

# Are we getting Best Value?

As part of a Best Value Review of the Council's resident's magazine a comparison exercise was carried out with other local authorities. 45 unitary authorities were sent a survey form in July 1999. 26 forms were returned.

This is a summary of the findings of the survey exercise

## **THE SUMMARY**

### **COMMUNICATING**

A Council magazine or newspaper is a popular means of communicating with residents but it is not used in isolation. 21 out of the 26 who responded had a magazine or newspaper of some kind. Posters campaigns and local media were also used. 23 produced publications on specific services and 22 used the mailing of Council Tax bills as a way of communicating additional information to residents.

### **FREQUENCY**

Messenger is produced 11-12 times a year. Of the 21 authorities who produce a magazine only one matched this. Four or five times a year was the most popular frequency. Many authorities mentioned that if their budget allowed they would like to increase frequency.

### **COST**

Most magazines costs between 3 pence and 10 pence per resident to design and print. Two of the magazines cost more than 20p per person to design and print!\*

### **DISTRIBUTION**

Distribution was, on the whole, cheaper than design and print and many cost less than 3 pence per resident to deliver. Almost all authorities reported that distribution cost less than 10 pence per resident.\*

The most popular means of distribution was with a local newspaper - more than half of those who produced a magazine choose this method. Only four choose Royal Mail door-to-door and five authorities used local distribution companies.

### **PAGINATION & FORMAT**

More than half of the magazines had 16 pages or less, with only 4 having more than 24 pages. Some mentioned that budget permitting they would like to increase pagination. A3 (tabloid) was the preferred format. Most authorities had opted for full colour throughout. Most magazines used 70gsm or less paper.

\* Costs are per edition

### **ADVERTISING**

12 out of the 21 authorities who had a magazine, sold advertising to other council departments and allowed non-council advertising as well. Ten also sold to partner organisations. Ratio of adverts to editorial varied dramatically. In one magazine there were 4 pages of advertising for every 5 pages of editorial, while in many there was no advertising at all.

### **FEATURES**

Four of the authorities said they ran a regular column from the Leader (or equivalent). Almost all carried features on council services and public consultations. Three quarters carried details about contacting councillors and recycling. Less than half carried an A to Z of services with telephone numbers (many authorities produce a separate publication for this function). Only two authorities carried job adverts. Community news and youth pages were also mentioned.

### **IMPROVEMENTS**

- Many of the authorities said they were constantly reviewing how they communicated with residents and in many cases they were planning to use Citizen's Panels for these reviews.
- Some of those who didn't have a magazine said they were looking into it
- 'Bigger and better' was the plan with many authorities saying they would increase frequency and/or pagination - budget permitting
- A number mentioned they were keen to put their magazine on the Internet
- Some of the authorities had ideas for increasing readership including - youth pages, more advice columns including consumer advice and gardening advice, and more community focused features on 'real people'.
- One authority sold pages to the local colleges to promote adult continuing education courses.