

**FOSTERING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN
THE ENGLISH PLANNING PROCESS
THROUGH LOCAL NEWSPAPERS**

Benjamin Samuel Webster

University College London

MPhil Town Planning

1998

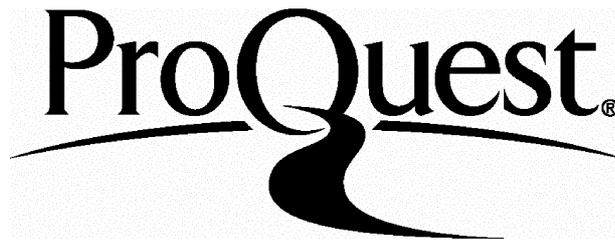
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ABSTRACT

Planning stories form a large proportion of the news coverage and letters in local newspapers. Consequently, local newspapers represent a valuable medium of publicity through which a local planning authority can transmit information about planning initiatives and consultation exercises to the public. It is also a gauge of public opinion and can act as a scrutineer of local authority decision-making. The local press is an under-utilised resource which could be better harnessed to improve the contribution of the general public to planning. I shall examine current practice in this field and make recommendations for improvement.

Questions which the research addresses include: what type of involvement by the public in the planning process is desirable and how can local press reporting contribute to or undermine the achievement of it? Which public relations techniques are useful for building a mutually-beneficial relationship with a newspaper? Can a desire to enhance the image of the council through public relations techniques conflict with the aim of eliciting public participation in the planning process? Are the statutory regulations requiring newspaper publicity for plans and applications effective? Is local press coverage of planning accurate and supportive or misleading and antagonistic? Do any councils practice any particularly effective techniques for publicising planning initiatives through the local press?

The main method of gathering data has been a nation-wide survey of local planning authorities to discover current practice in the field of press liaison. I have also taken Cambridge as a case study area in which findings from the literature and the national survey can be explored in more depth through interviews with influential participants in the planning process.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people without whose help this dissertation would have been impoverished:

- Prof. Michael Collins, my supervisor.
- Mr. Michael Monk and Ms. Patsy Dell, my informative interviewees at South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridge City Council.
- Ms. Jane Fannon, who enlightened me on the role of a local authority public relations officer.
- Mr. Michael Holden, sub-editor of the Cambridge Evening News, who helped me to appreciate the journalist's perspective.
- Councillor Brenda Bishop, Councillor Philippa Slatter, Mr. Peter Dawson and Ms. Ruth Wyner who were interviewed for the case studies.
- All the people who carved some time out of their busy schedules to complete my questionnaire.
- Mr. Adrian Parker of King's Lynn & West Norfolk Borough Council and Mr. C.A. North of North West Leicestershire District Council whose responses were especially insightful.
- Milly Cockayne, my wife and indefatigable proof-reader.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act passed into law, the right of citizens to comment on planning applications and development plans has been an established element of the planning system in the United Kingdom. From the late 1960s the planning profession pioneered techniques of public participation in local government, both extending and enriching local democratic practice. More recently, the pace of innovation in this area has slowed due to a combination of complacency, tight budgets and a stress on speed in the processing of applications and the formulation of plans. There is, however, scope for improving the methods through which public involvement in the planning process is secured. This research addresses questions of process rather than the substance or specific content of issues. It is a contribution to the design of techniques for collaborative planning (HEALEY, 1997).

Constructive participation depends upon ease of access to information about the mechanisms of planning and specific planning applications and initiatives. One channel of communication which, ideally, assists the dissemination of such information, is local newspapers. The word 'ideally' is significant because, hitherto, journalists and planners have generally failed to open themselves up to the sort of mutually-beneficial constructive engagement which could enhance the level and quality of public involvement in the planning process. The tenor of the relationship between journalists and planners is too often characterised by ill-informed antagonism and defensiveness, leading to a poor quality of coverage and a souring of public esteem for planners and planning.

Through this research I intend to explore the issues surrounding the presentation of planning in the local press, concentrating on how it contributes to, and detracts from, the securing of public involvement in the planning process. The dissertation concludes with a series of recommendations for fostering public involvement in the planning process through local newspapers. It is local planning authorities (LPAs) who have an active interest in the planning of an area and who will alter their practice in the interests of better planning. Exhortations for change are therefore addressed to LPAs rather than to journalists. However, I will not fall into the trap of assuming that what a LPA perceives as in its best interests is necessarily synonymous with improving planning in the public interest.

