Cabinet Report

Report of Head of Corporate Services

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Wards affected: All

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To: CABINET

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Policy on the council's public support for social issues and campaigns

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Recommendations

(a) That Cabinet agrees to adopt the policy set out below.

(b) That Cabinet agrees to incorporate dates relating to diversity and inclusion into a broader calendar of events to accompany this policy as set out in option 3 below.

(c) That Cabinet delegates the decision to finalise the draft list of dates to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, subject to any final amends in consultation with other Cabinet Members.

Purpose of Report

1. To set out the rationale for the creation and adoption of a new policy that sets out how and why the council lends public support to certain social issues and campaigns.

Corporate Objectives

2. Working in an open and inclusive way.

Background

3. As an organisation that represents the local community, we have a role to show leadership and solidarity on a wide range of social issues. This is most important on social media, where there's both expectation and scrutiny over how the council speaks on this kind of issue.

4. The priorities set out in the Corporate Plan give a good steer on a range of issues the councils support, but there is a vast – and ever-increasing – variety of relevant issues and campaigns throughout the year.

5. It is clearly not practical from a resourcing perspective to support all of them, so we need to strike the right balance between awareness-raising communications and important public messaging about council services and local issues. If we flood our social media accounts with too many awareness messages about social issues, we could risk losing followers who don't share the same social priorities.

6. Identifying which issues the councils would publicly support, to what degree, and how much resource to put behind it, has historically fallen exclusively to communications officers.

7. This historic approach exposes the councils to reputational risk, particularly given the increasingly critical environment on social media, where councils are under greater scrutiny for what they say and do.

8. It has therefore become increasingly important to have an adopted policy in place that sets out how the council uses its corporate social media accounts and other communications channels to publicly support social issues.

9. The policy would include an annual calendar of events that the councils would support, along with a procedure for how to adapt and update that calendar on an ongoing basis to ensure the council has the flexibility to adapt to breaking news and changing situations.

10. On a related note, Cabinet members have expressed their wish for the council to have a Diversity Calendar to demonstrate its commitment to diversity and inclusivity in the districts.

11. Other councils' Diversity Calendars are a published set of dates relating to events and issues around diversity and inclusivity although these don't appear to relate to any active commitment.

12. Officers therefore recommend that the calendar associated with this policy should include dates the council would publicly mark that are related to a range of religious festivals, and a variety of campaigns to support minority and marginalised members of our communities. This would serve as a diversity calendar and provide a practical way for the council to demonstrate its commitment to diversity and inclusivity in the districts. With diversity dates sitting alongside corporate priorities, the calendar could then be named appropriately in discussion with the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services.

13. The aim of the calendar of dates is to reflect our corporate priorities and the diversity within Vale communities. The calendar would be flexible, and the policy would allow us to change and update the dates we mark to ensure we are reflecting our diverse communities now and as they change in the future. When newer data from the recent Census becomes available around the diverse make-up of our communities, the councils' Equalities Officer will review the calendar to ensure it continues to reflect the diversity within our district.

Other options

14. There are some other options available for how to handle the need for a calendar to support this policy as well as a Diversity Calendar, which are set out below. Officers recommend option 3.

15. **Option 1 – two separate calendars:**

    a) a standalone "off the shelf" Diversity Calendar – this will cover all bases from a diversity and inclusion perspective, but we don't have the capacity to publicly promote/support every event listed;

    b) a calendar to accompany the policy, which includes the events and campaigns we will publicly promote/support, including selected items from the Diversity Calendar.

    The main benefit of this is we'd have a more comprehensive Diversity Calendar than the other options. The main drawback is that the extensive Diversity Calendar might draw attention to the fact that we're selective about the events we have the capacity to publicly promote, which might draw criticism.

16. **Option 2 – two separate calendars**:

    a) a smaller, bespoke Diversity Calendar of selected items that we can commit to publicly supporting, which reflects the district's diverse communities;

    b) and a separate, corporate priorities calendar that sets out the campaigns and events we'll publicly support that aren't directly related to diversity (EG Clean Air Day)

    The main benefit of this approach is that it means our Diversity Calendar carries more weight than Option 1 as we'd be committed to promoting every event listed. The main drawback is that it might make the two calendars look a little sparse.

17. **Option 3 –one calendar to support the policy.** It would be comprised of the two calendars outlined in Option 2 combined into one. A high proportion of the events listed are likely to be related in some way to diversity so it can serve as a Diversity Calendar.

    The main benefit of this approach is that it mitigates the risks of Option 1 and has all the benefits of Option 2 but none of the drawbacks. The main drawback is that some people might find it odd to include items that aren't directly related to diversity (EG Clean Air Day) on a Diversity Calendar. This can be mitigated by including those events in a different section of the calendar, or by renaming the whole thing as the Diversity and Social Campaigns Calendar or something similar.

    This is the recommended option.

Climate and ecological impact implications

18. There are no climate or ecological impact implications, but this policy does provide us with an opportunity to update and inform our residents and other customers on climate and ecological emergency work, one of the corporate plan objectives.

Financial Implications

19. There are no financial implications.

Legal Implications

20. There are no legal implications.

Risks

21. There's always a risk when publicly supporting one campaign or issue but not another, and that is heightened when publishing a calendar of dates as it draws greater attention to what we have and haven't decided to publicly support. Part of the reason for the policy to exist is to mitigate against this risk, by explaining the rationale for making the decisions and allowing flexibility for change where we might not have got it right, but there is still scope for people reviewing the calendar to be disappointed or upset with our decisions.

22. As a further mitigation against this risk, the council's Equalities Officer will be ensuring that the dates listed relating to diversity and inclusion properly reflect the make-up of the district.

