

Public Statutory Notices Survey 2023

Research Report

February 2023



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Summary

Background

The Statutory Notices Survey 2023 was conducted by the Local Government Association's Research and Information Team between 10th January and 5th February 2023 in order to gather up-to-date information about the process of publishing statutory notices. The results will inform LGA lobbying to change the current requirement to publish public notices in local newspapers.

We conducted an on-line survey amongst Communications heads to ask them about the costs associated with statutory notices, their attitudes towards them and other means of dissemination.

We achieved a response rate of 17 per cent which was 60 completed surveys from 355 surveys which were sent out in total.

Key messages

- We estimate that upwards of £28 million is spent per year on statutory notices which could be saved if the law was changed. However, this is likely to be an underestimate as it doesn't include all the categories of public notices for all respondents.
- There is a strong appetite amongst local authorities to have the law changed to loosen the requirement to have to place statutory notices in newspapers.
- Almost all councils use alternative means of communication, like messages on lampposts or buildings.

Key findings

- The average (mean) amount spent on public notices in the 2021/22 financial year was £76,753. The maximum amount spent by a council was £512,000, and the minimum amount spent by a council was £2,000.
- A quarter of councils who responded said that local newspapers charged a rate that is higher than that charged for general advertising, whilst a further quarter said they did not and the remaining half of councils didn't know.
- Ninety-three per cent of respondents said that they agreed with the statement "there are more effective ways to disseminate information contained in public notices to a greater number of residents than by using local newspapers". Only two per cent said that they disagreed.
- On average, there were two local newspapers available in a local authority area. The council with the most local newspapers had 10 and three councils (6 per cent) said that they had none in their area.
- On average, 22 per cent of the local population was reached by the local newspaper(s) in which their statutory notices were published.

- Councils were asked about other methods of dissemination. Most used were lampposts/buildings (83 per cent) and council websites (78 per cent).
- When asked “in your opinion, is the statutory requirement to publish public notices in the local press unnecessarily burdensome or not?”, 90 per cent answered “yes”. Seven per cent answered that it was not unnecessarily burdensome and three per cent didn’t know.

Introduction

This report looks at the state-of-play with regards to statutory notices in local newspapers. It is designed to give context to efforts to lobby on behalf of members to have the law changed to make it less stringent in obliging councils to use local newspapers when making public announcements. Information has been collected on the amount spent by councils, attitudes to statutory notices and other means of communication.

Methodology

The research was commissioned in-house, and the sample was heads of Communications. The survey was conducted on-line amongst 333 English and 22 Welsh authorities. It was run over a four-week fieldwork period from 10 January 2023 to 5 February 2023.

Overall, the response rate was 17 per cent, with 60 responses from 355 questionnaires that were sent out. This level of response rate means that these results should not be taken to be more widely representative of the views of all councils. Rather, they are a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents.

Table 1 shows the response rate by authority and Table 2 shows the response rate by region.

Table 1. Response rate by type of authority

Region	Total number	Number of responses	Response rate (%)
District	181	27	15
County	24	2	8
London borough	33	10	30
Metropolitan district	36	5	14
Unitary	59	12	20
Welsh unitary	22	4	18

Table 2. Response rate by region.

Region	Total number	Number of responses	Response rate (%)
Eastern	50	10	20
East Midlands	39	6	15
London	33	10	30
North East	12	0	0
North West	41	6	15
South East	70	13	19
South West	33	4	12
Wales	33	4	12
West Midlands	22	3	14
Yorkshire and Humber	50	4	8

In addition, the following points should be noted about the research methodology:

- The bases from which percentages were calculated vary throughout the survey, as not all respondents were shown all questions, and some questions were optional, meaning that some respondents chose not to answer them.
- Throughout the report percentages in figures and tables may add to more than 100 per cent due to rounding. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole per cent.

Statutory Notices Report

This section contains analysis of the full results from the survey.

Spend on statutory notices placed in local newspapers over the financial year 2021/22

The first question asked respondents to reveal how much their authority had spent on public notices in the 2021/22 financial year. 55 responses were given, of which 34 were a positive number, one was zero and 20 were don't know. The average amount spent by councils, not including the zero results, was £79,011 and the average amount spent by councils including the zero results, was £76,753. The maximum amount spent by a council was £512,000, and the minimum amount spent by a council, excluding zero results, was £2,000.

