investigations continue as to what the council could introduce. An e-newsletter could keep residents up to date with council services and decisions. It would be available to subscribers, who could be notified when a new issue went online (through emails, text messages or social networking sites), and to non-subscribers via the county council's website.
- 6.2 An e-newsletter could be delivered in various ways, including an email sent to subscribers and containing headlines with links to new information on the council website; or a PDF with embedded links to relevant web pages and email addresses.
- 6.3 An e-newsletter has a number of advantages over a printed publication;
 - with no printing or distribution arrangements to consider, the frequency and size of e-newsletters could be very flexible;
 - different versions of the newsletter could be created easily to cater for different groups (for example, residents' letters based on geography and demographics, partner letters, parishes, businesses)
- 6.4 To create a successful electronic newsletter will require the building of an audience, with residents actively having to sign up and read an online publication. This may form part of the council's increasing online activity and information provision.

6.5 The costs associated with this option mainly relate to resources to produce it, with some consideration given to any specific technical developments. This option does not preclude the development of any of the other options and can be pursued alongside the other considerations.

7.0 Partnership opportunities – public sector

7.1 One option given further consideration was partnership working with district councils. Contact has been made with each council to request their views on opportunities around resident communication. The overwhelming response has been that whilst partnership working is the way forward, budgets do not exist to support a joint resident publication and, for a number of authorities, this would represent additional expenditure, as they currently have no publication. In addition, they are not supportive of a printed format as a way of communicating with residents.

7.2 Further exploration is underway in the area of electronic communication with residents, and discussions are scheduled with Hambleton and Richmondshire.

8.0 Partnership opportunities – local newspapers

8.1 The option of a partnership with local newspapers involved an approach by one of the national newspaper groups, owner of local newspapers in the county, to consider how they could cover council news and information, in local newspapers, (both paid-for and free-sheets), at a reduced cost to producing NYTimes.

8.2 Further discussions have encompassed consideration of the rates charged for public notices, recruitment and display adverts. Discussions have taken place with both newspaper companies covering the county and have taken into account the potential costs outlined in 4.0 above.

8.3 One of the organisations, covering half of the county, has offered to progress this partnership on the following basis;

1. to provide the council with a set number of pages (usually two) in set newspapers each month (five in total), entirely controlled by the council, and including information previously covered in NYTimes. The council would have editorial control and it would be clearly branded as the council's; and
2. publish the additional public notices, recruitment adverts and display adverts that need to be accommodated in the absence of NYTimes.

- 8.4 This arrangement would be covered by the costs that the council will already incur without a council newspaper (as outlined in 4.0). This assumes the additional expenditure from the council will be spent equally between the two newspaper organisations. Thus resulting in no additional costs to the council to those already faced by the removal of NYTimes.
- 8.5 This would require an initial pilot of three to six months to monitor the levels of activity for the both the council and newspapers and any commitment from the council would only initially be for 12 months.
- 8.6 Discussions have progressed with the other newspaper owners, but at this stage, are not as advanced and therefore the initial pilot wouldn't cover the whole county. However, it is hopeful that further discussions will conclude with a similar proposal.
- 8.7 Whilst the newspapers cannot deliver the same penetration rate (in terms of distribution and reach) as NYTimes, the newspapers would provide coverage in key locations (Whitby, Scarborough, Harrogate, Selby and Richmondshire and Hambleton).
- 8.8 There are some limitations, in terms of coverage and readership of local newspapers. Whilst two pages in each publication will provide some content, the volume of information communicated by the council would be reduced, but will be more than any proposal to remove NYTimes totally. With most newspapers publishing on a daily or weekly basis, if residents don't purchase a newspaper on that day, they will have missed the opportunity to read the information – NYTimes has a long shelf life, which is not usually the case for local newspapers. The use of local newspaper websites will help to improve this.
- 8.9 This option will provide editorial pages in local newspapers, that gives the council a direct channel to a large number of residents to explain decisions, consult and inform them. There will also be the opportunity to specifically target a geographical area with information.
- 8.10 For the newspapers, this offers the opportunity to bring in confirmed income previously spent elsewhere, whilst also attracting additional readership, through the inclusion of council information. It also provides experience to build on elsewhere in the country, as well as following the overall spirit and intention of the draft new code of practice.
- 8.11 The use of newspaper websites is also proposed as part of this arrangement, with online coverage being offered alongside printed information (with relevant links for the council, for example) and more effective use of their websites for our consultation activity.
- 8.12 The further development of this option will require procurement and legal advice. It should be noted that it may be necessary to publish

statutory notices outside of this arrangement if coverage is required in a particular area further development of this option will require procurement and legal advice.

9.0 Financial implications

9.1 The financial implications are referred to in Appendix A.

10.0 Legal implications

10.1 The council has power, in accordance with Section 142 Local Government Act 1972, to arrange for the publication, in their area, of information as to their services and functions. Statutory notices, depending on their nature, are required, by various statutory provisions, to be published in papers circulating in the areas affected by their subject matter.

11.0 Recommendations

11.1 That the Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee offer their views on the options for future resident communications.

JUSTINE BROOKSBANK
Assistant Chief Executive HR and OD

County Hall
NORTHALLERTON

Report Author: Justine Brooksbank
Contact Details: Tel 01609 532103
E-mail Justine.brooksbank@northyorks.gov.uk

Report Author: Helen Edwards
Contact Details: Tel 01609 532104
Email Helen.edwards@northyorks.gov.uk

Background Documents: None

Appendix A

Summary costs for options on resident communications

	Funding p.a. £'000	Expenditure p.a. £'000	Costs incurred for alternative adverts*	Saving p.a. £'000
Removal of NYTimes	389.0	0.0	100.0	289.0
Changes to pagination and print				
8 pages	405.1**	294.8		110.3
12 pages	421.2**	308.4		112.8
16 pages	437.4**	383.2		54.2
Changes to frequency				
Annual	389.0	78.9	90	220.1
Bi-annual	389.0	157.8	82	149.2
Quarterly	405.1**	179.1	64	162.0
Electronic publication only	389.0	45.0	100.0	244.0
Partnership - Local Newspapers	389.0	145.0		244.0

All calculations are based on pro-rata changes to existing print and distribution contract costs.

**Estimates based on current NYTimes adverts and notices and current average rates used for purchasing advertising space in local newspapers.*

***Funding assumes a pro-rata level of income from advertising (internal public notices, external adverts)*