

Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	Cabinet	Date:	9 November 2016
Subject:	Review of City Life Magazine		
Report Of:	Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources		
Wards Affected:	All		
Key Decision:	No	Budget/Policy Framework:	No
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Appendices:	1 & 2. Comparative financial information		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

Note: The special circumstances for non-compliance with Access to Information Rule 5 and Section 100B (4) of the Local Government Act as amended (items not considered unless the agenda is open to inspection at least five days in advance of the meeting) were that there was a delay in the collation and analysis of data from external companies and authorities to support this report.

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 This report is a review of the City Life magazine. It looks at the current format, distribution and cost with a view to making improvements and making efficiencies to provide better value for money for tax payers and meet the savings requirements under the Council's Money Plan for 2017/18.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that:

- (1) Changes to the format and distribution of City Life Magazine are introduced as outlined in section 5 of this report.
- (2) The New Style City Life Magazine will be introduced from April 2017.
- (3) Authority be delegated to the Corporate Director, Partnerships, in conjunction with the County Council communications team, and in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Resources, to take all necessary steps to introduce a new-style City Life Magazine.

3.0 Background and Key Issues

- 3.1 City Life is a 16-page full colour residents' magazine that is printed to hard copy and delivered to households in the Gloucester district. It is currently produced three times every year.
- 3.2 City Life currently has an average print run of 60,000 copies. It is sent directly to homes, put through letter boxes in the city and stocked at city council premises including:
- TIC
 - Guildhall
 - Crematorium
 - Main reception (council offices)
 - Oxstalls tennis centre
 - GL1
- 3.3 Many local councils have chosen to disband their residents' magazine to generate savings. Others, like Gloucester City Council, value the direct contact with their customers and have continued to produce the magazine.
- 3.4 Nationally, evidence shows that areas that continue to have residents' magazines have higher satisfaction rates than those who do not. Locally, this is untested to date. However, what is known is that people are choosing to access their information in different ways today. There is more emphasis on social media and online content instead of hard copy newspapers or magazines.
- 3.5 This review will examine what the options are for improving the current product while making necessary efficiencies. The review of City Life is part of the Council's savings proposals with target savings of £5,000 for 2017/18. The recommendations within this report propose savings of £30,000.

Cost

- 3.6 The current budget for producing City Life three times a year is £36,000, or £12,000 per edition.
- 3.7 This budget is for printing and distribution. It is worth noting that the actual cost per edition can vary as the number of copies printed can change depending on content and depending on whether or not larger numbers are distributed to council premises like the Guildhall or museum, for example during Tall Ships festival or RWC2015.
- 3.8 Variations can alter the print cost by up to £2,000 per edition, though most editions come in at just under £11,000. The overall budget could be reduced by £3,000 per year immediately if we were to stick to set numbers for printing.
- 3.9 The writing, editing and design of the magazine are covered through the contractual arrangement Gloucester City Council has with Gloucestershire County Council's Communications Team.
- 3.10 This does take a significant portion of the allocated hours, especially with regards to design time. Questions have already been asked by both the Communications

Team and senior management at Gloucester City Council about whether this is an effective use of the limited resource.

Customer feedback

- 3.11 In the spring edition of City Life magazine, a survey was included to ask readers what they thought of the ways the city council communicates with them. We received 116 responses, which represents a 0.1% return rate. This in itself is evidence that people are not as engaged as we would like.
- 3.12 However, when asked if they actually read City Life 49% of the 116 respondents said they did. Of the 116, 17% said they relied upon City Life to find out what the city council was doing. Similarly, another 17% said they used social media for this. Both were the highest numbers with others commenting that they use radio, newspapers and the city council website.
- 3.13 When asked how they'd like to receive information, 47% said they liked to read about city council business on posters and display boards around the city centre. With regards to the council on social media, 33% of the respondents said they did follow the council and would like to see more engagement with the Council on social media.
- 3.14 The final question asked if residents felt informed about what the council is doing. In total, 42% said they felt informed while 56% said they did not. The remaining 2% said they didn't know.
- 3.15 In addition to the questions, many people left comments. The most common themes were:
- Send more emails as I find them informative – reference to Guildhall being very good at this
 - Do more on social media/digitally as this is an easy way of accessing information
 - Access to City Life magazine is not consistent
 - City Life is valued but we'd like more
- 3.16 While this is a small sample of residents' opinions, it is clear to see that most people who responded like City Life but they'd like to see more online and on social media and they'd like access to be easier. There is also an issue with the delivery of the magazine with many of the comments being that they hadn't received one through the door. This message has also been conveyed to the Communications Team on other occasions and a review into distribution was already planned.

