
ROCHFORD DISTRICT MATTERS

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides Members with details of the function and purpose of Rochford District Matters.(RDM)

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 RDM is a quarterly published newspaper for the residents of the Rochford District.
- 2.2 The paper has informative news articles, updates from the Council and a wide variety of features from around the district that keep residents up-to-date with activities in the area.
- 2.3 The latest edition of RDM was distributed on March 24. There are 35,200 copies produced for each print run, of which the Council retains about 1000 for distribution, and the rest are distributed to residents by Royal Mail.
- 2.4 The editorial stance of RDM is politically impartial, while aiming to keep residents informed of services offered by the Council.

3 THE CODE OF RECOMMENDED PRACTICE ON LOCAL AUTHORITY PUBLICITY

- 3.1 The revised Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, produced in March 2011, was brought in primarily to prevent unfair competition by local authority newspapers in relation to local media. The explanatory memorandum states that a “healthy free press is important in providing information to the public to hold their local authority to account.”
- 3.2 The code states that publicity by all local authorities should:
- Be lawful
 - Be cost effective
 - Be objective
 - Be even-handed
 - Be appropriate
 - Have regard to equality and diversity
 - Be issued with care during heightened periods of sensitivity (i.e. in the run-up to elections).

- 3.3 The code advises that for a community to be a healthy local democracy, local understanding of the operation of the democratic process is important, and effective communication is key to developing that understanding. Local authority publicity is important to transparency and to localism, as the public need to know what their local authority is doing if they are to hold it to account. RDM is a useful communication tool in that it can be used to get information through the doors of residents right across the District. It is also provided online, but door-to-door delivery gives us an opportunity to connect with those who do not use the internet. RDM has previously been used for such matters as a Budget Consultation, Elections, changes to Council Tax, and to give details of the Allocations Document as part of efforts to ensure the Council is transparent and keeps residents informed.
- 3.4 Section 24 of the code states that publicity material produced by local authorities relating to a particular member must not seek to affect public support for that individual. RDM does not promote any individual Member, but seeks to outline Council services.
- 3.5 However, it also states that the public should be informed not only about what action their authority is taking, but why the authority is taking that action. It stresses that authorities may communicate, explain and justify their policies and actions to the public. For this reason, RDM will quote portfolio holders in certain articles.
- 3.6 The code stresses that all local authorities that commission or publish newsletters/news sheets, or similar communications, should not issue them more frequently than quarterly and the product must clearly be identified as a product of the local authority, to prevent unfair competition towards local newspapers. RDM meets the criteria by publishing only four editions a year – in Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter.
- 3.7 During the period leading up to the election (purdah), local authorities should not publish any publicity on controversial issues or report views or proposals in such a way that identifies them with any individual members or groups of members. Publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published by local authorities during this period unless expressly authorised by or under statute. It is permissible for local authorities to publish factual information which identifies the names, wards and parties of candidates at elections. This year, RDM will be distributed in advance of the key date for purdah (April 9) so as not to conflict. The intention is for the next edition to include the election result, with details of each Member and how to contact them.

4 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The effectiveness of RDM is an operational and reputational risk to the Council. If RDM performs well, that is likely to have a positive impact on residents' understanding of the work of the Council.

5 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 RDM can be used to highlight useful crime prevention advice to residents. The latest edition issued an Essex Police warning about a cold-calling scam which is escalating across the county. It also gave tips on how to secure your home against burglars.

6 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 RDM can be used to highlight environmental concerns, such as encouraging people to recycle, to pick up after their dogs, and not to litter. The latest edition was used to urge residents not to dispose of medical waste in their recyclables bin – in an effort to drive down contamination issues.

7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The total expenditure is set to be £26,272.47 for 2013/14. The publication also charges £20,000 a year to Virgin Active for advertising, and runs adverts from our partners for a fee. In the last financial year this included £400 from Rochford Housing Association and £200 from Essex County Council. We are exploring income generation and other means to reduce costs of the publication.
- 7.2 An audio version of RDM is produced via local voluntary group Rayleigh Rochford and Castle Point Talking Newspapers for the Blind in an effort to make the product accessible to all. This costs £60 to produce, and goes on our YouTube channel.

8 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Any publication must be mindful of legal implications, including defamation and contempt of court. RDM also takes heed of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

9 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Publicity by local authorities may seek to influence (in accordance with the relevant law and in a way which they consider positive) the attitudes of local people or public behaviour in relation to matters of health, safety, crime prevention, race relations, equality, diversity and community issues.
- 9.2 Local authorities should consider how any publicity they issue can contribute to the promotion of any duties applicable to them in relation to the elimination of discrimination, the advancement of equality and the fostering of good relations.

10 RECOMMENDATION

- 10.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES** to note the contents of the report.

Amar Dave
Chief Executive

Background Papers:-

None

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If you would like this report in large print, Braille or another language please contact 01702 318111.