

## North Yorkshire County Council

### Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee

#### Review of the newspaper partnership

1<sup>st</sup> July 2013

#### **1 Purpose of report and introduction**

This report reviews the newspaper partnership with Johnston Press and seeks views on future options for the partnership.

#### **2 Background**

- 2.1 In 2011, the council approved exploration of a partnership with local newspaper publishers to provide a cost-effective means of communicating with residents. This was in recognition of the cancellation of NYTimes, the council's newspaper which was previously distributed to all households in the county eleven times a year, with a budget of approximately £400k.
- 2.2 The level of expenditure for the partnership was set at £50k a year with Johnston Press (and a potential further £50k with Newsquest).
- 2.3 Negotiations with the two newspaper groups took place. Agreement was reached with Johnston Press to include one page of council information each month in six of its newspapers, which began in February 2012.
- 2.4 Six-monthly reviews have since taken place, with the most recent extending the partnership to July 2013. A further review is now necessary to consider the value of this partnership and whether it should continue as part of the council's tools for communicating with residents.

#### **3 Review of current partnership**

- 3.1 The current newspaper partnership provides for one page of content, provided by the council, usually consisting of six news or feature items, related to the local area.
- 3.2 In the past six months, numerous articles have aimed to raise awareness of particular issues around budget, elections, roads maintenance, public health, etc. A number of the articles have featured 'calls to action', covering details of adult learning courses, the need for foster carers, details of apprentice events etc. Some of these were part of a wider awareness raising campaign, or information about consultations or service changes.
- 3.3 The cost of the partnership pages is linked to the council's level of public notices in these publications, with the monthly cost being approximately £2,500, (compared to a monthly cost of approximately £36,000 for NYTimes), linked to a monthly spend with Johnston on public notices of approximately £10,000.
- 3.4 Recent announcements by Government have indicated that there is unlikely to be any change in the foreseeable future to the requirement for local authorities to publish public notices, such as road closures, in local newspapers, leaving the council with the prospect of having to continue to pay newspaper publishers this level of expenditure.

- 3.5 In setting up this partnership, the objective was to provide a cost-effective way of reaching a significant number of residents in the absence of news being delivered by the council to each household. Specifically the partnership was required to:
- provide effective local coverage of council news that couldn't otherwise be achieved;
  - address key council messages;
  - be cost-effective;
  - reach North Yorkshire residents;
  - have a positive impact on readers;
  - result in action, responses or behaviour change; and
  - have a positive impact on the council's reputation and awareness of what the council provides.
- 3.6 Measurement of the impact of these pages is challenging as awareness raising is difficult to measure, as is identifying what role these pages have played in wider campaigns.
- 3.7 In assessing whether these objectives have been met, activity on the website has shown a link between information appearing in the articles and increase activity online – although it's difficult to identify whether the newspaper pages are the key generator of interest as other factors (such as other articles in the media, staff interacting directly customers, contact of existing service users) also result in increased web activity.
- 3.8 On consultations, the council carried a number of these relating to unclassified roads, timber routes, minerals and waste planning strategy, carers consultation. Again, there is an increase in the access to the website and surveys completed following the publication of the articles in the Johnston titles. This is particularly clear for consultations which had no other publicity.
- 3.9 On articles featuring 'calls to action', there is a link between enquiries and the articles appearing, but a specific link is difficult to identify because of other campaign activity. Feedback from third parties, such as those involved in social enterprises, has also been positive, and whilst they haven't seen an increased demand for their service they have received positive comments about articles and increased awareness of what they are doing.
- 3.10 Members of the public were also asked for their views on the newspaper partnership and have been asked for their views through social media. There has been very little unprompted response from residents, with no criticism of the pages, but some challenges about the partnership being no replacement (or as good as) NYTimes.
- 3.11 Although local newspapers continue to reflect the national trend of declining circulation, combined circulation for the partnership is approximately 77,500, with the latest circulation figures for each publication detailed below:
- Harrogate Advertiser, 10,661 (-16.1% over previous six months)
  - Knaresborough Post, 2,284 (-16.5%)
  - Ripon Gazette, 3,743 (-19.4%)
  - Scarborough News, 14,806 (n/a – previous daily figure 10,637)
  - Malton and Pickering Mercury, 2,370 (-7.9%)

- North Yorkshire News, 28,263 (-4.9%)
- Selby Times, 5,765 (-17.4%)
- Whitby Gazette 9,540 (+2.1%)

3.12 Johnston has also provided readership figures (i.e. the number of people reading the newspaper, as opposed to buying it) which are roughly three times these circulation figures. While publication in a paper is not a guarantee that this number of people will read the council page, it provides an indication of the potential reach.

3.13 The newspaper partnership is one of a number of channels that the council uses to keep residents informed and to communicate with them. Along with the paid-for pages in the newspapers, press releases and media updates are provided (regularly published in the printed newspapers, but increasingly published online by media outlets); the council also has its own e-newsletter which is published monthly, as well as being emailed to a subscription database of approximately 4,000. The council is also active on social media, signposting residents to the council website where there is more detailed information. This is in addition to meetings and other face to face forums.

3.14 This range of different channels aims to reach many different audiences across the county, both in terms of geography and demographics and doesn't rely on one particular mechanism to reach everyone.

#### **4 Future options**

4.1 In reviewing the newspaper partnership and what the future options may be, consideration is being given to the following;

4.1.1 Continue with the partnership – considering the cost-effectiveness of the arrangement, the reach of the newspapers, profile of the readership, the impact on readers (and any resulting actions they take), the continuing requirement to pay for public notices and how this fits with other channels of communication.

4.1.2 Develop other media partnerships – revisiting discussions with other local media, specifically Newsquest and local independent radio to extend the geographical reach (the current partnership doesn't provide county-wide coverage – Craven being a particular gap) and extend the reach in terms of demographics (radio reaching younger age groups). Consider discussions with individual newspapers and look to develop partnerships that involve a higher online profile via websites.

4.1.3 Deliver information without using paid-for editorial – focus effort on sourcing and creating potential content for local newspapers, but without paying for it to be covered, (similar to the media relations activity that happens at the moment), attempting to achieve a similar level of coverage for the breadth of articles and features.

4.1.4 Council publication – reconsider the production of the council's own publication, at a much reduced frequency and size, with a significantly smaller budget to cover similar news for all residents across the county.

#### **5 Financial implications**

5.1 As stated in 3.3, the cost of the partnership pages is linked to the council's level of public notices in these publications, with the monthly cost being £2,500, linked to a monthly spend with Johnston on public notices of approximately £10,000.

5.2 A maximum of £50k per annum was set aside for the Johnston partnership and an equal amount to explore other partnerships.

## **6 Recommendation**

6.1 That members of the Overview and Scrutiny provide their views on the current partnership with Johnston Press and on the consideration of future options for the partnership, prior to a decision being taken on whether to continue the partnership.

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