

News in the North of Edinburgh



The Edinburgh Reporter attended the AGM of the North Edinburgh News earlier in the week. Usually a news organisation is expected to have, well, news. But this week's meeting bore a striking resemblance to the report of what was discussed at last year's AGM.

At this time last year the council had just decided to establish a pilot project to find new ways of communicating with residents called Contact in the Capital. The Minutes of the 5 November meeting show that they [awarded £25,000 of funding](#) to the North Edinburgh News to find new ways of reporting local news and make them sustainable. Since then the NEN has produced one issue of a printed newspaper and has engaged with some young people in the area to nurture some young citizen journalists. It also employs the former editor, Dave Pickering, for 20 hours per week although Board members appear to be volunteers.

A project group was set up with representatives from each Neighbourhood Partnership, the NEN board, the local community councils and the NE Youth Forum which meets monthly to oversee the news project, but it was denied that the council funding affects the editorial freedom of the paper.

The pilot schemes were charged with embracing new technology and training others to be citizen journalists. At the time of the funding decision in November last year it was envisaged that there would be three pilots, one in North Edinburgh, one in East Edinburgh at Craigmillar and one in Gorgie/Dalry. In all, the sum of £50,000 was set aside for the schemes, but the Gorgie/Dalry scheme has so far failed to get started.

At the AGM last year, the chair, Martin Hinds, explained that within the 12 months to March 2013 printed newspapers had only been produced when the NEN had money, but that they kept the 'paper' alive on the blog when they were 'skint'. He was pleased to announce the council funding which he said rewarded the faith of those who had continued to support the NEN.

Hinds said then: "It's another exciting new chapter in the NEN story."

Councillor Lesley Hinds, a member of the Corporate Policy and Strategy Committee, explained to the meeting the rationale behind the pilots: that the council felt there is a need for improvement in two way communications between the council and the residents in the city. The Inverleith Ward councillor said that the existing set up at the NEN "a well-regarded local community newspaper, blog and website" could be developed into a cost-effective digital platform.

No figures were produced to this week's AGM of any income or funding received since March 2014, but in October 2014 the NEN produced an edition of the printed newspaper showing the extent of its paid advertising. You can download a digital version [here](#).

The board say on the front page of the newspaper that they wish to produce at least two printed editions as well as organising a revamp of the website and their social media presence and they also promise training for local community journalists. The next issue will be published in December 2014.

The NEN assures readers on its website as to its editorial policy which they claim will remain apolitical, but questions were raised at this week's AGM about whether this apolitical stance has been achieved.

Thomas Brown, editor of North Edinburgh Community News, questioned whether it was considered a good idea to place a

special thank you in the paper to the three Labour councillors who had paid for an advert.

The chair explained that a request had gone out to all councillors in the area to advertise in the NEN, but only the Labour councillors had actually placed any advertising.

Councillor Nigel Bagshaw, a Green Councillor who represents Inverleith Ward, said during the meeting: "The perception is that the NEN has a certain political bias. I was quite shocked that lessons hadn't been learned. Nobody appeared to have thought that with all this history it would not be a good idea to publish this thank you. I think it is quite important to stand back and think about this. Being political and party political are two different things. You condemn yourselves to making the same mistake again."

The Chair assured the meeting that they have learned from this and in the next issue details of all political representatives and their surgeries will be represented (for free). He also openly admitted that there is 'a fight going on at the council' over the project.

Allegations of investigation at the NEN were refuted by the Company Secretary Eddie Thorn at the 2013 AGM, but it appears that there are, at the very least, murmurings in the City Chambers about the newspaper this year. Some councillors question the use of public money to fund the project in North Edinburgh which has produced a printed newspaper and is seeking copy for a second issue in December 2014 rather than, as they see it, promoting the use of digital media.

At the council meeting held on 25 September 2014 which you can [view online here](#), SNP Councillor Alex Lunn questioned the council leader about the Contact in the Capital pilots.

