

PUBLIC NOTICES

The case for radical reform: part 1

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“LGiU is undertaking a practical study to explore new, simple and more effective ways for councils to distribute public notices.”

This is a lot of money, especially when councils are trying desperately to find savings. It is also an outdated system that has been left behind by technological advances. The current system provides no feedback to councils and ignores the fact that the audience is moving away from printed newspapers, to a varied digital media landscape.

LGiU believe change is necessary in the following areas:

- councils should be free to decide where is best to place public notices
- more work needs to be done to de-jargon and standardise the content of public notices councils who

do publish notices online should offer users a email subscription service, allowing users to opt-in to receive public notices

- hyperlocal, neighbourhood websites, as well as traditional local media news sites, should be encouraged to carry feeds of council notices

- the Government should

look into the possibility of supporting the development of a central online portal for publishing public notices

About the project

It is estimated that local government collectively spends £67.85m a year to have public notices published in local newspapers.

This seems a large spend in today's current local media landscape in which;

- readership of local newspapers is declining, dailies are turning to weeklies, and some papers are ceasing print editions full stop. The Lords communications committee found the printed press was in "crisis", with local papers under particularly "severe" pressure. Industry figures suggest daily average national paper circulation fell by 1.26 million copies between 2001 and 2011 .

- the number, and readership, of citizen-led com-

About the author

Rob Dale. I lead LGiU's work around digital engagement and communications. I have a BA in journalism, and during my time at university set up a hyperlocal site with fellow journalism students. I also contribute to the Brixton Blog - an excellent hyperlocal site covering the area of London in which I now live.

Because of my passion and belief in local government, printed journalism and hyperlocal reporting, I'm keen for this project to find some solutions that are beneficial to all three sides of this issue.

If you have any comments on this project, please contact me on rob.dale@lgiu.org.uk. You can also follow me on Twitter at [@robandale](https://twitter.com/robandale).

About the survey

Between August 22 and September 4, LGiU surveyed 110 councils. To add depth, we gathered information from different council departments - mostly legal, communications and planning.

Get involved in this project

This report represents the information and ideas we've gathered through stage 1 of our project into public notices. We welcome your involvement as we continue this work; contact rob.dale@lgiu.org.uk

Executive summary

Councils spend up to £67.85m (or an average of £181,000 per authority)¹ every year publishing public notices in local newspapers. The individual cost of publishing a notice can be upwards of three times that for a normal advert, reaching over £20 per column cm in some publications.

This is a lot of money, especially when councils are trying desperately to find savings. It is also an outdated system that has been left behind by technological advances.

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- councils should be free to decide where is best to place public notices
- more work needs to be done to de-jargon and standardise the content of public notices
- councils who do publish notices online should offer users an email subscription service, allowing users to opt-in to receive public notices
- hyperlocal, neighbourhood websites, as well as traditional local media news sites, should be encouraged to carry feeds of council notices
- the government should look into the possibility of supporting the development of a central online portal for publishing public notices.

About the project

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This seems a large spend in today's current local media landscape in which;

- **Readership of local newspapers is declining, dailies are turning to weeklies, and some papers are ceasing print editions altogether.** The Lords communications committee found the printed press was in "crisis", with local papers under particularly "severe" pressure. Industry figures suggest daily average national paper circulation fell by 1.26m copies between 2001 and 2012.
- **The number, and readership, of citizen-led community websites meanwhile has been increasing – and their use and appreciation by elected members and officers has been too.** 84% of elected members claim they are aware of a neighbourhood site in their area, the figure rises to 92% for officers³.
- **Web technology allows for ever simpler, more cost-effective publication of content on the internet.** The cost can be over £20 per single column cm in a local newspaper, digital publication can cost a matter of pennies.

LGiU is therefore undertaking a practical study to explore new, simple and more effective ways for councils to distribute public notices.

1 Hansard (2011) Proposed Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity - Communities and Local Government Committee

2 BBC (2012) Under-pressure newspapers 'deserve tax breaks'

3 Networked Neighbourhoods (2011) Councils & Online Neighbourhood Networks

This project consists of three stages.

