

# Local News Partnerships

## Annual Review 2017/18

### 1. Executive Summary

The Local News Partnerships were established in response to a Charter commitment to work in partnership to increase the availability of quality journalism, particularly on local democracy and civic life. This review focuses on the delivery progress of the proposals agreed in 2017: the creation of a cohort of journalists to report on local councils, a collaboration to produce data journalism and increase skill levels across industry and a means of sharing BBC News media assets with other local news organisations.

The BBC and News Media Association (NMA) developed criteria to determine access to the partnerships and these were used in May 2017 to approve more than 700 local news providers who would access the content generated. An open procurement that autumn determined which of those Partners would become Suppliers, winning contracts to employ Local Democracy Reporters. The Shared Data Unit started in October and welcomed three reporters from Partner newsrooms a month later. The first Local Democracy Reporter began work in Kent in January 2018. Delivery is now well advanced: almost 90% of the Local Democracy Reporters are now in post and 30,000 stories have been shared; the Shared Data Unit is on its third intake of secondees; the News Hub is sharing video across England and Scotland. Implementation will be complete when the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) extends to Northern Ireland and the News Hub includes audio and video content from all Nations.

A large scale partnership of this kind is not without challenges: for example, ensuring that the Suppliers share the stories they generate in a timely way. The agreement with the NMA allowed for possible expansion of the Local Democracy Reporting Service to up to 200 journalists, subject to a public value review. The current contracts between the BBC and the Suppliers which underpin the LDRS will end in January 2021. The first full survey of all Partners will not take place until all content is available across the UK, however early indications are that the content is valued and well used by Partners and BBC news teams. A trial survey in Kent showed high usage and appreciation by the BBC and partners and there are a growing number of examples of LDRS stories generating significant impact.

Once implementation is complete, the BBC team will increasingly look to use the LDRS as a tool for national news-gathering: spotting trends early and providing detailed local examples to illustrate running stories.

## 2. Context

A key component of the BBC's public purpose mission is to ensure that all audiences can engage fully with major local issues. Over the course of the Charter discussions the BBC developed proposals with the local news industry to improve the provision of local journalism and help address the democratic deficit. Working in partnership is intended to broaden the benefits for all audiences and help sustain plurality in local media. It is also in line with the commitment to a more open BBC.

The Local News Partnerships (LNP) were originally agreed with the News Media Association (NMA) and published in a joint letter in May 2016. The proposals are:

- a) *The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS)*: Recruitment of 150 new journalists, employed by local news providers, to report on councils and other public bodies;
- b) *News Hub*: Syndication of BBC local video and audio content for use by local and regional news organisations across the UK; and a
- c) *Shared Data Unit (SDU)*: Collaborative working with local news organisations on data journalism and making content available to wider industry.
- d) *Content Audit*: A jointly commissioned independent audit to establish the usage of local press content by the BBC on its media platforms and vice versa<sup>1</sup>.

## 3. Establishing the Partnerships

Criteria to join the Local News Partnerships were agreed with the NMA and in wider consultation with other parts of the industry. Partners would be eligible to receive content from the News Hub and Shared Data Unit, bid to employ the Local Democracy Reporters and use the content they produced. Applications for membership opened in May 2017 and more than 80 media organisations representing more than 800 print, online or broadcast outlets are now local news Partners. The Partnerships are open to any news organisation which can meet the eligibility criteria.

In July 2017, a technology provider was selected by open procurement to create the means of distribution for the Local News Partnerships content. Stream AMG provides the Authoring Tool for Local Democracy Reporters to create their content and two web portals which distribute the LDRS content ([www.ldrs.org.uk](http://www.ldrs.org.uk)) and BBC content ([newshub.bbc.co.uk](http://newshub.bbc.co.uk)) respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> Following an assessment of the likely cost and complexity of such a review, the BBC and NMA agreed to suspend this proposal to allow the other elements to be prioritised. This suspension will be reviewed periodically.