Using this to come to an estimate of the total expenditure in England and Wales gives us a figure of approximately £28 million. This has been calculated by calculating the average per authority type and multiplying each of these by the total number of authorities of that type. Caution though should be taken when using this figure due to the small sample size used in estimating it. The results for this are shown in Table 1.

However, all other things being equal, this is likely to be an underestimate as for 12 (42 per cent) of the definitive responses, the figure stated was non-inclusive of public notices for highways, for seven definitive responses (26 per cent) it didn't include licensing, for nine definitive responses (36 per cent) it didn't include environmental health and 10 definitive responses (43 per cent) didn't include business development/regeneration.

This can be compared to the figure given in the 2019 study of £27.2 million.

Table 3. Approximately how much did your council spend on statutory notices placed in local newspapers over the financial year 2021/22?

	All respondents	Shire districts	Counties and single tier authorities
Average (median) spend	£76,753	£49,743	£105,353
Minimum spend (excl. zeros)	£2,000	£2,000	£9,235
Maximum spend	£512,000	£242,733	£512,000
Base (number of respondents who gave a zero or positive response)	35	19	16

Table 4. Is this inclusive of spending on statutory public notices for the following services?

	Yes	No	Per cent (%)
Planning	29	1	97
Highways	16	12	57
Licensing	20	7	74
Environmental health	16	9	64
Business development/regeneration	13	10	57

Base: respondents giving an answer which wasn't don't know: planning (30), highways (28), licencing (27), environmental health (25), business development/regeneration (23)

Differences between rates for statutory notices and general advertising

A quarter of councils (25 per cent) reported that newspapers charge a higher rate for statutory notices than for general advertising whilst 25 per cent responded "no" to this question with 50 per cent saying that they don't know. The results for this are displayed in Table 5.

So, for those that did know, 50 per cent reported local newspapers charged a higher rate for statutory notices than for general advertising.

Table 5. Do the local newspapers in which you place statutory notices charge you a rate for statutory notices that is higher than the rates charged for general advertising?

	Number	Per cent (%)
Yes	15	25
No	15	25
Don't know	30	50
Total	60	100

Base: all respondents (60)

Agreement with statement about effective ways to disseminate information

Around two-thirds (67 per cent) of respondents strongly agree with the statement "there are more effective ways to disseminate information contained in public notices to a greater number of residents than by using local newspapers." with 27 per cent agreeing, meaning that 93 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement. Only one council (two per cent) disagreed strongly, with one further council (two per cent) saying that they didn't know.

For the 33 counties and single tier authorities the rate of strongly agreeing with the statement was higher at 73 per cent (24) compared to the 27 shire districts, where it

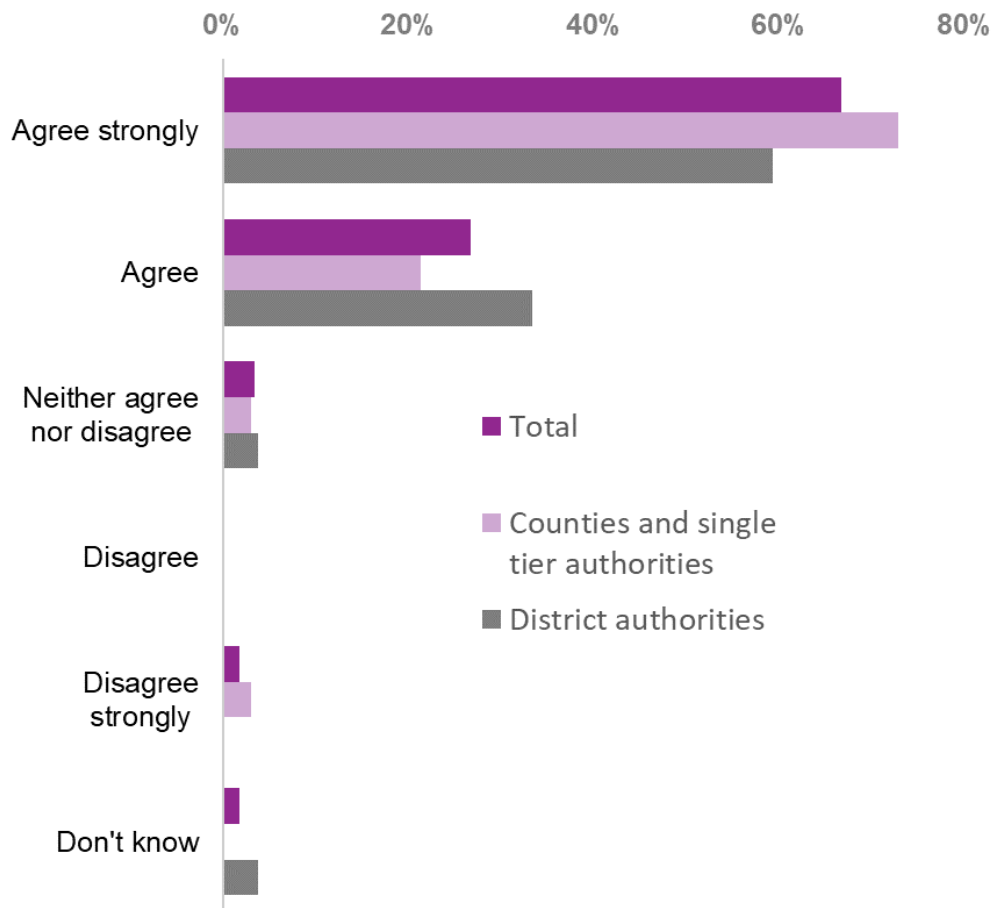
was lower at 59 per cent (16), although the total rate of agreement was very similar at 94 per cent versus 93 per cent. The results for this are shown in Table 6 and Figure 1.

