

Report by Jeremy Clifford, Chair NMA/BBC Advisory Panel

Local News Partnership: Annual Review

The BBC and NMA entered into an agreement in May, 2016, to deliver a new way of partnership working across the media landscape that was written into the Government's White Paper: "*A BBC for the future: a broadcaster of distinction*".

The Local News Partnership between the two organisations was set up, with one of the key aims being to "ensure the BBC supports and invigorates local news provision across the UK, through the delivery of a set of proposals to support local democracy."*

As a result, a working group was formed from representatives in the BBC and the NMA to address four areas set out in the joint letter of agreement. They were:

- 1) To establish a local democracy reporting service, including the recruitment of 150 reporters
- 2) To set up a Shared Data Unit between the BBC and regional journalists to identify new opportunities for data-related journalism and to upskill journalists in this field
- 3) To share BBC video and audio via a News Bank service onto eligible partner websites
- 4) Conduct an audit of content to establish the degree of content generated by NMA members that is used by the BBC that should be given proper acknowledgement, and vice versa.

The partnership will see BBC funding of £8m per annum for the lifetime of the Charter to support the various elements of the activity outlined in the agreement.

The first step was to agree a framework by which local news organisations would be able to actively participate in the partnership – *the eligibility criteria*. This was divided into two sections.

- 1) Eligibility to receive all content produced by the partnership. Local news organisations had to meet a number of criteria establishing their credentials as a bona fide news organisation, a background in reporting on publicly-funded institutions and a proven track record in quality journalism
- 2) Once the first criteria was met, partners could bid for contracts to employ the 150 local democracy reporters, meeting a further set of criteria that included the capacity to provide full HR and payroll support and holiday cover, training of journalists, and provision of a robust content checking procedure. In addition, they had to demonstrate a willingness to enter into partnership working arrangements and a commitment to inclusivity of employment and reporting.

In October the full list of eligible partners was published by the BBC, which now stands at 802 news organisations.

Contracts for the recruitment of the LDRs were put out to tender to eligible partners in November with awards made to successful bidders in December.

An Advisory Panel has been set up between the BBC and the NMA to oversee the operation of the Local News Partnership, chaired by Jeremy Clifford from the NMA, with Matthew Barraclough from the BBC as the lead BBC member. It meets every eight weeks to monitor the delivery of the four action areas set out above and to resolve issues as the partnership gathers momentum.

Local Democracy Reporters

In the first phase, 60 contracts comprising 145 reporting roles for mainland UK have been issued, with contract bundles ranging from between 0.5 and 6 posts. Successful bidders included but were not exclusive NMA members.

We believe we have made good progress in recruiting to those posts with 126 reporters out of the 145 awarded through the contracts now operational.

There have been difficulties recruiting in some areas of the UK, given the availability of reporters with the requisite skills. As a result we have reached agreement with the BBC to extend the deadline for recruiting to allow a full year for the contracts to be filled. We expect all contracts currently offered to be filled in that time (January 2019).

There still remains the issue of Northern Ireland where there has been some resistance to the project. We put in place three pilot roles into the region and following an assessment the BBC are now considering deploying a level of service into the region.

Without doubt the reporters have made a positive contribution to the scale and quality of reporting of our local councils. (Appendices 1,2&3)

- At the time of writing more than 30,000 stories have been published
- The impact of those reports can be assessed in the way those articles have been published - many making front page news, reaching the BBC national homepage, and the digital reach they have attained
- A pilot feedback survey commissioned by the BBC recorded positive responses from eligible partners, with no question receiving less than 70% positive scores
- There has been significant positive feedback from readers applauding the improved service
- Critically, Editors have referenced the improvement the existence the reporters have made to their ability to cover political institutions and meetings that were becoming more difficult to do

There is a rigorous monitoring and review process in place, run by the BBC, through which each individual reporter's output is measured. Each contract holder is held to account for performance and any necessary improvements are made clear.

