

HOMES & COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

18 JANUARY 2021

E-NEWSLETTERS

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To propose a move from twice yearly printed versions of the Voice, the council's newsletter, to an E Newsletter format.
- 1.2 To incorporate within this move an alternative provision for tenants (previously a quarterly printed publication provided by the council's former housing management provider, Newark and Sherwood Homes).

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The most recent edition of the Voice was the [winter 2019](#) publication and was 20 pages in length. It was distributed by The National Leaflet Company to 53,075 Newark and Sherwood District Council addresses. In previous years the Council has published Voice magazine twice per year: a summer and a winter edition.
- 2.2 The summer 2020 edition was cancelled, following agreement by SLT. Clearly the most relevant information would relate to Covid 19 and due to the changing landscape and guidance on the outbreak it would have been inevitable that any content would have been out of date before it was published and distributed to residents. This is still the case and therefore no plans have been made to produce a winter edition.
- 2.3 The Voice has previously offered the opportunity for NCC and NHS to take space within the magazine which made an occasional contribution to the cost of production. For a period the CCG also took a number of pages which offset the costs of the printing and distribution, however they indicated early in 2019 that they would not wish to continue with this.
- 2.4 Newark and Sherwood Homes had historically published the 'Home from Homes' tenant magazine four times per year: spring, summer, autumn and winter editions. It was usually between 8 to 12 pages in length. The last edition published was in [winter 2019](#) and was 12 pages in length. It is distributed by Royal Mail 2nd Class using a targeted address list, this included 5,404 tenant and leaseholder addresses.
- 2.5 Following the move of housing management services back in house in February of this year no further editions of Homes from Homes were produced. This was not only due to the outbreak of COVID-19, but also as the publication was seen as a company publication and a review was required to determine if the residents magazine could be amalgamated with the council publication or if there was merit in keeping all or some communications separate. In order for the District Council to ensure important housing messages were being seen by its tenants, an A4 leaflet insert was included in the quarterly rent statements during June and September.

3.0 The Proposal – A move to E-Newsletters

The proposal is to not return to a primary printed publication (either for residents or for tenants) but replace this with an e-newsletter format that will be equally useable for both purposes, as well as a range of additional functionality.

The resident's perspective

- 3.1 The current pandemic has shown we need to communicate with our residents in a timely manner and the natural long lead in time for a printed publication are not conducive to reacting at speed. An average lead in time for copy, design, print and distribution is 10 weeks. This has meant that we have not been able to use the council's magazine as a method of communicating with our residents during the pandemic. Whilst we have used social media there is a limit to the detail that can be included when communicating by this method and the council website has been the only place where the more detailed guidance can be accessed.
- 3.2 Our residents are, on the whole, IT savvy and will be used to receiving email correspondence; this is now the norm for anything from buying services, to online billing and banking. It represents a faster, more efficient and less resource intensive way of communicating with residents.
- 3.3 Due to the nature of printed materials of this size and cost it was not available in other formats (eg for partially sighted) or in other languages. This meant that a proportion of our residents could not access this information. An e-newsletter can include any key messages in alternative languages if appropriate, as an electronic format automatic 'google translate' can be used by anyone to translate the content to suit an individual's requirements. Often for those for whom English is not their first language, the ability to speak English is far easier than to read material in their second language. For those residents who are partially sighted it offers the opportunity for text enlargement or read aloud software to be utilised which are common functions for the visually impaired.
- 3.4 There are of course a proportion of our residents who do not use emails, this is estimated to be between 12%-14% (Office of National Statistics 2019). Whilst some of these residents do not read the current printed version and would not want to receive information from the council, a solution for these residents that do would be required, it is anticipated that a print by request version could be accommodated.
- 3.5 The council has always struggled to connect to younger people and the response to our residents survey in 2018 indicated that responses were heavily skewed towards residents over 55 and working age residents (25-54) were significantly underrepresented.
- 3.6 We do not know how many of our residents receive the publication but do not read it and simply dispose of it. Whenever the publication is distributed there are a number of social media comments about the perceived waste of money in printing something for every household.

- 3.7 Not all of our residents want to receive communications from us, whilst some only have interest in a specific service, for example; local businesses may wish to receive tailored information on help for businesses, a resident may have a specific interest in recycling or the green agenda. An e-newsletter would allow for choice on whether to receive any information or only to receive information tailored to their interest.