Distribution of the Local Democracy Reporters was mainly linked to higher tier local authorities. This layer of local government covers all parts of the UK and is generally itself linked to population. Additional consideration was given to large or remote rural areas and those areas with district councils. This table shows the distribution of Reporters and contracts by BBC area:

<b>BBC Region</b>	<b>Contracts</b>	<b>Reporters</b>
North East	3	8
North West	5	19
Yorkshire & Lincs.	5	16
South West	1	3
West Midlands	5	14
East Midlands	2	5
West	2	7
South	5	13
East	4	10
South East	2	5
London	12	13
Scotland	10*	21.5*
Wales	4	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>145.5</b>

*\* Two contracts totalling 1.5 FTE reporter currently unallocated*

#### 4. The Local Democracy Reporting Service

In November 2017, 58 contracts to employ 145 Local Democracy Reporters (LDRs) were awarded to 11 Local News Partners following an open procurement.

Following the procurement, the BBC was unable to identify a Supplier for Orkney and also in Scotland, DC Thomson requested that their two contracts were terminated. Following a reallocation, there are now just two unallocated contracts, totalling 1.5 FTE posts.

To date there are 126 LDRs in post and they have shared 30,000 stories with the Partners.

<b>Company name</b>	<b>Contracts</b>	<b>Reporters</b>
Reach Plc	23	63
Newsquest	18	38
Johnston Press	10	33.5
KM Media Group	1	2
Stonebow Media (The Lincolnshire Reporter)	1	2
Archant Community Media	1	2
Citizen News and Media (The Hackney Citizen)	1	1
London Evening Standard	1	1
Manx Radio	1	1
Shetland News	1	0.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>144</b>

Recruitment began in December 2017 and the first LDR was in post at the end of January 2018, although most Suppliers did not start the hiring process until the new year. Each LDR is employed and managed by the Supplier, however there are common features in their contracts to ensure consistency; they all work to the same editorial brief and submit their content into a common system.

Suppliers have found recruitment in some markets challenging. The minimum professional standard for hiring a LDR was agreed by the BBC and the NMA to ensure the quality of the Service but that has excluded trainees and some graduates from being appointed, although where the LDR has been appointed from within a Supplier's workforce, more junior reporters can be brought in to back-fill those vacancies.

As with any new undertaking which involves both contracts between organisations and large numbers of new and existing people, there have been challenges:

- Use of LDRS content by a given Supplier ahead of its publication to the other Partners
- LDRS stories not being shared in a timely fashion
- Insufficient productivity
- Incorrectly attributing LDRS stories
- Attempts by Partners (including the BBC) to directly commission an LDR

The BBC has worked closely with the Supplying Partners and progress has been made in most areas. Early indications of the value of the LDRS content to the BBC and the wider local news industry are discussed in Section 9 of this paper.

The LDRS has not yet been extended to Northern Ireland on account of differences in both the local news market and structure of local government. The BBC and NMA are evaluating the results currently and will make a decision in due course on whether the service extends to Northern Ireland. We are cautiously optimistic that an appropriate solution can be found.

## **5. The Shared Data Unit**

The Shared Data Unit (SDU) brings together experienced BBC data journalists alongside reporters seconded from the regional news industry. A key aim of the unit is to develop data journalism expertise in the regional news marketplace through its three-month training programme. Since November 2017, six journalists from the regional press - representing Newsquest, Archant, Johnston Press, Reach and ITV - have undergone training with the SDU. They have picked up a wide range of data journalism skills through formal training and day-to-day mentoring. The training covers all aspects of data

journalism from cleaning, analysing and visualising data to more advanced techniques such as how to scrape data from websites. The programme also includes a two-day placement with the BBC's Visual Journalism department at the New Broadcasting House. At the end of the course, the secondees undergo a two-day Train the Trainer course, which provides them with the skills and confidence to return to their newsrooms and share their skills with colleagues. The SDU is committed to training a total of 12 external journalists annually.

The SDU creates public interest data journalism, which it shares with Partners in the regional news sector who have signed up to the Local News Partnerships scheme, as well as across the BBC network. So far, the unit has published 12 pieces of investigative journalism. For each topic, the unit prepares a story pack that serves as a toolkit for journalists comprising of the top lines, analysis, quotes and a spreadsheet analysed to a regional level. Topics covered include the link between early deaths and poverty, the cost of policing football matches, the impact of Brexit on the NHS, potholes, extended access to GPs and the housing crisis. The story packs the SDU distributes to Partners have generated more than 400 local stories for more than 160 media outlets including television, radio and online. The content has also been used across the BBC's output including the News Channel, Breakfast, Radio 2's Jeremy Vine, Radio Scotland, The World at One, and dozens of regional and Nations radio and television channels. An awareness of the BBC's other data journalism teams and the work of other data journalism initiatives ensures that the shared output from this team is both distinctive and additive.