Councillor Lunn said: "In November 2012 the Contact in the Capital report put forward suggestions for pilot projects to improve contact with residents to focus on harnessing the

potential of digital and social media. To this end, can I ask the leader why the North Edinburgh News, a community newspaper which the last administration closed as part of a cost saving exercise is about to be published again?"

Councillor Lunn has apparently now written (as he promised at the council meeting he would) to the Chief Executive asking for an explanation about this and why it is happening. The Edinburgh Reporter understands that he may have asked for a stop on any future funding pending an investigation in to the production of a newspaper when the report clearly stated that the funding of the project was for the training and mentoring of young reporters.

Burns replied that he had taken a little time to look into this and mentioned the various meetings held where funding for the North Edinburgh News was discussed.

He continued: "To the best of my knowledge the criteria agreed for these three pilot projects and the terms of the council decision are being adhered to. I accept that Councillor Lunn is unsure about that and feels differently.

"I have looked back at nine sets of decisions relating to this matter:

5 November 2013 Corporate Policy Committee meeting

8 May 2014 Forth Neighbourhood Partnership

10 June 2014 Project group meeting

26 June 2014 Survey results

15 July 2014 Project group meeting

25 August 2014 Correspondence with Councillor Lunn and Councillor Child

9 September 2014 Project group meeting

18 September correspondence with Councillors Lunn and Cardownie

“All of this evidence that I have seen indicates to me that the criteria agreed to are being adhered to. I understand that he feels differently, and I would encourage him to to pursue this with the Chief Executive.”

Councillor Lunn (SNP Craigentiny/Duddingston) is also Vice Convener of the Communities and Neighbourhoods Committee which meets this week. Although the decision to fund these projects was made a year ago there is nothing [on this week's agenda](#) to suggest that there will be any evaluation at this point. Councillor Lunn replied to Councillor Burns that he looked forward to working with the Council's chief executive to get the answers. He concluded: “It is in the interest of the young people of the city that they get as much help as possible with employment in this digital age.”

The report presented to the meeting of the [Corporate Policy and Strategy meeting last year](#) included a number of targets set for the project. Targets include training 40 people capable of local digital reporting, holding at least three open door events, publishing 3 stories per week, publishing 2 photographs per week and sending 12 tweets per month. It is fair to say that on the numbers front the NEN has exceeded the targets set for its social media activity.

At this year's AGM audited accounts were produced to March 2014 for the limited company which owns the NEN.

These numbers include a payment of £6,500 by the Inverleith and Forth Neighbourhood Partnerships. This sum was paid to the organisation to ‘collate a database of potential advertisers in both partnership areas’. The board admitted that this sum was additional to the £25,000 now being paid by the council, but that the database had not yet been used to gain any new advertising income. The advertising income for

the year to March 2014 was under £4,000 and the chairman explained that they had not sourced any further grants, so did not yet know how the paper would continue after March 2015.

Up to 31 March 2014 the NEN attracted advertising of £3,980. When the cost of sales £3,209 (printing typesetting and delivery) is deducted there is a gross profit of £771. The balance sheet does not show any assets other than £355 cash in the bank, and the news outlet appears wholly dependent on council funding at least for the time being.

Although the Board said last year that they planned for the company to become a social enterprise during this last year, the Treasurer explained this week that they would not do so until they have time available to close bank accounts and deal with the 'multitude of administration issues" this would entail.

So far the Board has resisted ideas of putting a price on the paper to earn any additional income. The chairman said: "I am not sure it would go down too well in areas like this." But he agreed that the board may explore the possibility of digital advertising on the website when it is up and running at the end of November.

The board admitted that the cost of producing the single issue in October this year was not covered by the advertising sold although actual figures were not confirmed. Later in the meeting the board agreed that they might also put a 'Donate' button on their website to attract some additional funds.

The editor admitted that they had lost the passwords to the Facebook account which had caused them some difficulty, but The Edinburgh Reporter believes that there is some movement to a [new blog here](#).

