

Report of the Director of People and Improvement

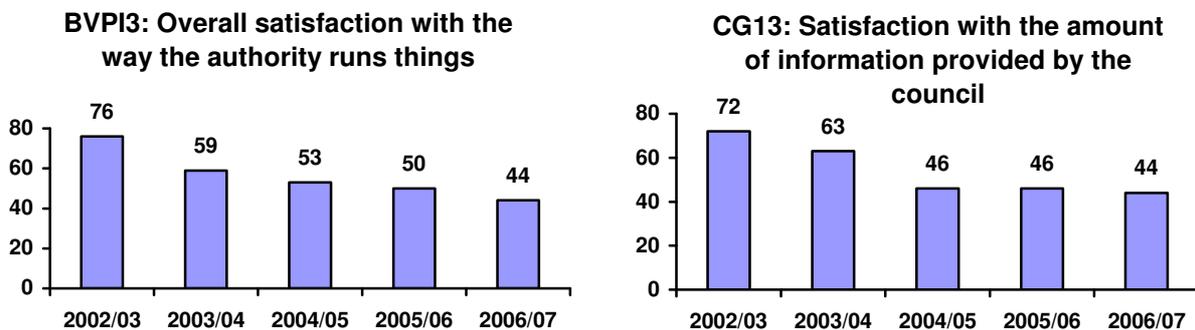
## Improved direct communications with residents

### Purpose of Report

1. Members have asked in the policy prospectus to look at a new approach to city management, involving extended public consultation arrangements, improved communications with residents (including the introduction of a monthly news-sheet), development of devolved decision making arrangements for local communities and capacity building for the voluntary sector.
2. This report concentrates on improving direct communications with the people of York by establishing a monthly council publication delivered to every household. It investigates three different approaches to producing a new monthly publication and recommends members' approval in principle for one of these.
3. The report also seeks members' approval to repeat the successful publication of an A-Z of council services delivered to every home.
4. A separate report will look at extending public consultation arrangements and the other elements mentioned in paragraph 1 above.

### Background

Communications Performance Indicators (percentages)



5. The Performance Indicators above, showing overall satisfaction with the council and satisfaction with the amount of information, have a strong correlation that is unlikely to be a coincidence. The market research firm MORI in research conducted for the Local Government Association (*'What drives public satisfaction with local government - 2004'*) concluded: "how residents feel about service delivery (most of

*which they will not use directly) and value for money is likely to be shaped by direct council communications”.*

6. In addition a report published by the ODPM, *The Business Case for Communications – why investing in communications makes sense (2005)*, examined 14 councils and looked in detail at communications and the effect that good communications had on staff, stakeholders and the public. The research found that how well informed residents felt directly affected how generally satisfied they were with the council:

*“...in those councils rated as relatively poor communicators, residents’ satisfaction with the council was consistently lower than might be expected, given their overall satisfaction with the area as a place to live. And in many cases, good performance on service delivery wasn’t matched by satisfaction ratings. In other words, many councils have a better story than the one they are telling”.*

7. The council’s existing publication, *Your City*, is a quarterly, A4 two-colour news sheet, with four pages available for news (please see annexe 4). This equates to approximately 1,500 words per news sheet when photographs are included. In comparison a daily tabloid newspaper carries roughly that amount of words over two to three pages: over the same period when the council has 1,500 words to explain itself directly to residents, a newspaper publishes over a million words.
8. At present marketing and communications (m&c) put out on average 65 press releases a month, from every part of the council - news and information that the council would like the public to be aware of. Very few of those releases make the pages of *Your City* which, because of the long gaps between publications, inevitably misses out on interesting and useful pieces of news and information. These can then only be communicated through the media or the council’s website. Inevitably those people who do not regularly utilize the city’s written or broadcast media remain unaware of the information and news communicated in the press releases.

