



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Policy and Resources
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>City Matters</b>
<b>Date:</b>	20 March 2009
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Eamon Deeny
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### Relevant Background Information

City Matters was initiated in 2002 after residents of the city stated it would be their preferred form of communication about council services and activities following a pilot the year before. Up until two years ago, we produced three editions of City Matters per year at a cost to the council of £140,000.

The success of City Matters as a communications tool in the intervening years can be measured in a number of ways:

- Last year's public survey showed that 71 per cent of citizens recalled seeing City Matters, which was an increase of 27 per cent from the previous survey (44 per cent) three years before; (see Appendix 1)
- Over 90 per cent of readers said it was important to receive the publication as it increased their understanding of the council (see Appendix 1)
- Around 1,000 responses are received from readers to every edition, which is a remarkable return for any publication, and 99 per cent are positive;(see Appendix 2)
- City Matters won the best newspaper/magazine at the Institute of Public Relations Awards in 2008, having won silver in 2007 and the best news sheet in 2006; There was 1,500 entries for the 2008 awards and the judges commented: "The entire submission is supremely professional and an enticement to read. The publication is effective, straightforward and so thoroughly not condescending, as so many of these publications are. This speaks to the people and for the people - no preaching or pontificating. "
- The Plain English Campaign has described City Matters as 'reaching very high standards' and asked that it be used as an exemplar to other local authorities wishing to produce a similar publication. (see Appendix 3)
- Following every edition, services featured receive a major increase in the number of enquiries;
- As well as distributing to 130,000 households, 5,000 copies of each editions are downloaded from our website.

Following the 2005 communications review, it was agreed by council that City Matters

should be increased to six times per year by 2009. The council further agreed in January 2006 that we would carry advertising in City Matters to help fund the magazine in a pilot edition. Two editions were successfully produced and in January 2008 the Council agreed to tender for the design, advertising sales, print and distribution of City Matters.

The contract was awarded to BPC NI and from November 2007 to November 2008, five editions of City Matters were produced at no cost to the council resulting in efficiencies of £240,000 for the council. City Matters is the only council publication in the UK to have been produced at no cost to the ratepayer.

Due to contractual difficulties, the council ended its association with BPC NI at the end of last year. Since then, Corporate Communications has producing the design and advertising sales elements in-house as well as managing the print and distribution.

However, because of the current economic climate, most organisations have significantly reduced their advertising budgets. The current difficulties are evidenced in the effect on major newspapers and broadcast organisations. For that reason, it is no longer possible to cover the costs of City Matters fully in this way.

Given the importance of the publication to the council's communications effort, it is vital that City Matters should no longer be dependent on funding from advertising. A new means of financing the publication and potential for future development are outlined in this paper.

Belfast City Council now designs City Matters in-house and organises and manages distribution.

We need to go out to tender for the **printing element** of City Matters.

## Key Issues

Without advertising, it would cost the council around £228,000 to produce six editions of City Matters. We will continue to cover around half of these costs through advertising but have set aside a budget of £100,000 per year to make sure that the production of this successful publication is not put at risk.

It should be noted that we will be producing twice as many editions as two years ago for less expenditure.

### 1. Costs and savings

- **Approximate costs of City Matters (per issue):**

Print:	£23k
Distribution:	£15k
<b>Total:</b>	<b>£38k</b>

- **How we will help to meet these costs**

In the current financial climate, it is becoming increasingly difficult to fully fund magazine through advertising:

- February 09: £26,373 revenue
- April 09: £19,533 revenue

We have already taken the following actions to minimise our production costs:

- i. **Distribution** - we've reduced the paper weight to make us eligible for Royal Mail's Door to Door delivery service. This is more than half the price of Royal Mail's Walksort, which we previously used. – a reduction of £31.5k to around £15k per issue).
- ii. **Design** - we've brought the design element in-house, saving around £2,900 per issue.
- iii. **Making advertising rates more affordable**

We've reduced our advertising rates to make it more affordable for both our internal departments and external organisations.

We are confident that we can continue to cover half the costs of City Matters through advertising. However, it is vital that departments consider City Matters as a priority for any major advertising or publicity campaigns they plan to undertake. From an audience point of view, no other advertising vehicle reaches every citizen in Belfast.

## 2. Alternative formats

We provide City Matters in alternative formats and now send out the following 38 versions of each edition.

## 3. Current content and future development plans

The recognised strength of City Matters for the council is that it delivers information to our ratepayers without it being diluted in any way by media interpretation. The council's agreed approach was not to include elected members as it becomes too difficult to keep the balance between the political parties. The exception to that is including contact details for all members in each edition and covering the appointments of the key positions (Lord Mayor, Deputy Lord Mayor and High Sheriff).

Regular features in City Matters include:

- Seniors section
- Green section
- What's on
- Outdoors
- Leisure and health
- Youth column
- Celebrated Citizen

We also have some feature ideas for future editions based on seasonal activities and events. We are planning to incorporate some more 'journalistic' features to balance out the heavy factual information. We acknowledge that the current format receives is extremely well-received so any changes will be subtle and will only enhance the magazine further.

We are also keen to work with other public sector organisations and consider the possibility of moving City Matters towards being a public service publication for the city,

particularly with RPA on the horizon, which may also provide future funding possibilities.

#### 4. Magazine format

At the start of this year, when we brought the design of City Matters in-house, we made some subtle design changes to freshen the magazine. When we had to change the weight of the magazine for distribution purposes, we opted to change the weight of the paper, rather than reducing the number of pages. As the paper is less glossy, it gives the appearance of being more cost effective and 'environmentally friendly'.

We currently print 5-6 editions per year and around half of our costs will be covered through advertising.

#### 5. Evaluation of print tender

Proposed evaluation matrix as follows:

Evaluation Criteria	Rating (%)
Cost	60
Ability to deliver to schedule	20
Quality of similar projects	10
Environmental management and impact	5
Experience of successful delivery to Royal Mail	5

#### Resource Implications

The change in the advertising market means that the cost of producing City Matters can no longer be covered fully by advertising. It should be noted that Belfast City Council is the only local authority in the UK to have ever produced its citizen's publication this way.

A budget of £100,000 has been set aside and the remainder of the £228,000 required to produce City Matters will be raised from advertising.

We will always make every effort to cover the costs of production but cannot guarantee that we will meet this for every edition as advertising activity has slowed down considerably.

#### Recommendations

Members are asked to agree:

- The value of City Matters in contributing to the council's communications effort
- That the success of City Matters is evidenced through ratepayers' comments, external validation by Plain English Campaign, awards, and public surveys
- City Matters will increase to six editions per year in 2009, as approved by council in 2005,
- While it is no longer possible to cover the entire production costs of City Matters through advertising, more than half of the costs will be met in this way.
- Departments must always consider City Matters as a priority advertising vehicle in any publicity campaigns.

- Delegated authority from the Chief Executive to go out to tender for the print of City Matters for a one year contract from June 2009 – June 2010, with the option to extend, following consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee.

<b>Key to Abbreviations</b>

<b>Documents Attached</b>
Appendix 1 – Extract from BMG Final Report Appendix 2 – Readers' Feedback Appendix 3 – Plain English Campaign Feedback

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