Recommended Option

- 3.17 The recommended way forward is:
- (i) Continue to produce a 16-page colour magazine which is hosted on the new website. Ensure it is interactive and innovative containing up to date relevant material including vlogs and videos and has a feedback function.
 - (ii) Proactively send out via email to existing subscribers and encourage new subscribers when they visit the website, though this should not be compulsory to view or download the magazine.

- (iii) Print a limited number of copies (circa 5,000) and distribute to key city centre premises for collection and more hard to reach communities outside the City Centre, for example through Councillors. Develop a distribution list but note that distribution will be via pick-up and at no cost.
- (iv) Promote the new format using social media through an initial 'Your new City Life' social media campaign with continued promotion each time we publish.
- (v) Consider paid for advertising if take up is low.
- (vi) Stop home deliveries.
- (vii) Review after two editions have been issued.

In moving to a digital solution, care be given to ensure that City Life Magazine will continue to be accessible for vulnerable, elderly and digitally excluded citizens.

3.18 Overall, this would save an estimated £30,000 per year or 83% on the current budget. This is made up of £12,000 delivery costs and an estimated reduction of around £6,000 per edition for printing. This is based on continuing to print 5,000 copies. Exact figures cannot be determined at this stage as we'd need to re-test the market for new quotes, however confidence is high based on conversations with the current provider.

4.0 Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Considerations

4.1 The proposals are in line with the Council's practice to engage with individuals and communities to do more for themselves. Looking forward, a web-based Council Magazine offers scope for ward or community based information hubs or exchanges if these were something Cabinet would want to consider.

5.0 Alternative Options Considered

No change to the current product

- 5.1 The first step was to review the cost and format of the existing magazine, including the frequency, distribution, and delivery and assess effectiveness and value for money.
- 5.2 Ultimately, the feedback from residents is that they do want some form of direct communication from the council. If anything, they would like to see more so reducing the frequency of the magazine would have a negative effect on engagement.
- 5.3 No comments were made on keeping the current format, while many asked for more online and on social media, which is ultimately the way communications is moving. Many of the council's peers have already moved to an online format for their magazines and newsletters.
- 5.4 With regards to cost, a review of current pricings shows that the council is paying the going rate for printing. However, if efficiencies need to be made, a sensible question to ask is to whether we should continue printing or whether we should follow other authorities and go down the online route.
- 5.5 Following concerns raised by residents in both the survey and in person, it is clear that the current distribution of City Life to households is not working well. After

carrying out initial investigations with the current distributor, it would appear that there are particular issues with gaining access to flats or multiple occupancy homes resulting in many people not receiving a copy. That said, it is also clear that people are happy to pick up their own copy from council and public buildings as collection rates are consistently high.

- 5.6 Ultimately, City Life in its current format is not as effective as it could be. It is also expensive and not good value for money, especially where the delivery is concerned.

Inclusion of advertising

- 5.7 One of the ways of generating efficiencies is to incorporate advertising into the magazine to offset some of the costs. This is being done by other local councils in both printed and online format and is a nationally recognised way of raising money.
- 5.8 Charges for advertising vary however, most of those who do charge are charging similar amounts based on distribution.
- 5.9 Appendix 1 sets out a sample of some local councils who currently charge for advertising with their associated prices.
- 5.11 Given that our pagination is currently only 16 pages, giving over double or four page spreads for advertising would limit the amount of council content significantly so is not recommended for consideration.
- 5.12 Using the figures in appendix 1, it is reasonable to assume circa £3,000 per edition could be raised through selling adverts, based on selling one quarter page ad on each page. This would address the required savings targets and reduce costs by 33%.
- 5.13 However, a strict protocol would be needed to ensure that all advertising was appropriate and acceptable within a council publication.
- 5.14 In addition to this, serious consideration would have to be given to the extra time and expertise required in selling the adverts as this is not covered under the contractual arrangement with Gloucestershire County Council and the additional resource required is currently not available.