Table 6. With regards to the requirement to pay to place public notices in local newspapers, to what extent do you agree or disagree that: "There are more effective ways to disseminate information contained in public notices to a greater number of residents than by using local newspapers."

	All respondents	Shire districts	Counties and single tier authorities
Strongly agree	67	59	73
Agree	27	33	21
Neither agree nor disagree	3	4	3
Disagree	0	0	0
Strongly disagree	2	0	3
Don't know	2	4	0

Base: all respondents (60)

Figure 1: Agreement that “there are more effective ways to disseminate information contained in public notices to a greater number of residents than by using local newspapers.”



Base: all respondents (60)

Numbers of printed local newspapers

Authorities were asked to provide the number of printed local newspapers in their area, including all dailies, weeklies and free newspapers but excluding all council-published ones.

On average, amongst the 50 respondents who gave an answer that wasn't don't know, there were 2.16 local newspapers available in the local authority area. The most local newspapers in a local authority area was 10 and three respondents (6 per cent) said that they had none in their area. For district councils the average figure was lower at 1.82 (based on 22 responses) and for counties and single tier

authorities it was higher at 2.43 (based on 28 responses). The results for this are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. How many printed local newspapers are available in your council's area?

	All respondents	Shire districts	Counties and single tier authorities
Average (median) number	2.16	1.82	2.43
Minimum number	0	0	0
Maximum number	10	5	10
Base (number of respondents)	50	22	28

Base: respondents giving an answer that wasn't don't know (50)

Reach of local newspapers

Authorities were asked to estimate the proportion of the local population in their area which has the opportunity to view public notices through local printed newspapers.

Although 19 of our respondents didn't know what proportion of the local population are reached by the local newspaper(s) in which statutory notices are published, on average for those who did, 22 per cent of the local population was reached. It was broadly the same for shire districts (23 per cent) as for counties and single tier authorities (22 per cent). The results for this are displayed in Table 8.

These figures were calculated by taking the midpoint of each interval, multiplying by the number of responses in that interval and dividing by the total number of responses across all intervals (not including don't know answers).

Table 8. Approximately what proportion of the local population are reached by the local newspaper(s) in which your statutory notices are published?

Band of response	All respondents	Shire districts	Counties and single tier authorities
0-25%	30	14	16
25-50%	8	3	5
50-75%	1	1	0
75-100%	2	1	1
Don't know	19	8	11

Base: all respondents (60)

