

## **BRECKLAND COUNCIL**

### **Report of Lady K Fisher, Executive Member for Environmental Wellbeing & Communications to the Cabinet: 5 April 2011**

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

##### **1. Purpose of Report**

**To advise Cabinet of the implications of the new Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity and recommend a decision regarding the future frequency of issues of Breckland Voice.**

##### **2. Recommendations**

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Considers that given the unique circumstances and media landscape of the district that it is appropriate to continue publishing a residents magazine 6 times a year whilst having regard to the Code.

**Note:** In preparing this report, due regard has been had to equality of opportunity, human rights, prevention of crime and disorder, environmental and risk management considerations as appropriate. Relevant officers have been consulted in relation to any legal, financial or human resources implications and comments received are reflected in the report.

##### **3. Information, Issues and Options**

###### **3.1 Background**

- 3.1.1 The Publicity Code provides guidance on the content, style and cost of local authority publicity. Authorities are required by law to consider the Code in coming to any decision on publicity of any form addressed to the public or section of the public.
- 3.1.2 A Consultation with local authority organisations on a draft revised Code closed on 10 November 2010. Over 350 responses were received from organisations and individuals. Breckland Council contributed to the consultation.
- 3.1.3 A report of the Local Government Select Committee was published on 27 January 2011 and a revised code was laid before Parliament on 11 February 2011.
- 3.1.4 The revised code is founded upon 7 principles that local authorities should consider which state that publicity should be lawful, cost-effective, objective, even-handed, appropriate, have regard to equality and diversity and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.
- 3.1.5 Breckland Council publicity reflects the recommendations within the new Code with the exception of the recommendation around the frequency of Council publications. Under the section relating to 'Appropriate use of Publicity' the Code states that "Where local authorities do commission or publish newsletters, newsheets or similar communications, they should not issue them more than quarterly"
- 3.1.6 Breckland Voice is currently published 6 times a year.

###### **3.2 Issues**

- 3.2.1 The current editorial and design policy of our residents' magazine, Breckland Voice meets the requirements of the proposed code however it is published 6 times a year. The reasons for this frequency of publication are shown below.
- 3.2.2 Breckland Voice is an essential element of our external communications activity alongside our website, PR activity, marketing literature and increasing use of social media. It offers a cost effective way of informing the widest possible community about

our services, events, consultations and community activity.

- 3.2.3 We currently print over 62,000 copies of Voice which are distributed through Royal Mail. This ensures that every household and business receives a copy through the letterbox. There is no other media that can offer this guaranteed 100% penetration throughout the district.
- 3.2.4 Breckland is a media patchwork, with no one newspaper or radio station offering comprehensive coverage to all residents. There are 11 major local / regional newspaper titles and a multitude of smaller magazines published within Breckland. It is possible to receive at least 8 commercial or community radio stations via FM in the district as well as BBC Stations. This is due largely to the fact that the District is based around five market towns rather than on one major population centre.
- 3.2.5 Breckland Council recognises that the market in print media is a challenging one with readership and advertising revenues declining. We therefore seek to make use of and support the media whenever appropriate to do so. Breckland Council officers invest considerable time and effort in developing close relationships with the local print and broadcast media contacts in the area and as a result we consistently gain far more positive media coverage than other neighbouring authorities. It would be unreasonable however to expect their editorial policies to reflect our requirements to impart specific information about services to our residents.
- 3.2.6 Whilst Breckland Voice is our primary means of communicating with residents we have kept the number of issues to 6 per year in order to increase the use of other media streams including electronic and social media. We have to consider though that whilst digital media is a growing opportunity to engage with residents and broaden our coverage to a wider age and demographic range, many people experience difficulties in accessing the internet or prefer to use more traditional media. (Please refer to Appendix A which illustrates Broadband coverage in Norfolk and highlights gaps in rural broadband provision) Breckland Voice is consistently cited by the majority of residents as being the preferred method of obtaining information about Council services and benefits. We consistently monitor resident's opinions of Breckland Voice. The last survey carried out through the Citizens Panel shows a very high level of satisfaction:

Citizens Panel report (survey carried out Feb/Mar 2010)

% who think Voice is informative	98%
% who agree we keep them informed about local services	81%
% who cite Voice as their preferred way to get information on Council services & benefits	72%

- 3.2.7 Although not a significant income stream, local businesses have an opportunity to advertise in Breckland Voice. We do not actively canvas for advertising revenue, but will accommodate advertisers that approach the authority to market their businesses. Other public organisations can submit copy to explain their working practices, projects, and contact details for the benefit of Breckland residents within our editorial. An example of this is the recent coverage given to the Norfolk Fire Service to publicise fire safety messages following a number of tragic house fires in the district. Organisations can also submit copy to advertise events in the area for which there is no charge.

