

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT OF THE RESOURCES, PROSPERITY, PARTNERSHIP & CONSULTATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 31 OCTOBER 2002

NOTE: A copy of the report mentioned below has been sent to all members of the Council. Any queries on this report to: Sally-Ann Cole, Room 202, County Hall, Hertford. (Tel: 01992 555228)

SCRUTINY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HERTS DIRECT NEWSPAPER

The Resources, Prosperity, and Consultation Scrutiny Committee considered this issue at its meeting of the 29 October 2002.

Effectiveness of HertsDirect

Publishing council newspapers is now considered standard good practice in local government communications.

A council newspaper offers excellent value for money compared to the public's other preferred mediums of direct mail or advertising. It also offers guaranteed coverage compared to the Hertfordshire public's most popular choice for finding out about the council - the local newspapers - where we've got to compete for space with everyone else vying for coverage.

We have now published nine editions of HertsDirect, the county council newspaper. Around 450,000 copies are printed four times a year and delivered to every household in Hertfordshire by Royal Mail.

HertsDirect was set up in response to the desire of the council for a more effective means of promoting council policies and services and, in particular, the need to have a more effective means of consulting the public. A consultation was carried out by MORI before setting up HertsDirect which showed that 83% of people believed that a county council newspaper would be fairly or very useful in keeping them informed about what the county council was up to. Over 80% of people felt they would be 'quite', 'very' or 'certain' to read it.

In December 2001, a MORI survey showed that over 50% of people remembered receiving HertsDirect and of those 89% remembered reading all or some of it. According to MORI this was one of the best results for a county council newspaper they had surveyed. In addition responses to consultations carried in HertsDirect have been encouraging with over 3,000 responses to the Best Value Performance Plan survey in October 2001, and over 10,000 to the WasteAware consultation in June 2002.

Advertising income, another indicator of the effectiveness of a publication has started to rise over the past two editions. Initial feedback from advertisers from outside council services has been very positive.

Editorial process

HertsDirect editorial is guided by an editorial board comprised of officers representing Environment, Adult Care Services, Children Schools and Families, Fire and Rescue, Community Information and the Corporate Consultation Manager.

The editorial board meets quarterly and decides on the subject of the main features and news stories which promote and support the council's Promises to Hertfordshire, the council's policies and services. A draft editorial list is sent to all Executive Members, chief officers and communications officers for comment.

All content is then drafted by officers in line with the Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986 as amended by Section 27 of the Local Government Act 1988 and with regard to the Code of Conduct on Local Government Publicity. The law prohibits the county council from publishing any material which appears to be designed to affect support for a political party.

A copy of the final proof is sent to the Leader of the Council and leaders of the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups.

The final proof is signed off by the Head of Corporate Communications and the Chief Executive.

This accords with standard practice in local government. Where a Council's procedures require a member decision to approve the final draft, this would have to be taken by the Cabinet, a cabinet committee or a member of the cabinet with delegated authority.

When the printed edition arrives at County Hall a copy is placed in every councillors' pigeon hole.

Complaints

Complaints from people receiving HertsDirect are dealt with under the council's procedures for complaints. Under these procedures, if complainants are not satisfied with their response from officers they have the ability to take their concerns to the District Auditor or the Local Government Ombudsman.

Since the launch of HertsDirect, there have been four complaints from members. Two, from the leader of the Opposition, two from the leader of the Liberal Democrat group, both on the basis of bias within specific articles. The relevant copies of HertsDirect are attached. The complaint about issue July 2001 concerned the front page article on the election of the new council; the complaints about issue July 2002 concerned the front page article on proposals for regional assemblies; and the complaint on issue September/October 2002 concerned the front page article on the budget.

Additional Information

In considering this report the committee noted:

- James Odling-Smee chairs the editorial board
- the Chief Executive has delegated authority, under the Scheme of Delegations to Officers, to determine the content of the news paper

- about 4 or 5 complaints from members of the public are received in relation to each issue of the news paper
- the article in the latest issue about the budget was not sent to group leaders in advance of publication because the Cabinet decision to consult the public was on the deadline for that edition.

Conclusion

Having discussed the issue of editorial responsibility and the nature of complaints received, the committee concluded by a majority, that the subject had been sufficiently scrutinised.

Bob Mays
Chairman
County Hall
Hertford
5 November 2002

Background information

MORI Communications Survey 1999
MORI BVPP Survey December 2001

Attached – Herts Direct front pages July 2001, July 2002 & Herts Direct Sept/Oct 2002