Part of the problem which the NEN had with setting up a new website is that Thomas Brown who runs the **North Edinburgh Community News** website and Live Edinburgh News had set up his

site at www.thenen.co.uk so the most obvious domain was no longer available to the NEN. Although quizzed about the cost of organising the new website, none of the board would confirm how much the outside advisers, Lennon Design, were charging for the new WordPress based website due to commercial confidentiality.

The editor explained that he now has an office on Ferry Road Drive to work from courtesy of Pilton Central Association and said he will be using that more often from now on. Mr Pickering also confirmed that visitors to the blog have been 400 (presumably per day), with 940 Twitter followers and that Sunday 31 August was the busiest day with 2,790 visitors but the traffic appeared to be driven to a spoof story published on 1 April 2014 about the local police station being turned into stables.

He continued: "Another paper will be produced at the end of February 2015, but I am disappointed it has taken so long to actually get the first paper produced. A lot of people in North Edinburgh do not access computers, and a lot of others like to pick up a newspaper. The great thing about the online presence is that it is immediate and there is an unlimited amount of space for photos and copy.

"The young people who live here are the best at producing stories about this area. They are enthusiastic but it is not always easy to be on top of everything immediately as I only have 20 hours a week to be the editor. We meet monthly with the steering group who are largely supportive and understand where mistakes have been made."

Martin Hinds said part of the exercise was to develop ways of contributing to the NEN, whether as citizen journalists or otherwise. He also explained that the Board is looking for new members who wish to get involved, but warned that without further funding it could be short-lived.

At the Forth Neighbourhood Partnership meeting on [26 August 2014](#) the NP expressed the view that the NEN is fundamental to communications around the [Local Community Plan](#) and confirmed that “the NEN will be invited to participate in any future developments associated with the priority”, although nothing more specific appears to have been mentioned.

Robert Pearson is Chair of Tenants and Residents in Muirhouse (TRIM) which has a following of 2,159 fans on Facebook. They aim to keep local residents informed about issues and initiatives in the area. He told The Edinburgh Reporter after the meeting: “I attended the NEN AGM expecting to get a few answers surrounding the £25k pilot which they are part of. After the chair gave a brief update, I was disappointed that they withheld information such as the cost of the brand new website which is still in process of being built.

“I asked the editor direct questions and during this the board were obviously a little miffed by the questions and started to shake their heads and mutter under their breath. During the AGM the chairman warned those present and I quote “Hope people who are using Twitter are careful by the way”.

“The NEN have shown that they are not trying to bring in money and openly said they will need the council to fund this and without the funding they will not have a NEN. With a website that gets 400 hits per day, targets set by the council which could be achieved by anyone, and a paper which is full of out-dated news, I think the future for the NEN is bleak.”

The Communities and Neighbourhoods Committee will meet this Tuesday although the Contact in the Community pilots are not on the agenda for discussion.

The Edinburgh Reporter spoke to Convener of that committee, Councillor Maureen Child, about the project. She said: “At the root of this is a dispute about whether or not monies the Council made available can support the production of a paper version as part of the pilot. There is nothing in the Council Committee decision that rules this out in any of the community

areas.

“As I understand it, there is strong local governance of each of the ‘community connecting’ projects and the use of any funds.

“There is scheduled to be a report back to Communities and Neighbourhoods Committee in the New Year, possibly February.”

Council funding of £12,500 is also helping to establish a news outlet in Craigmillar which is at the development phase following a survey conducted in the summer. It is led by the East Neighbourhood Team and a recent meeting held to discuss how the project might evolve was well attended. The Chronicle newspaper was produced in Craigmillar for many years until it too was affected by the council cutting its funding.

The Digital Sentinel, mentioned by Councillor Lunn in his address to council in September, has been funded by the Neighbourhood News initiative run by Carnegie UK Trust, as well as funding in kind or in cash from several other community partners up till now. Phyllis Stephen, the editor of The Edinburgh Reporter, is the Community Media Development Worker for [The Digital Sentinel](#) which continues to grow its online presence and which employs a graduate as a Trainee Reporter.