In line with its more strategic objectives, the Shared Data Unit hosted its first public hack-day, exploring transport data with more than 30 academics, transport and local government officials, data scientists, and journalists. The aim was to make inaccessible transport data more accessible to journalists, and to open up dialogue with specialists on stories that are of huge interest to our audiences.

The Shared Data Unit held a conference at Quay House in Salford to celebrate the rich variety of data journalism being practised across the UK and to promote the work of the SDU. It hosted a number of sessions throughout the day on how to source data, how to effectively use Freedom of Information laws, and how to effectively use data journalism in regional newsrooms.

## **6. News Hub**

The News Hub is an ambitious project to share BBC video and audio from the news teams of the four Nations of the UK with the Local News Partners. Once the BBC uses content for its own audience, it can then share it with other news organisations for online use only. The BBC content reaches new audiences and the Partners get access to high quality media to enhance their digital offering.

Distribution of the content is handled via a web portal. BBC content is processed, branded and captions are mixed in before being offered to the portal. The complexity of the project has largely been within the BBC where differences in technology and workflows across the UK created a challenge for the development team.

In June, the News Hub was activated in the West Midlands and North West regions and then rolled out across all English Regions in July. BBC Scotland’s daily news video became available in September. The next phases of development will be to deliver News Hub to the remaining Nations and to include the distribution of news audio. In order to ensure that BBC radio clips are both easy for Partners to upload and carry clear attribution back to the BBC, work is underway to offer audio as a video file, carrying the branding of the originating service as a still image.

Currently Partners are not permitted to carry pre- or post-roll advertising on their websites on content from the News Hub. The NMA has expressed interest in exploring the potential of advertising around video and has contributed to the recent consultation on our Distribution Policy. It is possible that an exception to the Policy may be appropriate for Partners, and the Policy allows for a trial to be conducted to test specific potential exceptions. The NMA has indicated that it may wish to propose a trial in the future.

## 7. Funding

The BBC has committed to spending around £8m per annum on the Local News Partnerships activity. The forecast expenditure for this financial year is £6m. It is anticipated that when the LDRS, News Hub and the Shared Data Unit are at full capacity, the cost of the Partnerships will reach the maximum amount envisaged under the BBC's Charter spend commitment.

## 8. Evaluation

The main quantitative indicator for the performance of the Local News Partnerships activity will be uptake of the content produced. The BBC and NMA have agreed indicative levels of usage, which will be subject to review. In addition, the BBC will collect data on the prominence of the content and will seek feedback from Partners and the wider local news sector.

Content	NMA Use	BBC Use
Local Democracy Reporting Service	65% or 975 stories per week, rising after 12 months to 90% or 1,350 stories per week	30% or 450 stories per week

Shared Data Unit	20% of members using each story pack	20% across broadcast outlets or 3 TV regions and 8 radio stations
News Hub	20% of members using at least one item of content per week	N/A

Two trial data gathering exercises were conducted during July in Kent and in two areas of Northern Ireland. Kent was the first place to receive a Local Democracy Reporter in January 2018 and we had undertaken to trial the Service in Northern Ireland to assess it in light of differences in the news market and functions of local government. Because the trial was based on a small sample, findings cannot be generalised to demonstrate overall impact. However, results from the pilot regions indicate that the service is working well.<sup>2</sup>

- The Local News Partnerships have helped the respondents to better serve their audiences; the average score of effectiveness at better serving audiences was **8.4**, with no organisation giving a score below 7.
- In terms of the individual elements of the service, all received an average score above **7.5**:
  - News Hub: **8.0**
  - Local Democracy Reporting Service: **7.9**
  - Shared Data Unit: **7.7**
- Stakeholders feel that that Local News Partnerships has helped them to hold power to account; when asked to score its effectiveness at doing so, the service received an average score of **7.7**
- Stakeholders indicated that a number of stories from the Local News Partnerships had driven high engagement amongst their audiences, either through a high number of comments or above average interaction on social media.
- Comments collected during the research were almost entirely positive and highlighted the value of the Local News Partnerships:

