

Please reply to:

Councillor Phillip L Davies
Leader of Wirral Council

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28th July 2016

Marcus Jones MP
Minister for Local Government
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my ref PD/BT/

Dear Marcus

Thank you for your letter.

I think it would be helpful to first explain some wider context.

Late last year Wirral Council commissioned extensive market research among its residents. This research provided us with some extremely valuable insight into what local people felt was most important to them, where they felt we should focus our energies and in what areas they felt we needed to improve.

One of the key findings from the research was the fact a majority of local people state they do not feel well informed about the services the Council provides. The research also made clear the more economically deprived a community, the less likely they were to state they felt well informed.

The research findings can be reviewed from our website:
www.wirral.gov.uk/wirralplan.

Our Cabinet have made the decision to respond to these findings by developing a new publication, which would provide this information directly to every resident, alongside a redeveloped website and suite of social media channels.

This decision was recently 'called-in' for further scrutiny by Members of the Council and on 27 July 2016 Members made the decision to uphold the decision of the Cabinet.

Representatives from Newsquest, who own a local media title in the borough, attended the call-in and gave evidence. They highlighted their concerns in regards to the perception the Council would be competing with them and also acknowledged a significant coverage deficiency, with a minimum of one in three Wirral households receiving no local newspaper.

It was made clear during the call-in process that the Council is intending to accept advertising within its publication but would not seek to compete with independent media suppliers in our borough. We will ensure this through a) not accepting advertising from those organisations and industries who most often advertise within the local press and b) setting our pricing structure at a level which is considerably higher than any local media provider. Accepting advertising is a by-product of developing this publication, not its direct purpose, and achieving any level advertising income is not material to it being sustainable and achieving good value for the authority.

We will continue to place advertising in the local and regional media. In particular, advertisements which are required to be placed within a newspaper – such as statutory and public notices – would continue to be placed within a local newspaper.

It was also debated and made clear that the Council is attempting to address a very real issue in the borough and ensure all residents are able to be kept informed about local issues and public service information.

It is important to note our publication would not attempt to emulate a newspaper in either style or content. The content would focus on Council services, community events and activities, job opportunities and issues related to housing, social care and other areas of public services which would not traditionally be considered 'news'.

In addition, the content of all communications, including the new publication, would continue to conform to the Code in its entirety. We have robust governance system in place to ensure all content meets the principles of the Code and our own local media guidelines. Content for the publication would also be sourced from our partner agencies – all of whom support the development of the publication as they too suffer from being unable to communicate easily with large portions of the most economically disadvantaged residents in our borough.

I would encourage you to read the report which was considered by my Cabinet earlier this month. It is available on the Council website (at item 20):

<http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=121&MIId=5503&Ver=4>

The report makes clear Wirral Council has shown regard to the Code and we have come to the conclusion that the strength of our rationale and business case regarding this publication makes it appropriate for us to depart from the Code in relation to frequency only. We have also committed to reviewing the effectiveness of the publication at regular intervals during the first 24 months of its existence.

We would welcome a meeting to discuss these matters further, should you need any further information.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phil Davies." The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Councillor Phil Davies