

Should public notice legislation be updated?

New report from LGiU calls for a change to the rules on public notices to provide better value for money for local government and residents

In 2008, the Killian Pretty review of planning applications recommended that local planning 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. But it is clear that while technology has advanced, offering more options for placing public notices and at cheaper cost, the legislation that requires councils to produce and publish public notices hasn't.

Councils spend up to £67.85m every year publishing public notices in local newspapers, according to an estimate by the Local Government Association. The individual cost of publishing a notice can reach over £20 per column cm in some publications, upwards of three times the cost for other adverts. This is resulting in a weighty burden on councils.

Local authorities are crying out for change. We surveyed 110 councils for our recent report on the issue and found more than 90% of respondents want the legal requirements reformed. One commented that current standards "are an out-of-date anachronism of a pre-electronic age". The head of communications at Brighton & Hove said they were a "total waste of public money".

There has been a distinct lack of engagement on the issue from the Department for Communities and Local Government, despite it being aware that councils want printed publishing requirements to be changed and cost savings to be made.

A 2007 government report into how the public sector could take a lead in adapting to new communications technologies recommended that public information should be made available cost-effectively, or ideally at marginal cost, and that publishing technologies had overtaken the requirements of most legislation.

Despite this, requirements on public notices did not form part of the government's last publicity code consultation. The guidance, published in February 2011, did not discuss public notices.

In terms of cost and time effectiveness, the success of reaching and engaging an audience and assessing feedback, the vast majority of residents rated the current system as bad or very bad. It is clear that councils are not getting value for their money.

LGiU wants to see a mixture of subtle and radical change:

- Councils should be free to decide where it 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 also look into the possibility of supporting the development of a central online portal for publishing public notices.

There is not, and should not be, a one-size-fits-all solution to this problem. Councils want the freedom to decide where is best to place public notices. Some may choose to go online only, others to continue publishing in local publications. Some may print more 'town hall pravdas' as communities secretary Eric Pickles describes them.

One participant in our survey mentioned they were looking at what new local TV might offer. The choice though, should be up to councils.

What impact would changing the system have? We can transform the way councils think of public notices, from being a chore and a cost, to a communication point that adds value to the council's engagement and channel shift strategies.

We also want to see a greater involvement of hyperlocal and community forums in the sharing of these notices. As Networked Neighbourhoods have shown, more and more people are using these citizen-led sites to find local information.

And what for the local press? These changes would have a big impact on local papers – £67.85m is a significant contribution to commercial newspaper industry's turnover. There is no doubt that a vibrant, local media is vital to the democratic process, but the current trend invites some hard questions about value for money.

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