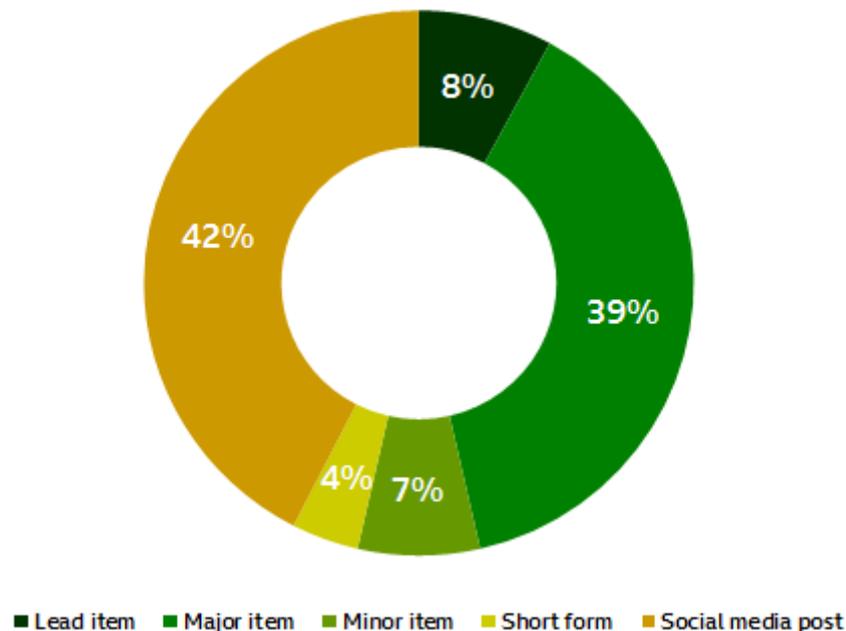
*“(The Local News Partnerships) has been an excellent resource for us, with the availability of content in areas not served by our group.”<sup>3</sup>*

*“As we now have a full complement of LDRS reporters, the stories being filed are more varied than before and are really benefitting the audience.”<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Based on responses from nine Partner organisations. Feedback scores range from 1 to 10, with 1 being “least effective” and 10 “most effective”.

<sup>3</sup> Kent Live

When recording use of Local News Partnerships Content, respondents chose one of five categories to indicate the prominence of the content on their platforms (shown in the chart below).



Once implementation is complete, Partners will be required to complete a survey twice yearly, capturing use of the content, satisfaction and specific feedback. It is likely that levels of BBC use will be affected by a number of factors including the number of LDRs and local authorities within a BBC editorial area. We would also expect BBC Nations which do not have significant local services to use a lower level of material

## 9. Evidence of impact

The Local News Partnerships work is redefining the BBC’s relationship with the UK’s regional news media, delivering at scale on the new Charter’s commitment to work collaboratively and driving an increase in content which is informing the public and improving accountability. In just over a year, a national public service news agency has been created from scratch, reporters from local newspapers have started to work in BBC Birmingham alongside our own staff in an unprecedented demonstration of editorial co-operation and BBC news video is being seen by the online audiences of Partner organisations.

### Local Democracy Reporting Service Impact

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<sup>4</sup> BBC South East

*“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.”<sup>5</sup>*

In terms of improving the provision of local journalism, the LDRS is certainly making an impact - 30,000 stories, focussed on local authorities and other public bodies have enriched BBC regional news services and those of the Partner organisations. For the BBC, the stories have ranged from ones significant enough to be the lead item on the main regional TV bulletin, through to short-form updates on a live feed of local online news.

Already, the work of the Local Democracy Reporting Service is having an impact on policy, openness, and the richness of local news-gathering.

### LDRS: Improving openness

In Herefordshire, the LDR has been credited with reversing a county council plan to cover up councillors’ misconduct. His story on 10th May and subsequent coverage led to public reaction which included a 1,700 signature petition. The council not only voted unanimously to scrap the “secrecy” provision, but also passed a new resolution to improve the transparency of councillors’ personal interests.