Teething problems in some areas, such as delay in publication to the shared wire and quantity of content produced, have been highlighted, with publishers asked to make improvements. I believe this is a positive process and any transgressions have been honest mistakes as we get to grips with the demands of the service provision.

A twice-yearly review forum of all eligible partners, on a region by region basis, is yet to be set up - which will allow for wider feedback on the performance of the contracts. Issues will be sent through to the joint BBC/NMA advisory panel.

It is our belief that the original intention to have 200 BBC funded journalists would further improve the breadth of coverage of democratic institutions, providing coverage to the wider media industry as well as the BBC. This should be enabled as a priority of this scheme.

Shared Data Unit

The Shared Data Unit is a developing partnership between the BBC and press industry in demonstrating the benefit of collaborative working in a fast emerging area of journalism. We have a skills shortage in working with data in our industry. This partnership offers not only the opportunity to identify news content but to upskill journalists for the wider industry. So far there have been three intakes of journalists into the data unit, providing training and experience to six people, the third intake of four journalists has just commenced. There have been 12 releases of content from the SDU shared across eligible media outlets.

Take-up from the service has increased as the service has improved. Impact has been mixed owing to the nature of the content. If your area is at the top or the bottom of a data set then it is more newsworthy. That said, there have been many examples of front page coverage. The content has also had airing on the national and international network of the BBC - demonstrating its quality.

The Shared Data Unit has also been nominated for Online Media Award (Innovation) and Digital Technology Leaders Award (Project Team)

News Hub

The launch and deployment of the News Hub has been the most problematic part of the LNP because of the technical and process requirements involved.

While the NMA is pleased to see the video element now deployed, it is difficult to assess its impact.

We have yet to resolve the issue around supporting advertising on host web sites (see later section). Because of the restrictions on this, there has only been limited take-up of advertising by some publishers because technical changes are required to websites.

The agreement was also to enable sharing of video and audio. So far there is no progress on the audio part to this service.

Content Audit

The NMA/BBC agreement includes an audit of content used by the BBC to assess provenance of content that is not sourced from the BBC's own journalists. However, after consideration by the NMA/BBC content audit working group, it was agreed that the three other workstreams and completion date requirements should take priority over this project and the resources that would be required. BBC acknowledgment of second-use content remains important and must be given, so the right to keep the Content Audit under review and to instigate the Content Audit is reserved. We believe there is more acknowledgement now of second-use content but we reserve the right to keep this under review.

Advertising

The joint letter of agreement between the Director of BBC News and the Chairman of the NMA of May 2016 to the Secretary of State, stated that advertising against News Bank video content might be one way of extending the Local Democracy Reporting Service to 200 reporters, post 2019:

"If the usage of the journalism on BBC outlets warrants increasing the numbers from 150 to 200 in 2019, the further 50 journalists could be funded from a number of different sources including net revenues raised by the participating news media groups from advertising against BBC news bank video content (which may need specific approval from the future regulatory body of the BBC), external funding, or reallocation of BBC resources..."

The BBC confirmed it was fully committed to working in partnership with the NMA and the wider local news sector, and the BBC understood that the need for commercial operations to drive revenues wherever possible. It considered that it had however been clear from the outset of the discussions that running advertising in this way would be subject to any regulatory approval that may be required. The BBC therefore agreed to initiate a formal consideration of this matter.

The BBC's Head of UK Policy in December 2016 advised in reply that *the agreement between the BBC and the NMA sets out that advertising around News Bank material "may need specific approval from the future regulatory body of the BBC"*.

The new BBC Board conducted a public consultation upon a Draft Distribution Policy for the BBC's UK Public Services from February-April 2018. The NMA submission response stated that, as the BBC had suggested, the NMA would be interested in exploring whether the new Draft Distribution policy might permit any advertising, whether as set out in the letter to the Secretary of State or otherwise. The new Distribution Policy came into effect on 15 June 2018 and the BBC published its helpful response to the NMA in 'Distribution Policy The BBC's response to the Distribution Policy consultation June 2018'. In addressing 'Section 5 of the Policy: exceptions' (at page 21) it stated: "The BBC welcomes the NMA's support for the BBC News Hub partnership and notes their interest in exploring advertising around the content it syndicates as a potential 'exception'. The Policy does allow for time-limited trials to test specific, measurable hypotheses for which it may not be proportionate to follow all aspects of the Policy (clause 5.3)."

