

Central Bedfordshire Council

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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Developing our News and Information Services

Advising Officers:

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Purpose of this report

1. To update Members on the changing nature of news and information and the Council's response to this, including a refresh of the Central Bedfordshire Council website.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is asked to:

1. Consider and provide feedback on the proposals for the development of our website and other news and information products.

Issues

The changing nature of news

1. Local and national research shows that the nature of news consumption is developing rapidly with conventional newspapers declining in popularity in favour of increasing use of broadcast and digital channels.
2. The preferences of Central Bedfordshire residents reflect national trends with the majority opting for electronic rather than postal communications.
3. In this context, the Council has been developing its mix of conventional and digital channels for communications and intends to continue to do so.

Our Website

4. It is five years since the Council conducted a major review of its website and technology and expectations have changed considerably over this period.
5. Therefore, working with IT colleagues and officers from all Directorates, the Communication Team initiated a project in this financial year in order to:

Enhance the look and feel of the website
Review and re-present all content
Enhance the search functionality of the site

The views and preferences of customers have been central to the project, which will deliver a refreshed site this spring.

Additional digital channels

6. In addition to our website, many residents elect to engage with the Council via other digital platforms including Facebook and Twitter. We have some 13.5k followers of the Council on social media. Additionally we have a database of subscribers to our email bulletins and alerts of some 36k residents.
7. The Council has recently launched area specific news bulletins which have proved popular with residents, 2,000 of which have subscribed over the past two months.

Conventional channels

8. Whilst the Council looks to shift the balance of its news and information products towards on line channels, it is recognised that for some residents more conventional and printed materials will be key. In this context, the Council is enhancing its core budget publication into a core directory which is to be direct mailed to all existing households and will be subsequently issued to anyone who moves into or within the area.
9. Additionally the Council intends to make better use of community news channels, including a range of publications produced by Town and Parish Councils.

Building skills and confidence

10. As many public sector and commercial organisations increase their efforts to communicate with their customers electronically, there is a case for supporting those residents who do not feel confident to use the internet or social media. Organisations such as Barclays are already

working actively with the organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureaux and Age concern and there is potential for Central Beds to actively support such initiatives.

Corporate priorities.

11. Effective communication is important to the effective delivery of all the priority outcomes embedded within the Five Year Plan. Whether our objectives are to promote specific campaigns, transmit core information or engage residents in the process of service and policy development, we need to find methods of reaching our residents and inspiring their interest.

Legal Implications

12. The Council operates in line with the Government's Code of Practice for Local Authority Communications and the proposals included in this report are appropriate under this statutory guidance.

Financial Implications

13. Whilst the Council will need to invest in new communication products, the shift towards digital channels has been planned in the Service's long term budget proposals and will generate efficiency savings.

Equality Implications

14. Public authorities have a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The provision of a diversity of communication channels including conventional and digital channels will enable the Council to ensure that the needs of the wider community are served.

Conclusion

The Council has achieved significant improvements in public perceptions of information since it was created in 2009. It has done so as a result of developing and adapting its approach to communications and it intends to continue to do so.

Appendices

Appendix One – A presentation on the Council's developing news and information offer.

Background Papers

1. The following background paper was taken into account;

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity
Published by the Government Department of Communities and Local
Government – 2011.