Opting for more paid-for advertising

- 5.15 One of the options is to use more paid for advertising in place of the traditional City Life magazine. To understand the cost implications, appendix 2 outlines The Citizen's current prices. The Citizen is the city council's main newspaper and would therefore be likely to carry the majority of the required advertising.
- 5.17 This type of communication is much more cost effective than the current format. Content would still be controlled by the city council and can be targeted at relevant audiences by pairing with specific news stories using demographic data held by the media company. It also has a well-known, well-visited website and has strong social media presence which could help promote the council to new audiences.

- 5.18 However, it is important to note that circulation figures for local printed media continue to drop year on year. Currently The Citizen has a less than 10,000 readership and this is rapidly falling as more and more people turn to online formats for their news.
- 5.19 In addition, this would dilute the council's brand and reputation if it relied on a media organisation to manage its relationships with residents.

Changing the format

- 5.20 As already outlined in various aspects of this report, many local councils have opted to change the format of their residents' magazine in order to make savings. Options include:

(i) Changing to an e-newsletter:

The council already has software for creating newsletters. Work would need to be done to determine if it could host and issue a magazine-style newsletter and may include paying for a new template. Putting aside any initial investment that is needed to set up the template, this option would generate £36,000 per year ongoing savings as e-newsletters are free to issue. It also makes the production simpler and quicker, reducing resource and time spent on issuing as it would be smaller and more targeted.

Promotion would be through media releases, possible paid for adverts and social media. However, as this method relies on residents subscribing to receive the newsletter, this may put people off.

In addition, this could discriminate those who don't have access to regular emails and those who are not technologically savvy, for example some older people do not find email an effective form of communication.

We may also find that it is those who are already engaged with council business who do subscribe, meaning the residents we'd like to target are still not engaging. In addition it limits the amount of content as e-newsletters tend to be no more than one page with click through links.

(ii) Changing to an online web-hosted magazine:

To a certain extent this is already happening. City Life is hosted on www.gloucester.gov.uk in pdf format which is readable online and downloadable for printing and storing. Currently, residents only have the option to read the pdf as any other document.

Early next year, the council is looking to upgrade its website. The new site will be able to host more creative and interactive material. City Life could be hosted on the new site and viewed like a magazine with the facility for videos or vlogs included. Residents would also be able leave feedback and comments on what they're reading making the product easier to evaluate and improve in future.

The cost of developing this function would be met within the website redevelopment and hosting online is free. This method would also generate

£36,000 of savings per year. However, it would not reduce the amount of time or resource spent in producing the magazine as the size, style and content would remain as it is now.

Promotion would be through media releases, possible paid for adverts (which would need budgeting for), social media, on the website and on posters and display boards throughout the city.

However, as with the e-newsletter, this could discriminate those who don't have access to the internet and those who are not technologically savvy. Similarly we may also find that it is those who are already engaged with council business who do visit the website to read it.

(iii) Cutting down the number of pages

Reducing the size of the magazine would reduce printing costs. For every two pages dropped, the cost drops by around £900 depending on print provider.

This would generate the savings required without the need to change the format significantly. However, this would be a missed opportunity for reviewing the product and creating a channel that is fit for the future.

(iv) Stop delivering to households direct

We already know the delivery process needs reviewing as it is not effective. Concerns over the number of flats and multi-occupancy homes in the city may mean that delivery is never at the standard it should be.