The NMA is now assessing its position.

Measurement of success

Establishing KPIs to monitor the uptake of content through the partnership has been challenging because of the number of eligible partners – 802 currently. Equally, the usage on the BBC websites

will be at a different level to the partners because of the volume of content created. It was agreed to have two sets of criteria, one for the BBC and one for NMA members.

LDR content:

- The BBC will work to a target of between 30% and 50% of content generated being hosted on its platforms.
- The NMA will work to a target of 65% in year one, rising to 90% in year two.

Shared Data Unit:

- Average take-up of 20% of partners using SDU content for reasons set out above (due to news worthiness of this type of content). This represents around 160 partners using each output.
- The BBC would aim to ensure 20% of its digital news teams used the content.

News Hub:

- We have set a similar target of 20% of partners downloading available content

We are also looking at impact measures as a qualitative guide to the success of the partnership. This will capture areas such as position a story has been used on website or printed title and on BBC bulletins; examples of stories uncovering issues that would otherwise not have been reported on, feedback from councils.

Methodology:

Two, two-week surveys conducted by eligible partners will be carried out to assess performance against these criteria. Ahead of each audit, first date to be confirmed once we are confident the LDR system is fully operational, the BBC will issue partners with a checklist for completion.

In place of the surveys, the BBC has commissioned a survey of two sites to assess impact, which has recorded overwhelmingly positive feedback.

Regional forum

A formal means of getting feedback from the LNP has been set up. Regional fora will be set up twice-yearly in every BBC regions.

They will be attended by a senior regional BBC figure hosting the meeting, all relevant LDRS suppliers, a member of the central BBC LNP team, eligible partners.

A summary of the meeting will be uploaded to a sharing platform for the NMA and BBC to access. Any significant issues or proposals to be brought before the NMA-BBC Advisory Panel. These are not yet live.

Footnote

*Letter of Agreement between the BBC and the NMA signed in May 2016

Appendices: Please paste links into your browser to view.

Appendix 1

Case studies:

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#search/in%3Atrash+paul+sinker/QgrcJHrhvWmNBXQhQGBZhgVtmwswzNkCJrl?projector=1&messagePartId=0.1>

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1hzjqvxOxW07go9F4jFrAaTEAgIbJunVGyg8Jli7cPQ0/edit?ts=5b0d6cda#slide=id.p>

Appendix 2 (Letter signed by partners to the NMA giving feedback on the LDR scheme)

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER SCHEME

One of the overriding motivations between the joint agreement between the News Media Association and the BBC in April 2016 was the White Paper on BBC Charter renewal that required the BBC “to make use of its privileged position to support the provision of news and information, specifically through a positive partnership with the local news sector”.

The BBC was required to support and invigorate that local news provision, particularly in the realm of public service journalism, by working in partnership with the local news industry to support local democracy.

Out of that came the scheme to recruit 150 local democracy reporters, funded by the BBC and employed by the local media.

The scheme is still in its early stages - having only really gone live in early 2018. However, it is already succeeding in its objective with more than 20,000 stories published by the local democracy reporters already.

David Higgerson, Digital Editorial Strategy Director at Reach, said: “*The LDR project has enabled us to recruit journalists who cover issues which are important to readers, but which readers don't always appreciate are important to them.*”

“The scheme has meant we now have the resources to once again cover councils in far greater depth, uncovering the stories which matter to readers, and then using our expertise in engaging with readers to get that content to readers.”

