

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF MESSENGER

Accountable Officer: Laura McGillivray (Head of Policy and Communications)

Author: Peter Heaton (Marketing & Communications Manager) – MK252413

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To seek the approval of the Sub-Committee for the findings of the Messenger Best Value review commissioned by the Sub-Committee which met on Wednesday 31 March 1999.

2. Summary

- 2.1 Before beginning the tendering process for the Messenger production contract a Best Value Review was conducted to find out what people thought about Messenger, whether they thought it was an effective way for the Council to convey information to the public and if it were to remain how it might be improved.

Tenderers were invited to make proposals on how they would meet the Council's requirements which had been modified in-line with the findings of the Best Value Review.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Sub- Committee:
- (a) supports the findings of the Best Value Review;
 - (b) requests the Policy and Resource Committee to accept the tender which best meets the MEAT tender evaluation requirements in accordance with the specifications improvements;
 - (c) recommends to the Policy and Resources Committee that Council advertising should be placed in Messenger instead of other local publications to keep costs down;
 - (d) agree to the continuation of the reference group set up to oversee the Best Value Review – to allow Messenger to be regularly reviewed and improved where possible.

4. **Background**

4.1 The Messenger has been the Council's main communications vehicle for 9 years. It is a 24-32 page magazine distributed to 96,000 households and businesses in Milton Keynes. In the last few years it has been produced between 10 and 12 times a year.

4.2 Its purpose is to:

- (a) inform the public about the council services that are available to them;
- (b) inform the public about changing council services issues on a regular basis;
- (c) provide a variety of information on the activities of the council;
- (d) consult the public on key issues and topics of concern; and
- (e) ensure that as many members of the public as possible receive this information.

4.3 Messenger is currently written, edited and designed in-house within the Marketing and Communications team. Pre-production work, advertising sales and distribution are contracted out.

4.4 Distribution is currently carried out by Royal Mail on a direct, through the letterbox basis throughout most of the Borough. Localities where this arrangement is not practical receive a bulk supply from the Council's Marketing and Communications team.

4.5 In 1999/2000 the Messenger budget was £96,540 with an income target of £19,800 making the net budget £76,740 net. For 11 issues this represents a cost per copy, per household of 3 pence for print and production and 4.2 pence for Royal Mail distribution, or just less than 80pence per household per year. Production costs are held down by advertising revenue which is built into the contract price.

4.6 Production and print contract is negotiated on a three yearly basis. The distribution contract is negotiated on a yearly basis.

5. **Issues and Choices**

5.1 The purpose of the Best Value Review was to determine satisfaction levels and proposed changes to improve the product ahead of the selection of a new contractor.

5.2 The review was overseen by a reference group made up of one Councillor and Council officers from across all four directorates.

5.3 The review measured Messenger against the 4Cs :

- (a) **CHALLENGE** - The purpose and cost effectiveness of Messenger was tested against other possible means of public communication. Options examined ranged from scrapping Messenger altogether and not replacing it, to producing a supplement in a weekly newspaper or producing Messenger with no advertising

at all. Full explanation of the various options considered and costed are in **Annex A**. However in general readership surveys have shown that people want to hear news about the Council direct from the Council, through their letterboxes and not second hand through newspapers or other means. In general Messenger would be too expensive to produce and distribute without advertising.

(b) **CONSULT** - Internally and externally a range of stakeholders were consulted over the frequency, content, style, and advertising considered appropriate. This included: an independent citizen's panel, independent research via face to face interviews with the public, independent questionnaires to managers within the Council, inviting views from the Leaders of the three main political groups on the Council, and the views of the members of the reference group. **Annex B** reports the overall summary of the consultation. In addition the Council's 1999 Citizen's Survey, undertaken by NOP, was also used to test awareness and popularity of Messenger as a means of public information. In summary:

- Readership of Messenger is high. In the NOP survey almost two thirds of people either read thoroughly or glanced through all of Messenger.
- Messenger in its current format appeals more to older people than younger (16-25 year olds).
- Most popular articles were – What's on in Milton Keynes, Information about Council Services and reference information, such as contact numbers.
- The respondents recognised the need for advertising to provide revenue – but both the public and staff felt that there should be better differentiation between stories and advertising.
- There was some dissatisfaction with the 'clarity of the structure' of Messenger, and it was suggested that this becomes clearer, with a contents page, page numbering, and standard format so readers can find their way around the magazine.

(c) **COMPARE** - As part of the review we looked at similar communications practice and products in 26 other local authorities producing magazines or newspapers see **Annex C** Council publications vary in terms of number of editions, size, paper, quality and distribution methods. Production costs varied from 3 pence to 10 pence with Messenger comparing favourable at 3 pence. Distribution costs were often less than 3 pence but penetration was not as reliable as door to door distribution.

(d) **COMPETITION** – Ultimately the review findings fed into the contract specification so as to obtain better or 'best' value. A MEAT evaluation was carried out on the tenders. The decision on choosing a tender will be put to Policy & Resources on 15 February 2000. Specific contract improvements include:

- improvement in design and readability;
- improvement to paper stock;
- potential for increased pagination;
- potential for increased frequency.

The last two points could be achieved through securing more internal advertising revenue.

5.4 The review also took into account a Messenger readership survey carried out in 1998 and the Council's Corporate Communication Strategy, agreed by Policy and Resources Committee in February 1999.

6. **Implications**

6.1 Environmental

The review and new contract take into account the use of environmentally friendly materials in connection with the Council's communication strategy.

6.2 Equalities

The images and messages portrayed in Messenger can support a positive approach to Equalities. Images need to reflect the multi-ethnic nature of the local population and take into account the needs of particular communities of interest.

6.3 Financial

The review has confirmed that Messenger is a cost-effective means by which the council can inform the people of Milton Keynes compared to other methods available.

6.4 Legal

The Best Value Review took into account the provisions of The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. It also took into account legal advice on areas/types of advertising which may be considered inappropriate for inclusion in Messenger.

Messenger is produced under the Local Government Act 1972, Provision of Information Section 142.

6.5 Staff and Accommodation

The review has produced recommended arrangements with a contractor which will reduce the amount of design time and costs met in-house, enabling resources to be better concentrated on wider aspects of the Council's communications activity.

7. **Conclusions**

7.1 The overall outcomes of the review, in summary, are:

- (a) Messenger is a cost effective means for the Council to communicate with the residents of Milton Keynes;
- (b) Readership is high, but more might be done to widen the interest amongst younger age groups;
- (c) Messenger could be improved in its design, content and in particular paper quality;
- (d) Advertising in Messenger is recognised as an essential means of revenue to enable 'Messenger' to be produced. More advertising by the Council services should appear in Messenger rather than other local media to save the authority money;
- (e) And house to house delivery is the most effective means of distribution

The contract specifications reflect the above findings of the review. The new contractor will need to meet the new requirements.

Background Papers:

Communication Strategy

Messenger report to Best Value CCT Sub-Committee March 31st 1999

Citizen's Panel Report on Messenger, 1999

NOP Survey Report 1999