The tenant's perspective

- 3.8 Of course our tenants are also residents and would have the option to receive any communication we sent to all of our residents. All of the issues mentioned for residents are equally applicable to tenants including the ability to access emails and the issues of language and formats.
- 3.9 The previous publication specifically for tenants had a significant amount of material which was generic, for example items about home security. Articles such as this would be able to be carried within the council's e-newsletter.
- 3.10 There are specific items which are required to be shared with tenants as part of the regulatory requirements. A default approach of an e-newsletter format would be able to accommodate this, with a set of publications specifically for tenants, with hard copies by exception.
- 3.11 Following bringing the housing management service back in house there has been a keen focus on tenant engagement and a publication which is fresh in approach and style would be able to support this move. Registered providers are required to demonstrate how they respond to tenants' needs in the way they provide services and communicate with tenants, this will be accommodated through an e-newsletter format.
- 3.12 As a minimum, the council are required to provide timely and relevant performance information to support effective scrutiny by tenants of their landlord's performance in a form which registered providers seek to agree with their tenants.
- How tenants can access services
 - The standards of housing services their tenants can expect
 - How we are performing against those standards
 - The service choices available to tenants, including any additional costs that are relevant to specific choices
 - Progress of any repairs work
 - How tenants can communicate with us and provide feedback
 - The responsibilities of the tenant and provider
 - Arrangements for tenant involvement and scrutiny.
 - Offer a range of ways for tenants to express a complaint and set out clear service standards for responding to complaints, including complaints about performance against the standards, and details of what to do if they are unhappy with the outcome of a complaint. An annual report that contains

- 3.13 Such provision must include the publication of an annual report which should include information on repair and maintenance budgets. The council also needs to inform tenants how they use complaints to improve their services. Registered providers shall publish information about complaints each year, including their number and nature, and the outcome of the complaints.

Resource reduction

- 3.14 There is a carbon footprint of printing and delivering publications to the door. In 2019 the council declared a climate emergency and this move would make a positive impact on the council's aim to be carbon neutral by 2035. The implementation of E-newsletters as an alternative to traditional print is a small contribution but an important visible step by the council in delivering their carbon neutral aims.
- 3.15 Measurement of the Carbon Footprint associated with producing both the council wide and tenant publications been considered and is a contributing factor in the proposal to move towards online publications. This analysis is based on the production of the paper, printing and the delivery of the newsletters, by producing online versions instead of paper publications Newark and Sherwood District Council could save up to 7.1tCO₂e. Newark and Sherwood District Council is committed to reducing the environmental impact of activities and exploring carbon reducing options in order to achieve the carbon neutral target of 2035. To assist Newark and Sherwood District Council on this journey the council is required to commit to the implementation of more sustainable practices such as this within the organisation.
- 3.16 The budget for twice yearly editions of the voice is around £29,000 the budget for quarterly editions of homes to homes is around £31,000. The move to e-newsletters would mean we could send as many editions as is required, of any length for a known fixed cost. There will be initial set up costs for e-newsletters but even with these there will be a significant saving for both the General Fund and the HRA, these are detailed later in this report

4.0 Methodology

- 4.1 This is not new, and most other councils already have an E-Newsletter and therefore the technology is sound and proven and the process is well documented. The most popular is a govDelivery solution by Granicus (which is used by Nottinghamshire County, Nottingham City, Gedling, Broxtowe, Bassetlaw and Rushcliffe, North Kesteven and West Lindsey. Other formats and platforms are available.

How it works

- 4.2 E-newsletter platforms require recipients to sign up to receive information from a particular council. Some considerable work would need to be undertaken to ensure a good level of take up. There are a number of ways in which the take up would be maximised:-
- a.) some providers include services to increase take up, any other local public body (eg

NHS) who use this service would facilitate asking its current recipients if they wish to receive updates from ourselves (within the relevant geographical area).

b.) a website pop up would ask all visitors to our website if they wanted to sign up to receiving information from the Council.

c.) We would proactively communicate this as a reliable way to receive information, we would utilise social media and other advertising methods to promote take up.

d.) E-newsletters could be promoted via quarterly paper rent statements that are sent to all tenants and leaseholders.

e.) the service would be promoted to those who have signed up too be part of our residents' panel.

4.3 Template(s) would be created along a number of themes, for example one for local businesses, one for tenants, one for those interested in climate and the environment etc. Residents can chose to sign up for subjects where they have a genuine interest, and would receive information only on areas they have indicated. Further development work would be undertaken once the main brands were developed.