**3.2.8 Impacts of reducing the number of issues of Voice**

- 3.2.9 Cutting the number of issues of Voice will result in bigger challenges to deliver timely communications. The current publication schedule is timed very carefully to fit key dates in the year. Examples of time critical communications include very successful arts and sports programmes for young people prior to school holidays which require a short period between deadline and publication, changes to bin collections over

bank holiday periods, promotion of events such as our golden age fairs and job fairs, participatory budgeting and grant opportunities and timely promotion of consultation activities. It will cause a reduction in awareness of such activities and consequently creates barriers in the engagement with residents.

**3.2.10** It will place a heavier reliance on other media streams such as our website, social media use, leaflets and posters. This will require further budgetary investment and additional officer time.

**3.2.11** Increasing the use of local media such as newspapers and radio stations would far outweigh any saving from cutting 2 issues of Voice because of the amount of titles needed to achieve a reasonable level of coverage. The use of other local media could never equal the penetration achieved by Voice. This conflicts with one of the 7 pillars of the Code 'to be cost effective'

**3.2.12** Publishing less issues of Voice would also increase the pagination of the remaining issues resulting in higher print and distribution costs further eating into any savings made. If the 4 remaining issues were to increase in pagination by the minimum of just 4 pages, 34% of the potential savings of cutting 2 issues would be lost.

### 3.3 Options

#### Option 1

Reduce the number of issues of Voice to reflect the recommendations of the revised Code

#### Option 2

Continue to have regard to the Code and continue to publish Voice 6 times a year given the considerations detailed within this report.

#### Recommendation

### 3.4 Reasons for Recommendation

Option 2 is recommended to Cabinet.

The proposed changes to the code requiring a reduction in the number of issues would cause a detrimental impact on our ability to communicate with all of our residents effectively at a time when engaging with residents is essential.

It would impact on the timely nature of the content of the editorial and may result in increased use of other methods used to communicate which may not be as effective and are far more expensive.

The geography, population distribution, demographics and media landscape are unique to Breckland and have informed the blend of external communications streams that we utilize to engage with our residents in a cost effective way.

A restriction on one of our most essential communication streams will dilute the effectiveness of our communications and will cost us more to reach less people – one of the very issues which the revised code requires us to consider.

Breckland Voice does not pose a threat to other media in the district in terms of both editorial content, design and advertising revenue.

Breckland Council will continue to have regard to the Code of recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. It is recommended that a continued policy of publishing 6 issues of Breckland Voice a year is entirely justified and appropriate.

#### **4. Risk and Financial Implications**

##### **4.1 Risk**

4.2 It is possible that Breckland Council may be one of a smaller number of authorities that issue council publications more than 4 times a year. Breckland Council may be asked to provide evidence that it has shown regard to the Code. This report and Cabinet meeting records would contribute to such evidence.

##### **4.2 Financial**

The current schedule of Voice publications is factored into future Marketing & Communications Budgets

#### **5. Legal Implications**

5.1 Authorities are required by law to consider the Code in coming to any decision on publicity of any form addressed to the public or section of the public. This report and subsequent decision by Cabinet demonstrates that consideration has been given to the Code

#### **6. Other Implications**

- a) Equalities: None
- b) Section 17, Crime & Disorder Act 1998: None
- c) Section 40, Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006: None
- d) Human Resources: None
- e) Human Rights: None

#### **7. Alignment to Council Priorities**

7.1 As an essential element to the Council communications strategy, Breckland Voice contributes to all Council priorities.

#### **8. Ward/Community Affected**

8.1 All wards

#### **Background Papers**

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##### **Key Decision Status (Executive Decisions only):**

##### **Appendices attached to this report:**

Norfolk County Council map of Broadband coverage within Norfolk.