

CABINET – 19 OCTOBER 2010

THE FUTURE OF THE COUNCIL MAGAZINE “OXON NEWS”

Report by Assistant Chief Executive (Strategy)

Background

1. Like many councils Oxfordshire County Council publishes a regular magazine for residents, “Oxon News”. This has been a quarterly publication in recent years although, in the last two years, one edition has been replaced with the Locality Leaflets. The magazine is currently a 36 page edition with the equivalent of 4 pages of advertising/other agency news.
2. At Government and local level questions have been raised about the cost of local authority magazines and in view of the Council’s budgetary position the Cabinet has asked for options for savings to be identified.
3. Oxon News is well regarded. Research shows that Oxon News is generally popular amongst residents, and is one of the key areas in which they get their information about the council (see recent research on sources of information for local residents).

Council Tax leaflet	598	50%
Oxon News Magazine	558	46%
Oxfordshire County Council website	464	39%
Local newspapers	418	35%
Leaflets, posters and notice boards	359	30%
Local TV news	214	18%
Friends and neighbours	194	16%
Local radio	187	16%
Contact with County Council staff	100	8%
Other websites	56	5%
Contact with County Councillors	43	4%
Oxfordshire County Council Twitter	16	1%
Other	47	4%
Total	1203	100%

4. County Council services that are featured in Oxon News report a strong, immediate surge in uptake of their services, arising directly from the articles. Advertisers report a similarly strong response.
5. We see a significant spike in traffic to website articles linked to associated pieces in the magazine – although one of the magazine’s key weaknesses is, of course, regularity of publication. Many stories are out of date by the time they appear, because of print deadlines.
6. For those who don’t use computers and access information from our website, Oxon News is the principle channel for OCC communication with taxpayers.
7. We also know from work nationally by MORI that councils with a good magazine tend to enjoy a higher reputation.
8. Naturally, there are those who dislike the magazine and we do receive complaints. Nonetheless, we have significant feedback after each edition and it is overwhelmingly positive.
9. Attached to this report are a number of Data Observatory based maps provided by colleagues from West Oxfordshire District Council. Whilst they only relate to WODC’s patch, the evidence of how much residents telephone and other forms of communication over a magazine is overwhelming and, we think, it is safe to assume that this pattern would be the same across the county (albeit in slightly different ratios). This emphasises the need to look to work with partners to ensure we localise information delivery as much as possible, and also supports the vision of OCC’s new Customer Service Centre to provide a better quality of telephonic support to residents (by far the most preferred method in the west of the county).

Options

Option One - Discontinue Oxon News

10. As well as saving production costs we could make some editorial savings too. However our communication with local residents would be severely curtailed
11. Potential annual savings of £240,000 are possible.

Option Two - Cease to produce a paper version of Oxon News and move it to an electronic magazine format.

12. This has attractions, not least the ability to make even greater use of our increasingly popular website. However not everyone has computer access so we would be excluding a significant number of people (largely older people) from our circulation.
13. This option would save £180,000 annually.

Option Three - Continue to produce Oxon News but seek commercial advertising and sponsorship at a higher level than previously to off-set costs.

14. We think that it is possible to increase advertising revenue but we do not have in-house ad sales staff, and would need at least one full-time person to bring in adequate revenue (industry standard would be two). Realistically we would need to bring in about £300,000 each year to clear the costs of the magazine and advertising sales.
15. Professional advice sought (free of charge) from Ogilvy tells us that this would be possible, but by no means certain in the current economic climate.
16. To achieve income of £300,000 pa the amount of advertising we would need to carry would drive up print costs and change the feel and nature of the product, which may defeat the object.
17. This option has the potential to save £180,000 each year but perhaps it would be more realistic to assume that in the first year no savings would be achieved.

Option Four - Merge Oxon News with magazines produced by districts and the City

18. Another potentially attractive option, although one laden with logistical and financial difficulties. However, when this was raised with Chief Executives of the authorities in question recently, they were all clear that their authorities would not support a move to joint publications.

Option Five - Reduce size of Oxon News

19. We could reduce the size of the magazine from 36 pages to say 24. This would reduce annual costs by approximately 15-20% (would need clarifying by negotiation with printers, etc.) but with a proportionate reduction in impact of the messages to residents. A smaller magazine also impacts on scope to carry advertising/news coverage for other agencies.

Option Six - Annual Residents' guide

20. As an alternative to the Oxon News we could opt for an annual "residents' guide" which would incorporate our locality leaflets, the council tax leaflet and elements of our A-Z of services (no longer produced) as well as key stories, messages, etc.
21. Costs for this option would depend on negotiations over delivery with the Royal Mail and district councils but, using our new print and procurement procedures, it is estimated that we might save at least £100,000 annually.

Conclusion

22. Keeping our customers informed and engaged is important for the County Council and the Oxon News magazine makes an important contribution. However there are other vehicles for communication including local radio and newspapers, the website and direct marketing of various kinds.
23. If the Cabinet is minded to seek savings in this area then Option One maximises the savings opportunity.

RECOMMENDATION

24. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to discontinue Oxon News at the end of 2010.**

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