Other approaches to publicising statutory notices

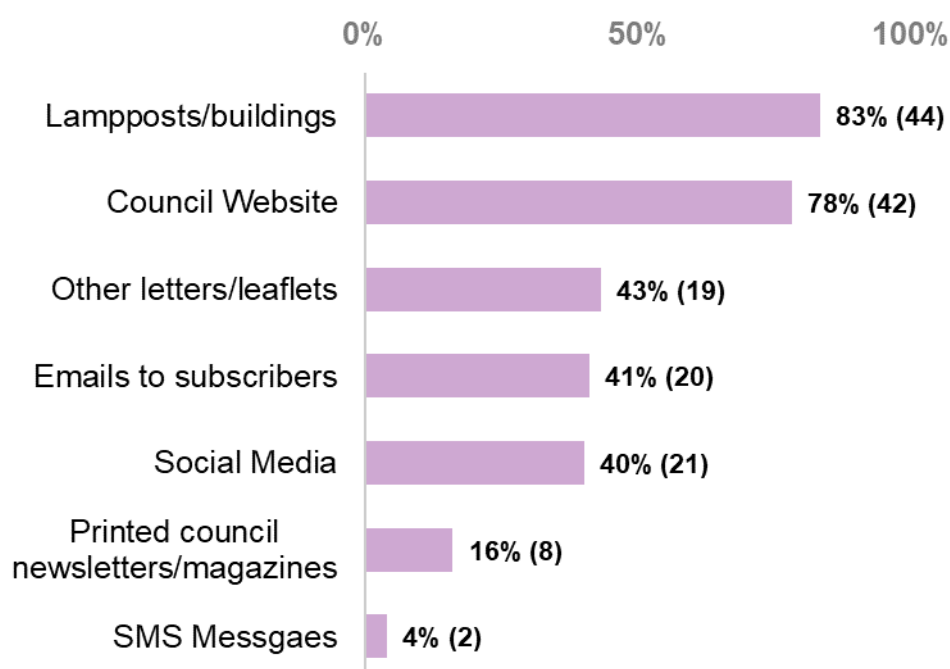
Eighty-three per cent of councils who gave an answer which wasn't don't know had used lampposts/buildings, 78 per cent used their council website, 43 per cent used other letters/leaflets, 41 per cent sent emails to subscribers, 40 per cent used social media, 16 per cent printed council newsletters/magazines and four per cent used SMS messages. The results for this are displayed in Table 9 and Figure 2.

Table 9. Please indicate which of the following other methods of dissemination, if any, you have used for statutory notices over the financial year 2021/22?

Percentage of respondents having tried approach	Used	Not used	Don't know
Lampposts/buildings	77%	16%	7%
Council website	75%	21%	4%
Other letters/leaflets	37%	48%	15%
Emails (to subscribers)	37%	54%	9%
Social media	39%	57%	4%
Printed council newsletters/magazines	15%	83%	2%
SMS messages	4%	85%	12%

Base: respondents who gave an answer: lampposts/buildings (57), council website (56), other letters/leaflets (52), emails (54), social media (54), printed council newsletters/magazines (52), SMS messages (52)

Figure 2: Other means of dissemination of public notices



Base: respondents who gave an answer which wasn't don't know: lampposts/buildings (53), council website (54), other letters/leaflets (44), emails (49), social media (52), printed council newsletters/magazines (51), SMS messages (46)

Judgement of whether the statutory requirement is unnecessarily burdensome

Respondents were asked whether, in their opinion, the statutory requirement to publish public notices was unnecessarily burdensome. Ninety per cent replied "yes" with seven per cent saying "no", and three per cent saying that they didn't know. The results for this are shown in Table 10.

The rate of agreement was higher for shire districts at 93 per cent than for counties and single tier authorities at 88 per cent.

Table 10. In your opinion, is the statutory requirement to publish public notices in the local press unnecessarily burdensome or not?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	54	90
No	4	7
Don't know	2	3
Total	60	100

Base: all respondents (60)

When asked to indicate in which way(s) the requirement to publish public notices in local newspapers was burdensome and to what degree, of those who gave an

answer, 82 per cent said “financial” greatly, 40 per cent replied “capacity” greatly and 24 per cent replied “administrative” greatly. The results for this are displayed in Table 11.

This indicates that it is primarily seen as a financial issue, then a capacity issue and then an administrative issue.

Table 11. Please indicate in which way(s) the requirement to publish public notices in local newspapers is burdensome and to what degree.

	Greatly (%)	Moderately (%)	Slightly (%)	Total
Financial	41	9	0	50
Capacity (time-consuming, takes staff resource)	20	26	4	50
Administrative (difficult or complicated to arrange publication)	12	22	15	49

Base: respondents giving an answer: financial (50), administrative (49), capacity (50)

General comments

Respondents were invited to make general comments about the current state of statutory notices and the themes emerging from these are summarised here.