1. LGiU has conducted a survey of local government to establish a feel for the current environment. The results of this survey are covered in this short report.
2. For the next few months LGiU, working alongside GovDelivery, will engage with a small, varied group of local authorities to design, build and use new web-based tools to publish public notices on the authorities' websites, and also through local (traditional) media, hyperlocal, community sites. Each tool will be designed with the authority - so each tool will differ and have specific elements relevant to the authority. This will provide a range of new data on the potential of digital methods of deliver.
3. By putting together all our information and insights from stages 1 and 2, LGiU will actively seek to work with more authorities to share best practice.

Where we are now

Whilst technology has advanced, the legislation that requires councils to produce and publish public notices hasn't. This is resulting in a weighty burden on councils, with the LGA estimating the total cost to be as high as £67.85m per year. Add on to this the value of staff time and the overall cost could treble.

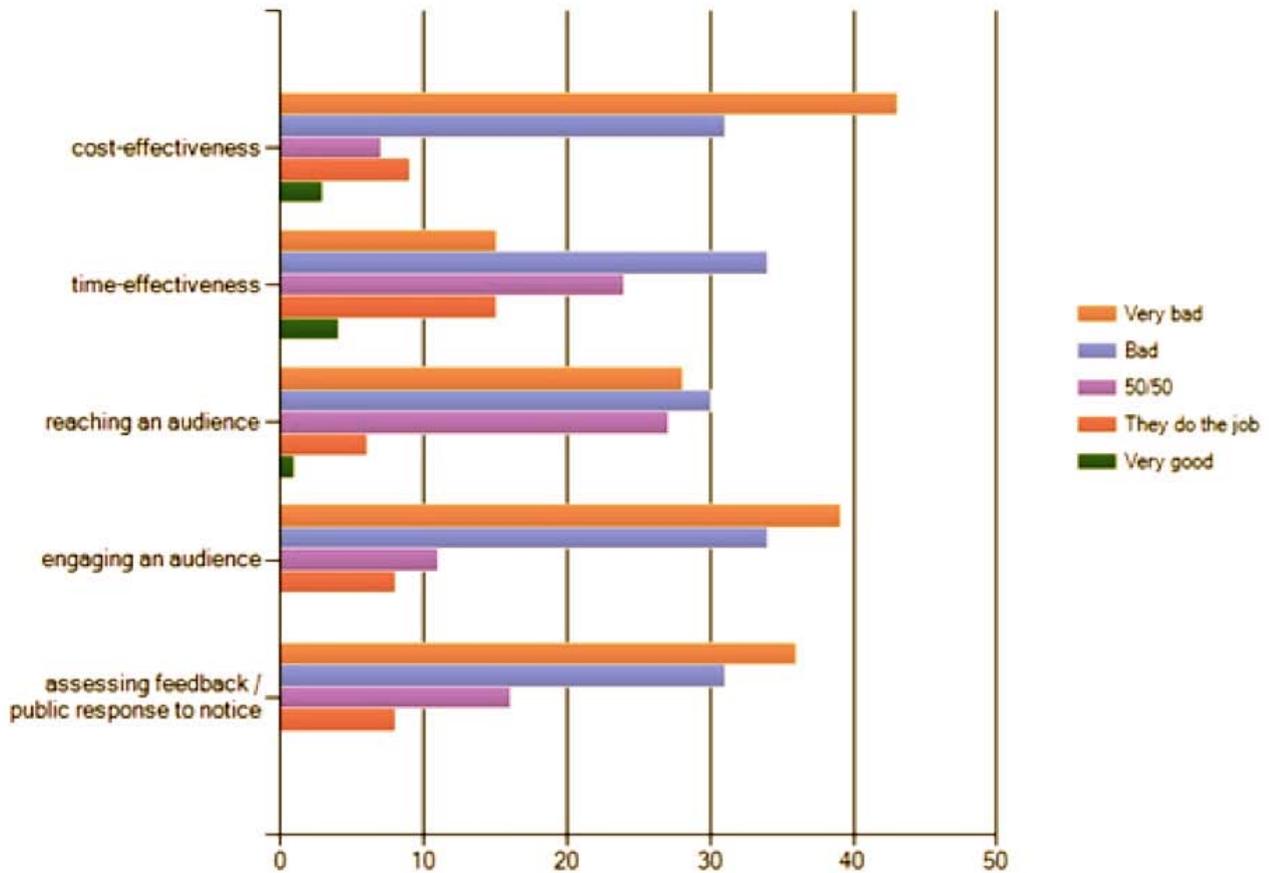
The Department for Communities and Local Government is more than aware that many local authorities dislike of the current system:

- A report commissioned by the government in 2007 to ensure the public sector acted as a leader in adapting to new communications technologies recommended public information should be made available cost-effectively, or ideally at marginal cost, and that publishing technologies had overtaken the requirements of most legislation.
- In 2008, the Killian Pretty review of planning applications recommended local planing authorities should "no longer be required to publish notices in newspapers". This would both improve effectiveness of "discussions and involvement of the local community" and give authorities flexibility to spend money "in the way they see fit to best engage their local communities". These proposals were not taken forward.
- The requirements on public notices did not form part of the government's new Publicity Code consultation - however many of those who responded took the opportunity to offer their views on the issue. The guidance published in February 2011 did not discuss public notices.

So despite central government being more than aware that councils want printed publishing requirements to be changed, and despite it being almost universally accepted that there are cost-savings to be made, there has been a distinct lack of engagement on the issue.

This is disappointing. Data contained in this report demonstrates that some subtle and some more radical changes in the current situation can not only save money, but can dramatically increase the usefulness and audience of these notices. With our recommendations we believe that public notices have the potential to add value to an authority's consultations and channel shift success.

The local government view?



In all five areas, the majority of respondents felt that the current system for producing and publishing statutory notices is either bad or very bad. In particular, the current system scored very low in terms of cost-effectiveness, they are a “total waste of public money” says John Shewell, Head of Communications, Brighton and Hove City Council.

Many respondents commented that the ‘legalistic’ wording of these notices is off-putting and alienating to many people. Also noted was the position in the paper that these notices are found: “statutory notices are in a part of the paper not read by your standard man on the street”, said one respondent.

All this leads to a widely-held assumption that statutory notices pass-by largely unregistered.

“I have worked for 30 years in this authority some of it as DC manager. As far as I am aware in that time we have had less than 10 responses to a published notice.” Tim Lewis, Planning Officer, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

This lack of feedback is worrying. If an authority is to understand the wants and needs of its community, it needs comprehensive, and if possible live, data on the audience reached by its messages.

Overall, more than 80% of respondents felt that these notices do not act as a consultation method. It is clear that these notices could act as a gateway to the council and its decision making process, but their wording and delivery currently do very little to enthuse people to engage with a local authority.

Democracy depends on dialogue. At a time when Eric Pickles is keen to open up the Town Hall to local bloggers⁴, statutory notices must surely be used better as a entry point to further and better interaction with the community.

How many and how much?

Finding precise figures on how many notices are published each year, and the total cost to each authority is, predictably, difficult.

In the vast majority of councils we surveyed, public notices are produced, and paid for by relevant individual departments. This clouds the situation as many people responsible for producing and publishing public notices are not aware of the overall council spend - thus seeming to make efficiency savings less likely.

It is perhaps then easier at this stage to look at a public notice in the singular. We were able to obtain precise figures in terms of cost per advert - this shows that the relative cost of space in the newspaper for a public notices is usually more expensive; sometimes three times as much as other adverts.

"Our local weekly newspapers (the Tindle group) charge £4.30 per single cm one column advert, if the advert goes into the main section of the newspaper. If the advert is a public notice the charge goes up to £13.50 per single cm across one column – more than three times the cost. I've just double checked the cost with them too. It's quite extraordinary!" Alison Stoneham, Communications Manager, South Hams District and West Devon Borough Councils.

This cost continues to rise as well. We also asked if the cost of advertising was increasing on a cost-per-cm basis - over 80% said yes, ranging between 2 and 7% over the last two years.

The relationship with the local newspapers also affects how efficiently notices get published. Again, due to the cross-department responsibilities for public notices, exact production time varies.

"Each notice has to be drafted, space booked and secured, orders placed, internal monitoring and payment systems. I would therefore estimate each notice equates to about two hours work".

The survey highlighted the power local newspapers have over councils. For as long as councils are required to publish in these publications, they will continue to be charged inflated cost.

The state of the local press

It is clear that local authorities are spending money (up to £67.85m) publishing statutory notices in local newspapers that they would prefer to spend on other frontline services.

As the LGA points out, this money is "a significant contribution to the commercial newspaper industry's turnover"⁵.

It could be argued that this is a backdoor subsidy, from local authorities to the local press.

There is no doubt that a vibrant, local media is vital to the democratic process. However, due to

4 Dale (2012) Pickles invites bloggers deeper into the Town Hall

5 Hansard (2011) Proposed Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity - Communities and Local Government Committee

economic pressures, reporting of local council news is decreasing, as too is the number of reporters being employed to cover council news.

