

Messenger - Progress in Letting New Contract

In March, the CCT/Best Value Sub-Committee agreed to recommend to the Policy and Resources Committee that the Messenger contract be extended so that a full review might be conducted, and two contracts let by 1 April 2000.

1. Background

- 1.1 The 'Messenger' has been the Council's main communication vehicle for 8 years. It is a 24-32 page magazine circulated to 96,000 households and businesses. It is understood that 'Messenger' was started to combat adverse local press publicity and the difficulties experienced in obtaining balanced and wide coverage of Council issues and information.
- 1.2 Its purpose is to:
 - (a) inform the public about the services that are available to them;
 - (b) inform the public about changing service issues on a regular basis;
 - (c) provide a variety of balanced information as a counterbalance to local newspaper coverage;
 - (d) consult the public on key issues and topics of concern; and
 - (e) ensure that as many members of the local population as possible receive this information.
- 1.3 'Messenger' is written, edited and designed professionally in-house, within the Council's Marketing and Communications team. Pre-production work, advertising sales and distribution are contracted out.
- 1.4 The cost of 'Messenger' is offset by the sale of advertising space. This is conducted by the contracted publishing company.
- 1.5 Distribution is carried out at present by Royal Mail on a direct, through the letter box 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.

2. Options

- 2.1 The review tested the purpose and cost-effectiveness of 'Messenger' against other possible means of public communication, taking into account research findings, financial appraisals and the Council's Corporate Communications Strategy.

2.2 Options examined for 'Messenger' were:

- (a) Scrap it and do nothing to replace it
- (b) Replace with paid advertising in local newspapers
- (c) Produce a supplement to go in a weekly newspaper
- (d) Leaflets through doors
- (e) Leaflets and posters in libraries, surgeries, community centres, etc.
- (f) Moving all editorial into local papers, local radio, parish magazines etc
- (g) Revise 'Messenger' with less advertising
- (h) Revise 'Messenger' with no advertising

2.3 The review examined similar communications practice and products in a range of other local authorities producing magazines or newspapers. The majority said they were aiming to make their product 'bigger and better'.

2.4 The review consulted widely with a range of stakeholders over the frequency, content, style, and advertising considered appropriate.

These included:

- (a) A Citizen's panel;
- (b) Research among the general public via face to face interviews;
- (c) Research among managers within the Council via questionnaires;
- (d) Inviting the views of the Leaders of the three main political groups on the Council; and
- (e) The views of members of the Review Reference Group.

The review also took into account a 'Messenger' readership survey carried out in 1998 and the Council's corporate Communication Strategy, agreed by the Policy and Resources Committee in February 1999 (Minute PRO 140/99 refers).

2.5 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 interest amongst younger age groups;

- (c) 'Messenger' could be improved in its design, content and in particular paper quality;
 - (d) Advertising is recognised as an essential means of revenue to enable 'Messenger' to be produced. More advertising by Council services should appear in 'Messenger' rather than other local media to save the authority money; and
 - (e) House to house distribution is the most effective means of distribution
- 2.6 New contract specifications (one for design/production/print; one for distribution) have been drawn up and will be issued in line with the Review findings according to a MEAT process.
3. **Next Stage**
- 3.1 Key changes to the contract specifications will aim to:
- (a) bring a product improved in design, feel and readability;
 - (b) bring better value for money to 'Messenger's' design, production, print and distribution; and
 - (c) increase public appreciation of 'Messenger'.
- 3.2 Invitations to tender will be sent out on 6 October 1999 and officers will award the contract according to the specification by 2 January 2000 so that the contracts can commence on 1 April 2000.

Peter Heaton
Marketing and Communications Manager
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