

BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of Ian Sherwood, Executive Member for Communications, Organisational Performance, Development and Public Protection

To: **Cabinet: 7 January 2014**

Author: Dominic Chessum, Communications Team Leader

Subject: **Cessation of the Council publication known as 'Voice'**

Purpose: **To enable Members to make a decision on the future of the Council magazine.**

Recommendations:

That

- 1) Members agree to cease production of the council publication known as 'Voice' with immediate effect.**
- 2) Members agree for the remainder of budget for the publication in financial year 2013/14 to be taken as savings and then remove from the communications budget for the 2014/15 onwards.**

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Council publication known as 'Voice' is currently in suspension following a decision taken by Cabinet at their meeting in May 2013.
- 1.2 At that meeting Councillors chose to "suspend the design, production and distribution of the Council's magazine 'Voice' with immediate effect, pending current legislation changes, and allow further validation of communication channels to be available to Members to inform a final decision on the future of Voice".
- 1.3 A budget of £44,000 per annum remains allocated to the publication and this is enough to cover the production and delivery of four editions per year.
- 1.4 Breckland has already gathered the views of residents as to how they rank the importance of 'Voice' compared to other services through the 'Could We – Should We' consultation that took place during 2012. Feedback was that the magazine was the service residents who responded were most prepared to cease in order to achieve savings for the Council.
- 1.5 Recent use of social media, including success in promoting the Festival On The Farm (August 2013), which saw an attendance of over 2,000 people, has also gone towards validating new communications channels such as Facebook and Twitter as viable and ones which the public are prepared to communicate with the council through.
- 1.6 By combining the use of social media with more traditional communications channels and ensuring parish / town councils and parish magazines are provided with press releases it is believed that any potential negative effects from ceasing the publication can be adequately mitigated against.

- 1.7 In most instances communication with residents is not a statutory obligation, however, there is a requirement placed upon local authorities to inform the public and be open and transparent.
- 1.8 The clearest guidance on the standards of communications that central government expects of local government remains the publicity code issued by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in March 2011 to all authorities in England and Wales.
- 1.9 The code lists seven key principles. These are that local authority 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.
- 1.10 There is no doubt that the Council is in compliance with this code, however, any decision on the cessation of the Council publication should be considered in light of the current financial pressures being experienced by the councils and central government's direction for councils to demonstrate the cost effectiveness of their communications.

2. OPTIONS

Option 1 - Do nothing

The publication remains in suspension and the Council does not realise any possible savings from the budget.

Option 2 - Permanently cease publication of the magazine (recommended)

Take remainder of budget for publication for financial year 2013/14 as savings and remove the budget line from the communications budget for the 2013/14 onwards.

Option 3 - Bring 'Voice' out of suspension

Continue to publish the Council publication with the number of editions to be agreed by Members. It should be noted that if Members were to agree a number of publications above 4 per year, this would not only remove the option of making efficiency savings, but would also require growth in the budget.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Substantial year-on-year savings can be made by ceasing publication of the Council magazine.
- 3.2 Modern communication channels including social media have now been validated. Combining these new communication channels with traditional communication methods and ensuring parish / town councils and parish magazines are kept informed means any negative effects from ceasing the magazine can be adequately mitigated against.
- 3.3 Ceasing the magazine also ensures continued compliance with the government's direction for council's to demonstrate the cost effectiveness of their communications.

4. EXPECTED BENEFITS

By ceasing the publication of Voice, the Council will be able to achieve savings from the budget.

5. IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 **Legal** - It is the view of the report writer that there are no direct legal implications arising from this report.
- 5.2 **Risks** - For some residents Voice was their main form of receiving information from the Council. This said, by combining the use of social media with more traditional communications channels and ensuring parish / town councils and parish magazines are provided with press releases this risk can be mitigated against.
- 5.3 **Financial** - If Members approve cessation of the publication, a saving of £44,000 can be made from the budget.
- 5.4 **Timescales** – If approved by Members, this can be undertaken with immediate effect.
- 5.5 **Equality and Diversity** - It is the view of the report writer that there are no direct equality or diversity implications arising from this report.
- 5.6 **Stakeholders / Consultation** - Consultation on the future of the Council publication, Voice, has already taken place during 2012 as part of the 'Could We, Should We? initiative. The outcome of this consultation suggests that members of the public would support the cessation of Voice as recommended in this report.
- 5.7 **Contracts** – There are no contracts in place relating to this report.
- 5.8 **Section 17, Crime & Disorder Act 1998** - It is the view of the report writer that there are no direct implications arising from this report.
6. **WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED**
- 6.1 All Wards are potentially affected by this decision.

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Director/Officer who will be attending the Meeting

Name/Post: Vicky Thomson, Assistant Director – Democratic Services

Key Decision – No