### LDRS: Changing policy

Following a request made under the FOIA, the LDR for Leicestershire learned that the county council had failed to claim £900,000 due to it from developers. “Section 106” payments are made by developers to local authorities to improve the wider community, but they must be claimed within a set time period. The council has changed its policy in the wake of the story and the council chief executive thanked the LDR for bringing the oversight to their attention.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Stow, Independent Person for Herefordshire Council

## Leicestershire council hands back unspent £900k to builders

19 June 2018

f t e Share



## LDRS: Bringing important issues to light

The LDR for Gloucestershire attended a health scrutiny meeting and learned that the failure of a new computer system had prevented the county's Foundation Hospitals Trust from claiming £10m from the Clinical Commissioning Group – which contributed to a doubling of the Trust's debt. Without the coverage of the LDR, it is possible this issue would never have come to the public's attention. The reporting was picked up widely across the West of England, and was the top story on the BBC's regional TV bulletin.

## NHS trust £14m debt partly 'due to patient system failure'

9 May 2018

f t e Share



The trust runs Gloucestershire Royal Hospital, Cheltenham General Hospital and services at Stroud Maternity Unit



## Shared Data Unit Impact

Launched in November 2017, the SDU has been operational the longest. We have recorded almost 400 individual stories<sup>6</sup> generated for Partners using the Unit's data sets,

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<sup>6</sup> Excludes broadcast Partners

some of which were significant enough to merit front page splashes. We have seen evidence that the SDU's work has also been used by broadcast Partners. Inside the BBC, the content has been widely taken up by Local Radio in England, Nations Radio and regional TV teams. The collaborative nature of the Unit has meant that seconded reporters from Partner news organisations have undertaken live broadcast segments for BBC News, including a live 2-way on the News Channel.

As well as delivering useful content, the Unit's longer term ambition is to raise the level of data journalism expertise across the industry. With only two intakes of secondments to date it is too early to draw firm conclusions, but we know that all three reporters who worked in the Unit between November and February have produced significant data-driven reporting in their own newsrooms and have been given the opportunity to share some of the skills they acquired with their colleagues.

To date, the number of page views for the BBC News online versions of the Shared Data Unit's stories totals just over 3.9 million.

#### News Hub Impact

It is too early to assess the impact of the video the BBC is sharing with Local News Partners, although initial reports back from one large Partner are promising. In a pilot roll-out to the BBC North West and West Midlands regions, Reach Plc agreed to provide usage reports for June 6 to July 17. In that period, Reach websites used 46 pieces of BBC video content which translated to 88,684 video views from 664,478 player loads and a total viewing time of 71,175 minutes. An interview with England footballer Jordan Pickford, a feature on domestic violence and a new signing for Wolverhampton Wanderers were among the most-viewed on Reach's websites. While it may be safe to assume that this will be extending the reach of BBC News it is impossible to separate those viewers from those already included in the regular TV audience figures.

#### **10. Next steps**

Suppliers will continue to complete the recruitment of the LDRs across mainland UK and, subject to an evaluation of a recent trial, the service will hopefully be established in Northern Ireland.

Regional forums will be held every six months in every BBC Region and Nation. Partners will be able to meet the Suppliers and provide feedback directly on all the Partnerships' activities. Assuming recruitment of the LDRS has been completed the first usage survey of all Partners will be carried out in May 2019.

In addition to the content feeding news operations in the Nations and Regions, the BBC is keen to explore ways that the content generated by the LDRS can inform its UK national

newsgathering operation. A comprehensive source of public service reporting from most local authorities in the country has never existed before. We are interested in what insight and context it can give national stories, or what early indications may be seen of stories which begin locally but are of potentially national significance. Recent examples such as the organised sexual exploitation of children or fire safety issues in tower blocks graphically illustrates the need for large news organisations to be better connected to developing local stories. LDR stories from Northamptonshire, Cornwall and Liverpool have all been picked up by network news outlets and we anticipate this will continue to grow.

In response to feedback from Partners, a number of refinements to the technology are planned, including the ability to present audio in a standard video format and to allow users to preview News Hub content in the portal.

The original Letter of Agreement between the BBC and the NMA outlined the possibility of expanding the LDRS by up to 50 additional reporters. As agreed, future expansion of the service will depend on both a clear demonstration of its public value to the Licence Fee Payer and identification of an acceptable funding solution.