### **Potential benefits of a new publication**

9. The new publication will allow the most newsworthy and important stories to be reported. Areas where there is a particular need to explain the council’s thinking on an issue can be highlighted in feature articles. The provisions of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity would apply, as they do to all of marketing and communications’ work already through the media protocol (see paragraph 23).
10. Each directorate would be featured and the editorial team would attempt to make sure all aspects of the council’s work are reflected equally. There would be space for consultations, letters from the public, ‘What’s On’ details and promotional features on specific council services.
11. Other benefits a more frequent and bigger publication will provide to the council include:
  - the ability to carry stories from the council’s partners where appropriate, strengthening ties
  - the opportunity to increase participation through questionnaires and promotions

- a medium for annual budget consultation
- a regular calendar of events helping the council's own marketing
- special features on initiatives (such as fostering – see below)
- a greater potential reach within York.

### **Other advertising and awareness raising opportunities - added value**

12. As mentioned above a monthly publication, distributed to all York residents, would give the council the opportunity to promote and increase take-up of numerous council services and instances where the council needs residents' help. It is much better to have a message constantly in front of people rather than have a two week burst of information, and a number of examples where a monthly publication would help are given below.
13. The recruitment of foster carers is an issue for the council. At present there is funding to produce an annual three-week recruitment campaign that results in a significant increase in enquiries during and for a couple of months after the campaign. But without a continuing visible presence, and with an alternative in NYCC who advertise all year round, the number of potential foster carers enquiring then dramatically reduces. The case for a year round presence, with the associated budget needed, is given in annexe 4 (currently under consideration by Children's Services).
14. There are many other campaigns in the council with a year round need, including: benefits take-up; benefits fraud tip-offs; activities and services for young people; the York Contact Centre; the website [www.york.gov.uk](http://www.york.gov.uk); parking; Park & Ride; Recruitment of adopters; anti-litter; York Neighbourhood Pride initiatives; road safety; Active Leisure activities; recycling; home carer recruitment; arts & leisure services; libraries; register Office services. In addition to year round information the publication could also be used to promote one-offs such as voter turnout.
15. All of these could be promoted through the new publication, creating possibilities where none existed and diverting funds that would otherwise be spent on awareness raising in external media. This is a real, though unquantifiable benefit to the organisation – the value is in the more successful marketing of services rather than a direct saving, although there may be direct savings in some instances. As a result of the decentralisation of the council's marketing budgets it is hard to put a direct figure on those savings, which have therefore not been added into the costings.

### **Disadvantages of a new monthly publication**

16. The disadvantages of a new publication are as follows:
  - any problems with distribution could lay the council open to criticism
  - only people within the council's boundaries would see the new paper. Current advertising in the local media takes in a larger part of North Yorkshire – this is relevant if costs for the new publications are offset by carrying the council's local recruitment advertising (although the new paper would potentially be seen by every household as opposed to only those who bought the existing media).

- in the short term potential job applicants might find it confusing when looking for a job to switch from one media (the local press) to another (the new publication) for the council's vacancies, potentially reducing the effectiveness of the council's advertising until the new arrangements are known and accepted
- the amount spent on recruitment advertising is often not a direct spend but recouped through the post being vacant while the advert runs. In addition the recruitment advertising spending across the council used in this paper is an historical spend that may not necessarily be repeated this coming financial year (although clearly there will be some recruitment advertising).

### **Funding the publication**

17. As mentioned above, one way of financing the new publication is to publish the council's own local recruitment advertising, saving the costs of advertising elsewhere and allowing the publication to be published at an overall saving to the council. North Yorkshire County Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council follow this approach in their newspapers, although neither carries all recruitment advertising.
18. For some managers this will slow down their recruitment process and will require them to work differently, planning recruitment to longer timescales and managing vacancies more proactively. Although this will be inconvenient to some managers it needs to be weighed against the benefits afforded by the new publication for improved communication with residents.
19. A recruitment protocol will be written which outlines deadlines and managerial procedures for advertising council jobs in the new publication. This protocol will need to be followed by all managers for the new publication to be financially viable.
20. For a breakdown of recruitment advertising and spending on public notices in 2005/06 please see annexe 1.

### **Public notices**

21. A possible extra saving could be made by publishing at least some of the council's public notices in the new publication. The relevant legislation stipulates that public notices should be published in a 'newspaper circulating in the area', but there is no definition of what constitutes a newspaper. The advice obtained by legal services is that a council publication would not constitute a newspaper and the council would be at risk of legal challenge if it published public notices. However, there are several types of public notice that the council produce and m&c will continue to investigate whether at least some could be placed in the new publication.