Residents do appear happy to pick up their copy of City Life at the TIC or Guildhall so wider promotion of collection points may encourage more people to do so. Locations and dates could be promoted in the media, on social media, on the website and on posters and display boards throughout the city.

This would save more than £12,000 per year.

Making better use of other existing channels

- 5.21 This option involves stopping City Life altogether and not replacing it with anything new. Instead, we would rely on existing channels of communications with residents.
- 5.22 This would immediately generate £36,000 per year savings and would significantly reduce the amount of resource used up as part of the contractual arrangement with Gloucestershire County Council.
- 5.23 However, simply removing this channel of communication without any form of replacement is risky. As set out in section 1, satisfaction levels tend to be higher when there is direct communication with residents using things like the council magazine.
- 5.24 Reputationally, there is a risk that people are resentful of the withdrawal and disengage even further. Equally, it could be seen as a smart move by a council trying to balance its books.

- 5.25 Research shows that most councils are trying to adapt and do things differently rather than simply cutting their magazine before trying other methods first.

6.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 6.1 The proposal is recommended in order to make improvements and efficiencies to provide better value for money for tax payers and meet the savings requirements under the Council's Money Plan for 2017/18.

7.0 Future Work and Conclusions

- 7.1 No formal editorial review of content or style of City Life has taken place since the magazine started many years ago. While there has been some natural evolution, it has remained a lively, full colour magazine that follows a rigid structure and contains content based on council priorities, often repeating what has already appeared in the media.
- 7.2 While the wider review of the future of City Life is agreed, the opportunity should be taken to engage with residents over what content they would find useful and what stories they'd like to read. They can then be adapted to fit with the feedback – you said, we did. It is suggested that communications staff host a stall in the Farmer's Market over a couple of weeks to engage with shoppers and seek their opinions on the magazine. This is a relatively inexpensive, easy way to secure solid feedback and could improve engagement moving forward.
- 7.3 Gradually, as more and more people become comfortable with online products we can reduce the number of printed copies and continue to make savings with a view to City Life being entirely online and free to produce by 2020.

8.0 Financial Implications

- 8.1 The only financial implications would be the limited cost of developing the correct web tools to produce the product we're looking for. These costs would form part of the existing website development project and would be one-off, estimated at no more than £1,000. Ongoing savings would be at least £30,000 per year, in excess of current £5,000 savings target. Any savings in excess of the current savings targets will be incorporated into the Money Plan for future savings requirements.

(Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report)

9.0 Legal Implications

- 9.1 None. City Life is not a statutory service.

(One Legal have been consulted in the preparation of this report)

10.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

Key risks:

10.1 People choose not to access the website to read City Life

This is mitigated by the fact that we know people are already opting to use online channels to find the information they need. Public feedback and best practise elsewhere also demonstrates a shift to digital is the way forward.

10.2 People find the online version difficult to use or not as engaging

This is mitigated with the use of the most up to date, purpose built technology, which simplifies and enhances user experience. Test groups will be carried out before we go live so any issues can be addressed in advance.

10.3 The savings aren't as projected

This is mitigated by detailed research into print costs and by shopping around for the best deal in advance. As the online version costs nothing, savings are guaranteed in this area.

Opportunities:

10.4 Significant savings are generated

Careful management and a phased approach will lead to a totally cost neutral product with three years.

10.5 Opportunity to improve the product

Better research and public feedback will help to improve the content and make it more relevant and in line with the council's corporate agenda.

10.6 Opportunity to increase public engagement

If the product is better and more accessible online, it stands to reason that engagement will be better and more far-reaching.

11.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA):

11.1 The recommendations have no affect on anyone individual or any staff member. Any impact on residents unable to access City Life online is negated by making sure they are readily available in popular community buildings.

11.2 The PIA Screening Stage was completed and did not identify any potential or actual negative impact, therefore a full PIA was not required.

12.0 Other Corporate Implications

Community Safety

12.1 There are no community safety implications arising from this report.

Sustainability

12.2 There are no sustainability implications arising from this report.

Staffing & Trade Union

12.3 There are no staffing and trade union implications arising from this report.

Background Documents: None