

# **Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Date of meeting: 2 June 2009**

**Subject: Forester Consultation**

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**Committee Secretary: A Hendry**

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## **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- 1. To note the outcome of the Forester public consultation; and**
- 2. To recommend to Cabinet any proposals for the future development of the Forester including the potential involvement of the Local Strategic Partnership.**

## **Report:**

### **Background:**

1. As part of their terms of reference, the Customer Services Transformation Task and Finish Panel has been undertaking a review of the Council's Forester publication. However, the consultation results were not able to be fully evaluated prior to the preparation and consideration of the Panel's final report to the Cabinet in February. As such, the Cabinet recommended that when available, the Forester review should be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Consultation took place during the latter part of 2008 and early 2009. Residents have already received some feedback in the Spring edition of The Forester. The full report and analysis has been placed in the Members Room.

2. The annual production budget of The Forester for the Council is approximately £54,000, made up of design, print, editorial support, distribution and miscellaneous items such as photography and Braille. Actual production costs are somewhat higher, the balance being met by advertising in the region of £8,000 to £10,000 per edition. The Council receives 25 per cent of advertising revenue above a threshold level of £6,317 per edition.

3. The research gives an insight into which residents read The Forester. Just over 300 residents responded to the questionnaire. The overwhelming response was very positive. Many constructive suggestions were received on how The Forester could evolve or be improved but most respondents seem to like The Forester in the current form. However, analysis of the responses does appear to support the view that the largest readership is among older residents. A large number of respondents described themselves as retired (42 per cent). More women than men completed the survey.

4. Three focus groups were held to provide qualitative information. These elicited a great deal of feedback with many responses included in the report. The focus groups provided an opportunity to reach groups that might not have responded directly to the survey questionnaire. They also enabled staff to discuss issues in more detail. Young people were less likely to respond to the quantitative survey. In this regard, the focus group held with representatives of the Youth Council was particularly important. Perhaps surprisingly, even among the young members of the Youth Focus Group, there was a great deal of positive feedback about the current Forester as well as many suggestions for ways to develop and enhance the magazine.

5. For example, members of the Youth Council felt that people welcomed The Forester. When articles relevant to young people such as the 'Big Youth Debate' appeared, Youth Councillors identified good levels of feedback among their peers. However, larger photography, stronger cover design and shorter articles could appeal to a broader cross section of young people. The Forester should emphasise its role as the magazine 'for residents'. It should include a combination of Council and community-based articles. In common with other respondents, members of the Youth Council wanted The Forester to offer information on local activities.

6. The second focus group took place during the morning coffee break at Loughton Methodist Church. The church provided an opportunity to talk with a cross-section of residents dropping in for refreshment or taking part in the various activities in the Church. The third meeting took place at Leonard Davis House in North Weald where members of the district's Tenants' Associations meet regularly with the District Council's Tenant Participation Officers. Comments of all three focus groups are included within the report in the Members Room.

7. The comments fields on the questionnaire and focus groups were designed to encourage people to say how they would change The Forester. In response to member comments at the Customer Service Transformation Panel, the questionnaire also included fields allowing residents to indicate if they wanted The Forester to remain the same. Where respondents were asked to rate the current Forester, satisfaction levels were high.

8. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents felt the quarterly delivery schedule was about right and 75 per cent preferred to retain the existing format. Using a scale of one to five, most respondents felt The Forester was well written, covered interesting and relevant subjects, was clear and easy to read, had good pictures and illustrations and is a useful way of receiving local news.

#### **Local Strategic Partnership:**

9. Since the conclusion of the formal consultation, Officers have developed further proposals to extend the content of The Forester to include Epping Forest District Local Strategic Partnership.

10. As a major partner, Epping Forest District Council has facilitated publicity and awareness raising of the LSP and its activities through The Forester. This has particularly been the case for the Safer Communities Partnership. However, while the activities of Safer Communities get widespread attention, Officers perceive a lack of public awareness in general of the wider LSP.

11. By incorporating LSP contributions, The Forester would be expanding into areas such as health service provision, the volunteer sector and transport issues. Issues covered by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership such as education, employment and free time could feature as would environmental issues of potential concern to organisations such as the Corporation of London. Partners such as the emergency services could enhance their coverage.

12. The Forester has a high local public profile. It is delivered to nearly all homes and businesses within the district. As can be seen from the consultation, it is generally well regarded in the local community. As such in an enhanced format it could provide a platform not just for the District Council but also for the whole LSP.

13. This could be achieved in various ways. Pages currently dedicated to Council news could be made available to other members of the LSP. However, there is always more demand than space available in the current format and Members may feel that cutting the amount of Council information is not desirable.

14. The Forester could be expanded with additional pages per edition or more editions per year. These options would increase production costs and staff resourcing.

15. Eight pages of advertising currently subsidise the cost of The Forester production. These pages either in block, or an equivalent throughout the magazine, could be offered to the LSP. In return, the LSP would be asked to fund the balance of lost advertising, creating a neutral impact on the Council's production budget but improving the breadth of the content and issues identified in the survey as important to local people.

16. Officers believe that the 'Forester brand' is strong. There is good local recognition and although there is scope for development, the core branding should be retained. Epping Forest District Council should also retain ultimate editorial control. The Council would continue to edit, co-ordinate production and meet the largest proportion of costs. The magazine would need to retain strong District Council themes and associations with residents.

17. These proposals have only reached a theoretical stage in Officer discussions. Before a formal approach to the LSP Board, District Council Members are invited to indicate whether such an approach would be desirable from the Council's perspective.

### **Conclusion:**

18. Respondents to the Forester consultation survey and focus group participants agree that the A4 colour magazine format, quarterly production schedule and mix of council and community news and information items should be retained. There are high levels of satisfaction with the current Forester format but there is also scope for improvement. A refreshed design appealing to a younger audience should be combined with a continued mix of council and more community news.

19. Members are asked to note the conclusion of The Forester consultation and indicate support for integrating suggestions into the development of The Forester during 2009. Members are also asked to indicate whether Officers should approach the Local Strategic Partnership with an offer to incorporate The Forester into a joint Council/LSP publication.

### **Resource Implications:**

Potential additional staff resourcing and production costs depending on Member decision.

### **Budget/Personnel/Land:**

Existing – Advertising revenue subsidy £8,000 to £10,000 per issue.

### **Relevant Statutory Powers:**

### **Background Papers:**

The Forester Magazine Public Consultation February 2009 – Members Room

### **Environment/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:**

### **Key Decision Reference:**