### **Distribution**

22. Distribution is a key issue for any council publication that needs to be delivered to every household. It is essential that every household receives the publication in a timely and reliable way. Distribution issues are discussed in the options contained in annexe 2.

## **Applying the media protocol to the new publication**

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

23. The council's media protocol is governed by provisions in the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 1986 and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity 1988 ("the Code of Conduct") and revisions to the Code that came into force on 2 April 2001 (which take account of the implications of the Local Government Act 2000). The Code recognises that councils are accountable to their electorate and that local accountability requires local understanding. This understanding is promoted by councils through publicity. The Code notes that *"increasingly, local authorities see the task of making the public aware of the services available as an essential part of providing all kinds of services. Good, effective publicity, aimed at improved public awareness of a council's activities, is to be welcomed."*
24. The Code recognises that *"publicity is, however, a sensitive matter in any political environment"*. Paragraph 12 of the Code states *"Any publicity describing the council's policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both"*. This will be the guiding principle of the new publication.

### **Editorial responsibility**

25. Paragraph 18 of the protocol says *"the [m&c] team will promote agreed corporate initiatives in liaison with the Leader of the council, Executive Members, Chief Officers or other senior managers"*. The marketing and communications team will draw up a news list for every issue, with a rough outline of the contents of that month's publication. That will be agreed with the Chief Executive or Director of People and Improvement and sent to the party leaders (or their deputies) for their comments and agreement. Given the deadlines these comments will be sought within a tight timescale.
26. In line with the media protocol the new publication will not quote councillors: paragraph 19 *"No publicity or press releases issued by the council will quote the comments of councillors, although publicity or media releases concerning any decision of the council will make it clear who was responsible for that decision."*
27. Ultimate editorial control for the contents, tone and style of the publication will rest with the Chief Executive – paragraph 11: *"The final arbiter in deciding whether and how to issue publicity about a specific issue or a subject will be the [deputy] Chief Executive. If for any reason the [deputy] Chief Executive is unavailable the Head of Marketing and Communications will make the decision."*
28. The structure of the Chief Executive's directorate has changed since the media protocol was written, and the post of Deputy Chief Executive does not exist in the same way. Many of the functions of the old post, including deputising for the Chief Executive on communications issues, are now part of the job of the Director of People and Improvement. For that reason the editorial responsibility should rest with the Chief Executive, then the Director of People and Improvement and then the Head of Marketing and Communications.

29. The party leaders (or their deputies) will be shown the final draft for their comments, although given the deadlines involved there will be a very tight timescale on this checking process.

## **Photographs**

30. The protocol allows for media photographs (photocalls) to be set up to promote council policies or initiatives. Executive Members or politically balanced groups of Scrutiny Members can be asked to take part. However, on the subject of the council's own publications the protocol says *"Members will not be featured in photographs for use in publications. Simple 'head and shoulders' photographs of councillors that allow the public to identify them are acceptable, providing they are not linked to any text that in any way promotes the councillor in question. Factual information, such as contact details, is acceptable"* (Paragraphs 51 and 52).
31. The restrictions do not apply to the Lord Mayor. The protocol says *"Only the Lord Mayor will be actively featured in council publications (with an overlap of two months when Lord Mayors change to allow for the lead in times in publications)* (Paragraph 51).

## **Options**

32. Three options have been investigated in order to produce a new monthly publication:
- for it to be managed in-house
  - in partnership with Your Local Link Magazine
  - in partnership with the York Press.

These options, which are commercial in confidence, are dealt with in annexe 2.

## **Analysis**

33. Please see annexe 2 for full analysis.

## **A-Z of council's services**

34. As well as their primary purpose of helping people to access council services, A-Zs are known to have a positive effect on people's understanding of the breadth of the council's work. Research from MORI shows that A-Zs where they exist are used by 55 per cent of respondents, 15 per cent above any other council publication.
35. Having already researched the contents of the successfully published 2007 issue, a 2008 version would require less work from the council, as the job would be updating existing material rather than starting with a blank sheet, as was the case in 2007. That work could be done by the publications assistant taken on to deal with the new publication. Please see annexe 5 for full analysis.