Almost all of the 26 comments that were left were negative towards the current requirement to publish statutory notices in newspapers. As well as comments saying that the present system is outdated, the main themes that came out were that there was a lack of coverage in using local newspapers to carry public notices, cost and value for money were an issue and that there were better methods for publishing notices:

Lack of coverage

The most common concern respondents had with the requirement to publish notices in newspapers was that the newspaper or mix of newspapers in their area did not cover enough households.

“The local paper circulation rate reaches less than 10% of our households. And even less than that will actually read the statutory notice. Why is this anachronistic law still being discussed in 2023!” – metropolitan district, West Midlands of England

“Our local newspapers do not even distribute to most of our district anymore. Paper sales have fallen through the floor. Most of their views are online but don’t reach everybody.” – district authority, West Midlands of England

Cost and value for money

The cost of placing notices is cited amongst several of the responses to this question. The cost advantages of publishing on-line or using social media advertising imply these as being preferable. One authority in the North of England said:

“In my opinion, the cost of providing a public notice is outweighed by the benefit. It is often buried on a page with other notices and there is no evidence to suggest it works. Social media advertising (for example) would be cheaper and reach far more people.”

Coupled with the issues around coverage the general feeling was that the requirement represented poor value for money and was no longer fit for purpose.

“We feel it would be best for public notices to be published online e.g. on the council's website and promote to our many email subscribers, without a requirement to publish in local newspapers. This would reach at least the same number of residents as the current approach does - probably more - and would achieve a cost saving for the council of over £200k a year.” – unitary authority, South-West of England.

Preferred methods for publicising notices

That there are preferred methods for publicising notices is mentioned by several of the respondents. Generally, on-line means of conveying the required information are cited as being preferable, both from the point of view of cost and reach:

“Our e-newsletter reaches 65,000 people alone and there are other ways without spending so much money when every penny counts.” – London Borough

“In 2022 there are much more effective and free or low cost ways of reaching audiences. Approximately 90% of residents are digitally enabled and consume media via the many digital options.” – London Borough.

Annex A: Questionnaire

1. Spend on notices

Approximately how much did your council spend on statutory public notices placed in local newspapers over the financial year 2021/22

Please write the amount of money numerically and in full i.e. 1,000 rather than one thousand or 1k. If the answer is 'zero', please enter '0'. If you don't know please enter 'dk'.

£

2. Is this inclusive of spending on statutory public notices for the following services?

Yes, No, Don't know

Planning

Highways

Licensing

Environmental health

Business development/regeneration

3. Do the local newspapers in which you place statutory public notices charge you a rate for public notices that is higher than the rates charged for general advertising?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

4. In regard to the requirement to pay to place public notices in local newspapers, to what extent do you agree or disagree that:

"There are more effective ways to disseminate information contained in public notices to a greater number of residents than by using local newspapers."

- Strongly agree
- Agree

- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

5. Number of papers

How many local newspapers are available in your council's area?

Please include all daily, weekly and free newspapers but exclude all council published newspapers.

6. Circulation

Approximately what proportion of the local population are reached by the local newspaper(s) in which your statutory notices are published?

Please show the total combined coverage of all of the local newspapers used.

Please choose the correct band for the answer. If you don't know please tick the 'don't know' box.

0-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-100%, Don't know

Proportion reached

7. Other methods

Please indicate which of the following other methods of dissemination, if any, you have used for statutory notices over the financial year 2021/22?

Used, Not used, Don't know

Lampposts/buildings

Printed council newsletters/magazines

Other letters/leaflets

Emails (to subscribers)

Council website

Social media

SMS messages (to subscribers)

Other (please specify)_____

8. If used printed council newsletter/magazine

- a. Approximately what proportion of the local population do you estimate can be reached using printed council newsletters/newspapers?

Please choose the correct band for the answer. If you don't know please tick the 'don't know' box.

0-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-100%, Don't know

Proportion reached

- b. With what frequency do you publish printed council newsletters/newspapers?

Weekly

Every two weeks

Every month

Every two months

Every six months

Other (please specify)

9a). In your opinion, is the statutory requirement to publish public notices in the local press unnecessarily burdensome or not?

- Yes
 No
 Don't know

Then if yes,

b) Please indicate in which way(s) the requirement to publish public notices in local newspapers is burdensome and to what degree:

Greatly, moderately, slightly, don't know

Financial

Administrative (difficult or complicated to arrange publication)

Capacity (time-consuming, takes staff resource)

Other: *Please specify:* _____

10. Comments

If you would like to add any further comments about the dissemination of statutory public notices, please do so using the space below.



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