4.4 It is important to understand that there has been a movement away from traditional PC's and laptops and the most people regularly receive communications on their mobile devices. All the proposals and templates will be equally useable on mobile devices as well as traditional laptops and PCs.

4.5 A communications plan would be developed to ensure that the most benefit was sought from the e-newsletter platform. The scope reaches well beyond a direct replacement for the Voice and Homes from Homes. The platform has the ability to send targeted emails directly to specific residents by location (useful for missed bin collection rounds for example), or by interest (residents can opt into receiving just 'general' updates from the Council as well as key information about service area's that interest them (e.g. the environment, recycling, parks, events). It could be used to send out messages to specific residents in time of emergency (ie. Flooding). The platforms also offer an email automation service so that messages arrive at a time that suits a particular audience.

4.6 The system would be used for not just resident communication, but developed to be used for internal communication, member communication and other key stakeholder communication. Regular newsletters, with the ability to provide for 'one off' pieces, as required would be in place. There will need to be a balance between remaining in touch with our residents and tenants without bombarding them with information.

4.7 The nature of templates and targeted communications will enable us to utilise the e-newsletter as a marketing tool, using it to target sell some of the council's services. The analytic features of such a platform allow for targets to be set on all electronic communication and will let us know how well particular subjects are received.

4.8 The council periodically undertakes consultations, for example recently we held a parking consultation. Maximising the number of responses in consultations gives a more robust set of data on which to base decisions. The E-Newsletter format would include the ability to link to additional surveys, the uptake of a direct link rather than a ‘find the link on the website’ approach should increase the number of responses to consultations and these can be programmed in.

5.0 Next Steps

5.1 Subject to approval by members a procurement exercise will be undertaken in accordance with council’s procurement rules.

5.2 The proposal was presented to Housing Advisory Group on 21 December 2020 and was well received, particularly with regard to modernising this communication channel. Initial feedback included:

- a) A request for hard copies to be available in Community Centres and how we support people to opt in;
- b) How we might “push out” notifications to tenants that a new e-newsletter is available
- c) Further discussion on how we might be able to use the savings from this to invest in digital skills/equipment/connectivity for tenants.

5.3 Further consultation will be undertaken with a wider tenant cohort regarding the options, costs and potential savings associated with the choices available as well as any decision to move to an e-newsletter so they can “opt in” to a paper version.

6.0 Financial Implications - FIN20-21/7036

6.1 The current budget is set out below and it shows the cost per household per year.

2020/21 Budget

Production costs*	Design	Print	Direct delivery	Total per edition	Total cost per year	Cost per household per edition	Cost per household per year
Voice	£1,650 (20 pages)	£6,750 (53,500 copies)	£5,305 (53,075 households)	£13,705	£27,410	26p	52p
Home from Homes	£650 (12 pages)	£2,120 (5,500 copies)	£4,769 (5,404 households)	£7,539	£30,156	£1.40	£5.60

6.2 Whilst the exact cost is yet to be understood, as this will only be finalised once the procurement exercise has been completed it will provide savings on the current budget, which hasn’t been spent in 2020/21. Soft market testing has indicated that ongoing costs of the system and associated activities to be less than £20,000 per annum, therefore saving in excess of £40,000 per annum. The initial set up which would be split across the General Fund and the HRA, can be funded from the current

years savings from not producing the printed newsletters. The details of how the future running costs of the e-newsletter would be split would be worked out once further details are available, but would represent significant savings to both.

7.0 Digital Implications

This report supports the digital declaration and aims to provide a modern digital way to further communicate, provides better value for money and best meets the needs of the resident.

All GDPR and email security concerns will be investigated throughout the project and procurement exercise.

8.0 Equalities Implications

8.1 There are a range of equalities implications both positive and negative in moving from universal traditional print to a 'opt in' e-newsletter. A full Equalities impact Assessment has been completed and is attached at Appendix A.

8.2 The assessment determines that there are predominately positive implications for the younger age group, for those with visual impairments and for those for whom English is not their first language. It identifies a potential negative implications noted for those in the older age group, for which mitigation is provided with the opportunity to request a printed copy.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS, that:

a.) The proposal to move to electronic E-Newsletters, as an alternative provision for Council tenants to replace the printed publications they previously received, be approved in principle - subject to the outcome of the consultation referred to in paragraph 5.2 of the report.

Reason for Recommendation(s)

To move forward with a modern digital way to communicate with our residents, provides better value for money and best meets the needs of the resident and tenant.

Background Papers

Nil

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