## Corporate priorities

36. Improved direct communication with residents is also an appropriate action for all the corporate priorities as they all have communication actions. However, the one priority most relevant to this paper is “Improve our focus on the needs of customers and residents in designing and providing services” as improved communication with customers is essential to improvement.

## Implications

- **Financial**

The recommended option will provide a saving for the council as the cost of the new publication can be met by advertising and diverting some of the council’s recruitment advertising. However, should managers continue to advertise in other media the viability of the publication will be threatened.

The council’s corporate management team were supportive of the cost of the publication being removed from directorate budgets using a suitable formula based on advertising spending and other relevant factors. The formula would need to be agreed with Directors to ensure the publication is financially viable and not a financial risk.

- **Human Resources (HR)**

The publication would be overseen by one of marketing and communications three Media and Publications Officers. It will be supported by the other two Media and Publications Officers, with the publication’s overall management the responsibility off the Media and Publicity Manager and the Head of Marketing and Communications. This will require these officers to adapt the way they currently work.

The new publication would require a Publication Assistant to liaise with printers, designers and advertisers as necessary. He or she would also assist on the editorial side, writing some of the publication, sourcing photographs, chasing contributors and checking copy. This is a specialist role and therefore would need to be a proposed grade of Scale 4.

If distribution remains the council’s responsibility, as it is in two options, a part time administrative post (proposed grade scale 2) would be required to ensure efficient distribution, given the risk to the council involved in under-resourced or incomplete distribution. This post would not be required if the recommended option is agreed.

- **Equalities**

Advertising to every household will increase the opportunity for council adverts to be seen by wider groups, including (as the new publication will be delivered to all households in the city) all BME households.

The publication will be printed with the existing ‘language box’ which goes on all council publications. This has recently been expanded to include Polish.

As with the existing Your City taped versions of the publication will be available for anyone with a visual impairment. This will cost in the region of £2,000 pa.

- **Sustainability issues**

The publication will be printed on environmentally friendly paper and will include a request that residents recycle it when they have finished with it. Provision can be made for the publication to be emailed to those residents who would prefer that (although it would be designed to be read as a printed publication).

The opportunities provided for improved communication on environmental issues could potentially outweigh any concerns with paper usage. For instance, if the council is able to increase its recycling rate as a result of being able to put the arguments for recycling to more people more frequently, than that changed behaviour might outweigh the environmental impact of the extra print.

- **Legal**

As with all council publicity, the new publication and the A-Z would be governed by the council's media protocol and by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Specific legal advice about public notices is contained in paragraph 13.

- **Crime and Disorder**

Improved communications with the people of York through a new publication could play their part in reducing the fear of crime and other perception issues related to crime and disorder.

- **Information Technology (IT)**

There are no IT implications in this report.

- **Property**

There are no property implications in this report.

- **Other**

All other implications have been covered in the report.

## **Risk Management**

37. The options contained in this paper include partnership arrangements with private firms. There is a risk with any commercial arrangement with the private sector that their financial health is secure.
38. The costs involved in the new publication require the council to advertise its jobs locally in a different way. The risks involved in this are dealt with elsewhere in this paper (the financial implication above and in paragraph 16). The benefits of a new publication (paragraphs 9-15) outweigh these risks.

## Consultation

39. The council's Corporate Management Team has been consulted on the options outlined in this paper.

## Recommendations

40. With regards to the monthly publication, Members are asked to agree in principle to option 2b, as set out in Annex 2.

Reason: On the grounds that it is the most economic option, with the most innovative approach and the best distribution guarantees.

41. With regards to the A-Z of Council services, Members are asked to agree in principle to option 1, as set out in Annex 5.

Reason: On the grounds that it is the most economic option.

## Contact Details

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Report Approved  Date 13/7/07

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Human Resources: Janet Neeve

**Wards Affected:** *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

**For further information please contact the author of the report**

Annexes:

- 1 Spend on recruitment advertising
- 2 Three options for producing a new publication
- 3 Your City – July 2007
- 4 Case for a year round marketing presence for fostering
- 5 Two options for publishing a new A-Z