The Lords communications committee concluded that:

"This has created a serious threat to investigative journalism and hence to democratic accountability in local areas."

Questions therefore need to be asked:

- is the local press holding its local authorities to account?
- in today's digital media landscape, what additional value does the local press offer over newer local media channels?
- how can a newspaper truly hold to account an organisation to which it is financially bound?

Many people still "want to see and know local journalists, want them to 'walk the beat', and engage face-to-face. They want journalists, local news and local newspapers back at the heart of their communities."⁶

How many journalists though would fulfill this criteria?

These are challenging questions, and the answers will vary enormously around the country. But we should have an open debate about this - a debate that the current backdoor subsidy obscures rather elucidates.

Changing the system

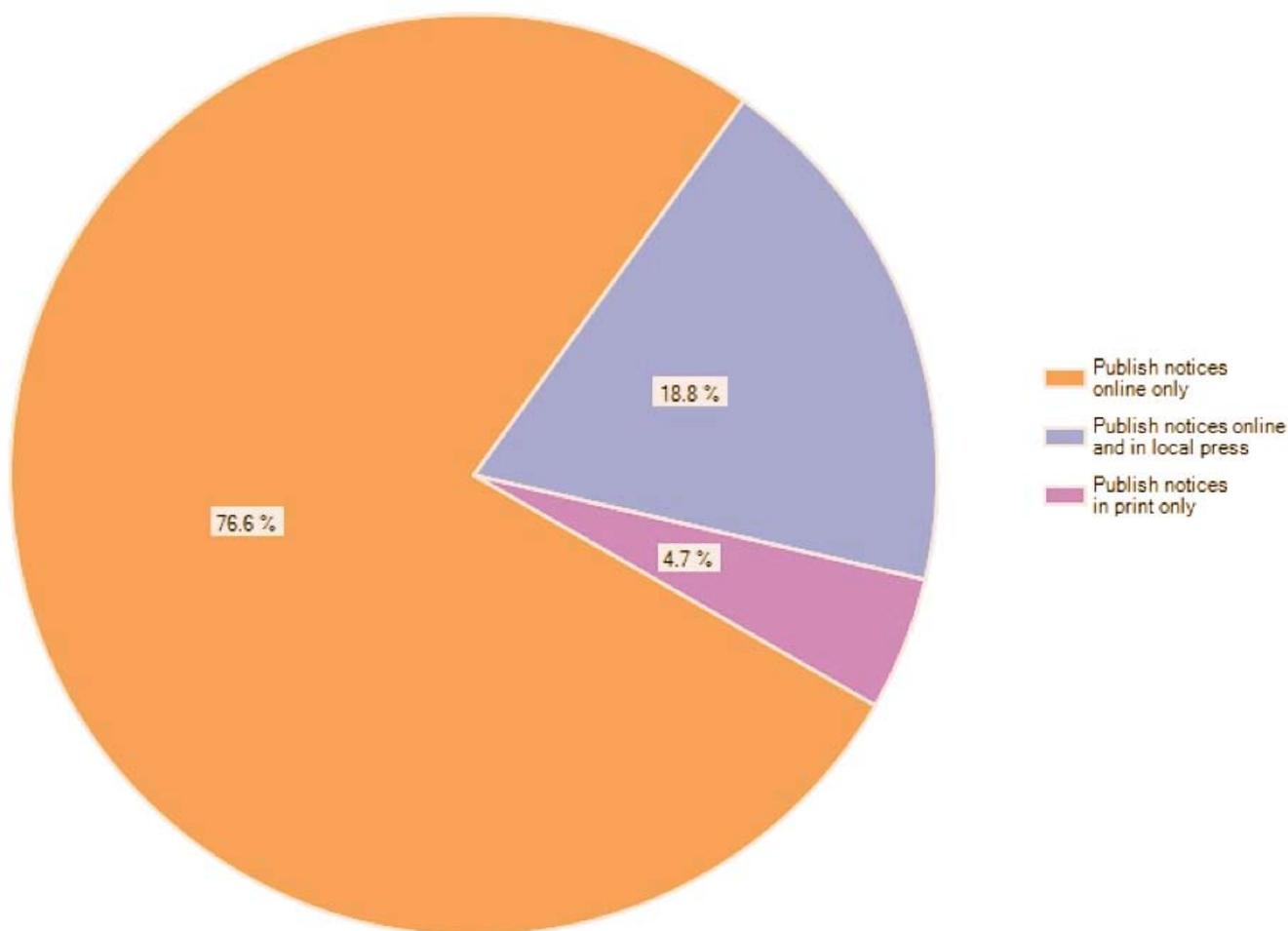
Over 90% of participants do not want the current legal requirements on public notices to remain as they are.