“As a society, it is important that decisions are seen to be made fairly, and better decisions get made when there is high quality scrutiny. In a world where every story stands or falls in Google or Facebook on its own merits as determined by secretive algorithms, we can bring our skills in attracting audiences to important content in a way no-one else can, but need the support of society to make sure more stories are told for the good of society.”

Toby Granville, Editorial Development Director at Newsquest said: “*The Local Democracy scheme has the potential to be a game changer for sustainable models for quality local journalism.*”

“It has meant that we can dedicate resources to provide our readers with the stories that make a difference to their everyday lives.”

“There has been no more important time than to hold councils to account and scrutinise those in power – and without the LDRs we would be unable to do so – and those issues affecting our readers would otherwise go unpublished.”

“Now we need further support across other areas of public service reporting to shine a light on those too - so our communities are no longer left in the dark.”

Jeremy Clifford, Editor in Chief at Johnston Press said: “*The appointment of a team of local democracy reporters with a tight brief to ensure local councils and other public bodies receive daily coverage has meant that local democracy is now being given much better scrutiny.*”

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“Our editors have all welcomed the arrival of new blood and dedicated reporters into their newsrooms - either allowing fuller coverage of political bodies, or freeing up other journalists to provide better coverage of their region.

“We have unearthed stories that quite frankly we would not have been able to bring to our readers’ attention had we not had this team of reporters in our newsrooms. Councillors and council leaders have welcomed the additional coverage and also the scrutiny that is now reported to the public.

“The only frustration is that we do not have more of these reporters to cover more public organisations - allowing for more public service journalism. The intention was always to find a way to expand the number of BBC-funded reporters to 200-250 and that remains our aspiration.”

Ian Carter, Editorial Director at Iliffe Media said: *“As an independent publisher, we have continued to invest in grass roots reporting and still employ a dedicated political editor.*

“However, the Local Democracy Reporter scheme has enabled us to cover more meetings and scour more agendas than we would have managed even in the days when staffing levels were significantly higher than they are now.”

Matt Kelly, Chief Content Officer at Archant said: *“Local news organisations have always been the fabric of the community; bringing essential transparency to the public institutions and justice frameworks we all depend on. Much of this work has always been unprofitable and done because we understand our communities depend on it.*

“If we are unable to serve this function, particularly as our business models become increasingly challenged, society will be the poorer for it. I believe a Government commitment to supporting this work, in whatever form, will benefit us all.”

Appendix 3

A piece of feedback sent to the BBC of the kind of impact the Local Democracy Scheme is having - that could have otherwise had a different outcome were it not for their coverage. It's from Richard Stow, the Independent Person for Herefordshire Council:

“I have a strong interest in promoting openness and accountability in the decision-making of Herefordshire Councillors, because I am the "Independent Person" appointed by Herefordshire Council to fulfil the obligation in s 28(7) of the Localism Act 2011. The role of the Independent Person is to assist the Council in discharging its duty in the Act to "promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the authority". The role is wholly advisory - I have no decision-making powers at all. I am just over two years into a four-year term of appointment.

“The LDR story which had a major impact was titled “Tories vote to keep misconduct hidden - Decision went against independent advice on transparency”, written by Carmelo Garcia and published in the Hereford Times on 10 May 2018.

“The story caused an immediate public reaction against the secrecy, including letters to the Hereford Times and an online petition which quickly achieved over 1700 supporters, and probably individual contact with ward councillors.

“However, the end result was that at full Council on Friday 25th May, the secrecy decisions of the “constitution working group” and the Audit and Governance Committee on 8th May were totally reversed in a unanimous vote. In addition, a second motion to improve the transparency of Councillors' personal interests was also successful by a large majority.

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“My view, as a close follower of Herefordshire Council’s decision-making in my statutory role as “Independent Person”, is that neither of the two decisions in favour of openness at full Council would have taken place if the LDR story on 10 May had not been written and published.

“This story also perfectly fits your LDR brief: “to report on the decision-making process: what decisions are made in the public’s name and how they are arrived at, what evidence is presented to the council...”