

## **District Link magazine**

### **Review of editorial policy, October 2003**

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#### **Background**

Our editorial policy was developed at the launch of the magazine in 1997.

In general terms, the reports submitted to council at that time agreed that:

- Content would be agreed by the editor, senior officers and group leaders;
- The magazine would promote the role of the authority within the community; and
- Commercial advertising and sponsorship would not be used to support the magazine.
- Quotes and photos of members would not be used.

#### **Proposed revised editorial policy**

Since the inception of the magazine, various practices have evolved which ought to be formalised. The following policy takes into account many of the working practices that have subsequently developed.

#### **Aims of District Link magazine**

District Link is the council's flagship publication, delivered to around 73,000 households in the Vale, by mail direct to the letterbox, using Royal Mail's door-to-door service.

In publishing this magazine, we aim to:

- Promote the role of the council as a community leader;
- Provide information to our residents about council policies and decisions;
- Inform residents of services that may be of interest to them;
- Encourage residents to take part in the democratic process and consultation exercises;
- Provide news about issues and events in the area that affect residents.

#### **Officer involvement**

- All services heads and other senior officers shall be invited to contribute ideas to the magazine.
- Other officers shall be reminded of the publication dates and invited to contribute ideas to the magazine, in consultation with their manager.
- All contributors shall be required to sign off a final proof of their article to ensure factual accuracy.
- The Head of Communications & Marketing shall approve the draft contents list before submission to the Editorial Board.

## **Editorial board**

### **Membership**

- Editor of District Link or a representative from Communications & Marketing.
- One councillor representative from each of the political parties represented on the council (currently one Conservative and one Liberal Democrat).

We review the membership of the board after each major election or if any member resigns from the board or the council in the interim.

### **Role of the board**

- To review the draft contents list for each issue;
- To review the text, draft layout and front cover options at the editorial meeting;
- To agree publication dates for each year, within the constraints set by Royal Mail;
- To agree any readership surveys to be conducted; review the results; and to agree any action plan as appropriate; and
- To provide any feedback to the editor after publication of each issue.

### **Draft contents list**

The draft contents list is prepared two weeks before copy writing begins, to allow the board and Chief Executive to comment on the proposed contents. The purpose of reviewing the contents list is to ensure that:

- The articles are newsworthy (not old news) or are promoting appropriate council, partnership and/or relevant community services;
- There is a good balance, in terms of the services represented, the geographic spread of the Vale, and in terms of our readers' interests.
- We have included the current and important issues affecting our services or our residents. Members are most welcome to make suggestions for amendments or additions if they feel something has been overlooked.

We're aiming for a contents list that looks like a good read and has wide appeal. Any major changes to the list will be sent to the board once all comments have been received. A small amount of space will be left to allow for any late news items that may crop up during the production process.

### **Editorial meeting**

The editorial meeting is held after the first draft layout has been prepared. Copies of the draft layout are sent to board members around five days before the editorial meeting, to give them a chance to read the text.

In reviewing the text, we want to ensure that:

- there is no political bias;
- there is factual accuracy;
- there is an appropriate tone (lively, friendly but not bureaucratic or patronising);
- we use Plain English; and

- we pick up any errors that haven't already been identified.

In reviewing the draft layout, we're looking for:

- A layout that is clear and easy to read; and
- Gives articles the correct amount of prominence in relation to each other.

The front cover is what our readers see first when it drops through the letterbox, so the image that they see may determine whether or not they read the magazine.

Working with a very limited budget, sourcing appropriate, good quality photographs for the front cover can be difficult. However, we always try to find at least three strong photos that reflect one of the stories inside, or something seasonal, depending upon the issue date.

The photo can be illustrative of one of the articles inside – it does not have to be a literal representation. This is particularly helpful for occasions when we're writing about something that has yet to happen.

The 'teasers' on the front page can also be influential in getting readers to open the magazine, so we need to identify around three or four articles that will do that. The editor suggests some to go on the front cover options, and the editorial board's comments are welcome.

## Content

- Articles should be:
  - Topical
  - Relevant
  - Useful to the reader
  - Useful to the council
  - Newsworthy
  - Interesting
  - Not too specialist, but have wide appeal.
- To avoid any conflict with the Local Government Code of Publicity or accusations of political bias, the magazine shall not express any overt political views or include member quotes. It will, however, reflect decisions made by the council in relation to policy, the provision of services to residents and so on, as a matter of public interest.
- Information about councillors will be restricted to factual details, such as the publication of councillor details, telephone numbers, election results and so on. We do not feature photos of councillors attending events and similar activities.
- When considering articles for inclusion, the editor will take into account the following:
  - How much exposure the topic has already received;
  - Whether the article compliments other publicity channels (is it part of a wider communications plan?)
  - How much extra value we'll get from including the article, over and above what's already been done by way of publicity.

- There is a lot of pressure from both within AVDC and from external organisations, to have space in the magazine. Priority shall be given to articles that:
  - promote the aims and objectives of AVDC;
  - promote AVDC services to customers;
  - are time-sensitive and cannot be held over until another issue; or
  - refer to joint AVDC/partnership working.
- Contributions from partners (that are not joint initiatives), such as the county council, health authorities, police and other important local services, will also be considered for inclusion, subject to the space available and how newsworthy the article is.
- We receive requests from many organisations (mostly community and voluntary groups) to run articles in the magazine, most of which we can't accommodate because of space. We will try to include groups who are working with us on specific projects or initiatives. The remainder will only be given space if the editor feels there is a specific benefit to readers *and* there is space that cannot be filled with something more deserving.
- With the exception of some entries in the *What's on* guide (see below), we will not carry content from commercial organisations that publicise goods or services that are not directly related to a specific council aim or objective.
- The *What's on* guide shall carry a list of public events that reflects the entertainments available throughout the Vale. These may include commercial activities as well as council organised and community events. Community events with only a very local appeal, such as fundraising events, fetes, jumble sales will not usually be included.
- The writing style should be friendly and informative without patronising the reader. Even though some of our readers may have poor English skills or low educational achievements, we shouldn't underestimate their knowledge.
- Articles should be written in plain English and the editor shall be responsible for sub-editing any articles that are not.

## Evaluation

To make sure that we continue to meet the needs of both the council and the readers of District Link, we conduct the following evaluation of the magazine:

### **Informal:**

Feedback from staff, councillors and readers following each issue – comments are collected and, if appropriate, acted upon. If they relate to something that we can't implement immediately, comments are kept on file until such time as we conduct a review.

### **Formal – each issue:**

After the magazine has been printed, the editor gets in touch with three or more service departments and asks them to monitor how many enquiries they've received as a result of the District Link article. We collect the figures over a four week period immediately following the end of the Royal Mail distribution. This is an important way of monitoring the impact the magazine has on an ongoing basis.

**Formal – long term:**

We conduct a readership survey every three years to find our readers' views. Once completed, we conduct a full review of the magazine, looking at both the content and design of the magazine and taking into account the information collected in the survey. The last readership survey was conducted in 2005.