"They are an out-of-date anachronism of a pre-electronic age."

We asked what new system participants would like to see - over three-quarters opted for an online only approach. 73% of respondents also said that publishing notices online would also increase their audience.

One respondent pointed out that: "Most people access them through pressure groups - not direct from newspapers. We should allow local authorities to publish them on their website instead. If necessary a small reminder advert could be placed in the local press every month or two to remind people of the URL".

6 Media Trust (2010): Meeting the new needs of local communities



A new audience

The migration of the audience from print to digital is well known. This, in general, is leaving local newspapers with decreasing readership numbers of print editions. In response, most editors are increasingly turning their attention to the titles' online presence.

At the same time, the number and readership of citizen-led hyperlocal, neighbourhood websites is increasing. Research conducted by Networked Neighbourhoods found that 84% of elected members claim they are aware of a neighbourhood site in their area, the figure rises to 92% for officers.

Not only is the audience going online, but it's fragmenting - going to 'traditional' media for some news, but also 'new' media for other information.

This multi-layered local media landscape can be a positive for local government. Rather than just publishing notices in a local newspaper, or on the council website, councils should look to work with traditional and new news producers to go where the eyeballs are and explore how these third parties can carry more content that directs people towards the council website.

This could work off RSS feeds that are shared through information sharing widgets that can be reused on other website. This would involve some risk for councils, in terms of where the content ends up; but the information itself could not be tampered with and would mean their content would be seen by many more people in the online environment.

The Highways Agency currently uses such widgets⁷ - which have been shared with, and used by, some local authority websites already. One widget was shared on 57 separate websites within a month of launch.

Such arrangements may open the possibility of new funding revenues for the news sites.

For example, a pay-per-click model would:

- encourage news sites to carry more useful, useable information for local residents
- mean that councils pay by results, rather than upfront
- provide councils with greater data about how many people engage with public notices.

This is what stage 2 of this project will focus on. LGiU welcomes your thoughts on this - especially from those involved in local newspapers and hyperlocal, neighbourhood websites.

North of the border

It is also worth looking to Scotland for ideas as to how public notices can be made more relevant and accessible.

TellMeScotland is a product of Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Scottish government investing in the development of online technology that can save their local authorities money over the long-term, and improve the use of statutory notices.

TellMeScotland has been developed as an online portal to deliver statutory, and non-statutory public information notices in a single view throughout Scotland, and demonstrates delivery of public information to Scottish citizens and communities, without organisational boundaries.

It puts the citizen at the centre of the process by enabling users not only to search for relevant information with ease, but also to set-up email alerts and text messaging alerts so they are informed of developments within their chosen areas – they are able to be alerted to developments within six specific areas of their choice. Each alert then takes the citizen straight to the public notice concerned, without having to search through the portal's home page.

The portal's development is funded by the Scottish government. Annual maintenance and operational cost is £119,000.

Given that Scotland has been working on this since 2010, local authorities in England and Wales should be asking why DCLG and the LGA have not invested in a similar central portal.

⁷ <http://www.highways.gov.uk/traffic/24359.aspx>

What does local government want?

"This is an area ripe for change - it should have happened years ago."

The results obtained by LGiU show that councils want changes to the system that allow for a more local, optional and varied approach depending on the media (online and offline) use of residents.

Ideas for a better system

This project will be looking with greater depth and first hand experience into these issues through stages 2 and 3.

Already though, it is clear that changes - some subtle and some more radical - could be made in the following areas:

1. Free up councils to decide, based on their local online and offline ecosystem, where best to place public notices.
2. Councils should work to de-jargon the content of public notices.
3. Councils who decide to publish public notices online should offer residents the ability to register to updates via email.
4. Hyperlocal websites and traditional publishers should work with councils to publish on their websites.
5. DCLG should investigate the suitability of a central portal, like TellMeScotland, for England and Wales.

Get involved in this project

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