Conclusion

23. Having this policy in place provides a sound and justifiable basis for the council to publicly and proudly support a wide range of events, religious festivals and social issues in a way that is sensitive to its residents' beliefs and opinions, and in a way that is proportionate to the rest of its external communications.

24. It will help to ensure the council is focusing the support it lends to the events and issues most aligned to the councils' adopted priorities. It will also help to explain, if criticised, why it has chosen to promote one issue but not another.

25. This report includes a draft version of the policy and a draft list of dates to be supported.

Background Papers

None

DRAFT Policy on the council publicly supporting social issues and campaigns

1. This policy sets out the social issues, national days of celebration and other public events that South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils will publicly support through our corporate communications channels.

BACKGROUND

2. As organisations that represent the local community, residents sometimes look to us to show leadership and solidarity on local, national and international issues, particularly on social media.

3. Social issues can often be sensitive, divisive and changeable over a short space of time, which can sometimes make taking a corporate stance on issues arising out of current affairs quite complicated and open to misinterpretation.

4. Councils are sometimes criticised for speaking out on issues while also being criticised by others for not speaking out enough on the same issue.

5. **Despite the challenges faced by getting involved in public debate about current affairs, it's very important for the councils to show leadership on issues that are important to members of their communities.**

6. To avoid criticism for what we are and aren't taking a public position on, this policy sets out the key social issues, days and events we'll mark throughout the year.

7. Naturally, it wouldn't be practical to mark every issue, day or event as there are so many, and so the ones identified in this policy have been chosen in line with the councils' corporate priorities.

8. While an annual calendar of events to be marked could be established in advance, the council needs to be flexible enough to adapt its procedures to react to breaking news and changing situations.

THE POLICY

Annual campaigns the council will support

1. The councils will aim to provide some public support online and through other communications channels to the campaigns listed in the calendar in Appendix A (TBC).

2. The choice of communications channel and how much support the councils provide will depend on a number of criteria, including: professional judgement from the Communications team on what level of support is appropriate, how high-profile the

campaign is, how long it runs for, compatibility with other communications campaigns the councils are running at the time, resources, and other priorities.

The difference between corporate support and councillor support

3. This policy sets out how we will respond to social issues corporately using communications channels managed and co-ordinated by the Communications team like the corporate social media accounts or the official council websites, and by other teams in the council.

4. Councillors are free to use their personal social media accounts to comment on current affairs and social issues in line with the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

Exceptions and changes to the calendar of events

5. There might sometimes be a high-profile current affairs issue that arises, which isn't included in this policy.

6. On occasions, it might be a significant enough issue to require being permanently added to the calendar. This can be achieved with written agreement from the council Leader and the Head of Corporate Services.

7. If it's an issue that just requires some one-off council support, then on request of the council Leaders and with agreement of the Head of Corporate Services, an exception can be made. The preferred method for making an exception is for Communications to draft some wording for approval by the Head of Corporate Services. Once agreed, the council Leaders can issue it on their personal accounts and/or it can be published on the councils' corporate communications channels if presented as "message/statement/letter from Cllr XXXXXXX on behalf of the district council."

8. There may be occasions it is necessary to postpone or abort plans to support any of the events in the calendar. For example, a breaking news story or a separate ongoing sensitive issue that would conflict with the messaging around a scheduled campaign, or a major event causing a capacity issue within the Communications team. In these instances, the Communications team will identify and flag any issues and, where time allows, will seek support from the Head of Corporate Services and relevant Cabinet Members.

Reviewing the calendar of dates

9. The calendar will be reviewed annually by the council's equalities officers to ensure the dates continue to reflect the councils' priorities and the diversity within our district. It will also be reviewed periodically when new data about the district's demographic is published, to ensure our communities are accurately and appropriately represented.

Appendix A – Diversity and Social Campaigns Calendar *[DRAFT – name TBC note that once approved, this calendar will be developed into a visually-pleasing, accessible and easy to read design]*

- Third week in Jan Big Energy Saving Week
- 27 Jan International Holocaust Remembrance Day
- Late Jan/Early Feb Chinese/Lunar New Year (varies each year)
- Third week in Feb UK Race Equality Week
- 8 Mar International Women's Day
- 18 Mar Global Recycling Day
- Fourth week in Mar National Workouts and Wellbeing Week
- Mar/Apr Ramadan (varies each year)
- Mar/Apr/May Eid al-Fitr (varies each year)
- Mar/Apr/May Easter (varies each year)
- Apr Stress Awareness Month
- 3 Apr Walk to Work Day
- 22 Apr Earth Day
- 8 May VE Day
- Mid May Equality, Diversity and Human Rights Week
- Third week in May Mental Health Awareness Week
- Jun Pride Month
- First week in Jun Volunteering Week
- Third week in Jun Loneliness Awareness Week
- 15-20 June Learning disabilities week
- Jun/Jul Eid al-Adha
- Fourth week in Jul National Countryside Week
- 5 Aug Cycle to work day
- 7 Sept Youth Mental Health Day
- Second week in Sept Zero Waste Week
- Third week in Sept Great British Spring Clean and Big Green Week
- Sept/Oct Yom Kippur (varies each year)
- 22 Sept World Car Free Day
- Oct Black History Month
- First week in Oct Mental Health Awareness Week
- 8 Oct Clean Air Day
- 10 Oct World Homeless Day
- 18 Oct Anti-Slavery Day
- Second Sun in Nov Remembrance Sunday
- 11 Nov Remembrance Day
- Mid Nov Diwali (five-day festival)
- 19 Nov International Men's Day
- Last week in Nov/First week in Dec National Tree Week
- Late Nov to late Dec Hanukkah (varies each year)
- 3 Dec International Day of persons with disabilities
- 25 Dec Christmas Day
- 31 Dec New Year's Day