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## REVIEW OF ROCHFORD DISTRICT MATTERS

### 1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report contains the Review Committee project team's observations and the information provided to them during their review of Rochford District Matters (RDM), the Council's newspaper.

### 2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 RDM is a quarterly published newspaper for the residents of the Rochford District.
- 2.2 The editorial team try to ensure that the paper contains 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 They also have to ensure that they adhere to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

### 3 SCOPE OF REVIEW

- 3.1 The Members of the project team agreed that the review would focus on looking at the function and purpose of Rochford District Matters. It would include looking at alternative methods of communicating important information to residents of the District, the editorial content, the future distribution of RDM, the costs associated with the production and distribution (including how it is financed) and how other authorities communicate with their residents.

### 4 METHODOLOGY

- 4.1 The project team had a number of meetings with the People and Policy Manager and also the Senior Corporate Communications Officer to examine the issues around the paper.

### 5 GENERAL

#### **Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity**

- 5.1 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".
- 5.2 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).

5.3 It also states that where local authorities do commission or publish newsletters, newssheets or similar communications, they should not issue them more frequently than quarterly, apart from parish councils, which should not issue them more frequently than monthly. Such communications should not include material other than information for the public about the business, services and amenities of the Council or other local service providers.

#### **Production and Distribution Costs**

5.4 During the 2013/14 year the total cost to produce Rochford District Matters was £26,272.47 of which £20,000 was funded from the advert for the Leisure Contractor, which is part of the Leisure Contract.

#### **Alternative Methods of Communication**

5.5 The team looked at what communication options were open to the authority and also what methods other Councils used to communicate with their residents. These included:-

- Using the Council's website
- Posters and Flyers
- Inserts in the local paper
- Adverts in the local paper
- Press releases
- Letters posted to all residents
- Use of Social Media
- Community events
- Media interviews

5.6 It was felt that most methods of communication had drawbacks and risked not reaching the targeted audience. Whilst a mail shot to every residence in the

District would reach every household it is clear that the cost would be prohibitive and there would still be no guarantee it would be read.

### **Residents' opinions**

- 5.7 As part of a consultation exercise various questions relating to Rochford District Matters were posed to residents at two events that the Council was involved in. These were the Apple Day at Cherry Orchard Park and at an over 65's event.
- 5.8 70 residents completed the Council's questionnaires at the Apple Day, plus another 14 at the over 65's event. Of the 84 questionnaires completed a total of 72 people, or 86%, stated that they read RDM.
- 5.9 Of the 72 people who said they read RDM only 13 expressed a willingness to read it online, whilst 31 people did not want to read it online and wanted a paper copy.
- 5.10 The suggestions for improvements were as follows, the first two being suggested several times:-
- Events, including specifically summer and Christmas events
  - Planning minutes and apps
  - Stop self-congratulation
  - Tips
  - Local scouting information in the District
  - Social stuff
  - Transport information to Cherry Orchard
  - Childrens activities
  - Faces of Councillors

## **6 CONCLUSION**

- 6.1 The project team have produced a number of recommendations following the review and these are listed below, with the reasons for them.
- 6.2 During the review there was some discussion on whether RDM served its purpose and whether the paper could be made available to residents without the need for printing and distributing copies throughout the District. At the current time it is clear from the number of hits on the RDM pages of the website that the majority of readers use the paper format. The cost of consulting residents in other paper forms was considered but, from the information supplied, the cost would be prohibitive.
- 6.3 It was clear from the sample of residents that had been consulted on RDM that it was read by residents and with some minor changes it could be even more useful to residents.

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- 6.4 Whilst the readership of the online version is currently low it is expected that over time as residents become more used to using the web for more of their needs this will increase. The growth in mobile devices, social media and the move away from paper bills by the majority of companies will encourage more people to explore what else they can do on the internet.
- 6.5 The project team could see that over time there would be more online readers of RDM than those who wanted a paper copy and it would be worth monitoring this on an annual basis.
- 6.6 Whilst Rochford District Matters is a play on words the project team thought that this name had served its purpose and now would be a good time to rename the paper. The current title does not make it stand out from the rest of the free papers and information sheets that are regularly delivered within the District.
- 6.7 With the aim of getting more resident engagement it is suggested that the residents are given the opportunity to suggest a new name for the paper with the objective of having a new name for the summer edition.
- 6.8 The members of the project team were concerned that design of RDM did not make it stand out against the other free papers in the area. Whilst they appreciate that the existing contract with the printers does not allow for many changes to be made without increasing costs there is an option regarding size that could be made without increasing costs.
- 6.9 The team understand that the size could be reduced to 320 x 260mm which would mean that RDM would not be immediately mistaken for one of the free newspapers delivered in the District.
- 6.10 Currently each page of RDM is titled but the sections are jumbled and the titles are not clear for residents. The team would like to see clearer section names, rather than grouping things under one title. An example of this would be that instead of 'Environment' a more descriptive title such as Recycling, Flooding, Planning etc could be used.
- 6.11 They also thought that a clear section on what is coming up and another on what has happened would be worthwhile.
- 6.12 Residents would then be able to find the pieces that interest them and would be less likely to read only parts of each section because they are split within the paper.
- 6.13 It was suggested that as planning is of interest to many residents it could be worth using the paper to educate on issues around building control and permitted development.
- 6.14 To encourage readership of the paper the project team felt that the residents needed to feel that they were part of the paper. Engaging residents in a page or pages of the paper would make them keener to read it. Ideas such as a

letters page or question and answers page from residents were suggested. Also, the possibility of asking residents to submit pictures or drawings from around the District. This could have the added benefit of encouraging tourism, especially if the pictures could be used in other promotional literature.

## **7 RECOMMENDATIONS**

7.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RECOMMENDS** to the Portfolio Holder that:-

- (1) That Rochford District Matters continues in paper format.
- (2) That the readership of the online version of RDM is reviewed on an annual basis.
- (3) That residents be encouraged to suggest a new name for the paper.
- (4) That the size of the paper be reduced to 320 x 260mm.
- (5) That the paper be divided into clearly defined sections.
- (6) That more is done to encourage resident engagement in the paper.

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