I will be careful not to over-estimate the influence of newspapers in fostering public involvement in the planning process. Newspapers are only one of many modes of publicity available to LPAs. They have the potential to be vehicles for the delivery of regular parcels of information about planning, free of charge (excluding the cost of officer-time), to a large, well-informed and civic-minded audience. Yet it is a risky strategy and fostering involvement may be in conflict with press access. Firstly, information may be twisted and distorted. The profile of planning may be deliberately raised only to be visibly abused. Secondly, local newspapers have a tendency to siphon off public comment for their own news copy. They will conclude a report with an invitation to contact the newspaper to air grievances or share opinions, with the implication that this is an effective method of influencing events. People will contact the newspaper in preference to councillors and officers, thus dissipating the positive civic impulse. Unfortunately, many of the correspondents may only wish to vent their spleen rather than engage in proper, committed involvement. It would be better for democracy if newspapers inserted a note at the bottom of a report giving details of how to contact planning application case officers or ward councillors. Thirdly, the exclusion of the press and public from local government meetings is permitted in certain circumstances under section 50A, subsections 2-4, of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985. An example is where the identity of a "protected informant", for example in an enforcement case, must be concealed to protect them against retribution. Without this guarantee of anonymity, many informants would refuse to testify.

At all times, the risks of engaging with newspapers must be weighed against the benefits. This may require research into the market penetration of particular newspapers and the type of people who read them (WALKER, 1997, 42-3). Such an analysis may indicate that local authority (LA) resources might be better invested in publicising planning through other media, especially if the relevant newspaper is not motivated by a civic as well as a commercial ethic.

Objectives for public involvement in planning

Securing greater public involvement in the planning process is a worthy aspiration. It is imperative, however, to decide what kind of public involvement is desired. This guides the content of publicity. The degree of power decision-makers are prepared to share or delegate must be unambiguous in order to prevent people joining an involvement exercise under false pretences. Arnstein's model is a useful taxonomy of involvement and the implications for power

relations of each type. If the contribution of a particular group in society is sought, certain forms of publicity will be more effective than others. Huw Thomas writes,

... the point is that "the public" needs to be defined; a programme then needs to be consciously designed with the particular public in mind, a "public" with a certain vocabulary, background, history, culture, set of interests, patterns of life, and so on - all of which will influence the drawing up of a public participation programme that can engage with the "public". (THOMAS, 1996, 185)

For instance, when architect Wendy Shillam began a consultation process in east Birmingham she found Muslim women very reticent. Yet she discovered that these women listened to the local Asian radio stations (SHILLAM, 1997, 24). Some of the women's focus sessions were broadcast as phone-ins. This underscores the point that the local newspaper is sometimes an ineffectual or inappropriate publicity medium.

The submission of a planning application is the most basic form of participation in the planning process. This legal requirement is not universally known and much confusion surrounds what constitutes development. Some people are uncertain about where and how to submit planning applications. Enforcement cases which involve people who are genuinely ignorant of the law prove these assertions. Awareness of planning law and compliance with it is enhanced through publicity, for which local newspapers are a useful vehicle.

People possess a legal and moral right to influence decisions on proposed developments which will have ramifications for the environments they inhabit. Members of the public possess intimate knowledge of their locales and interest groups have expertise in their areas of concern. By tapping this information planning decisions can be improved. Public scrutiny of governmental actions maintains the accountability of councillors and officers to their publics. A good newspaper will sometimes produce probing and critical coverage of an LPA in addition to providing factual information. It is significant that whilst the local government ombudsmen cannot insist that a council compensates an aggrieved party, they are able to pressurise intransigent councils by making their reports available to local newspapers. This can provoke valid public disapproval. While some people will always disagree with decisions, it should be possible to produce a reasonable and comprehensible justification of them. An ethos which promotes public scrutiny of planning decisions, and which is backed up by appropriate procedures, is a defence against arbitrariness or corruption. The Lees Report into malpractice in North Cornwall identified a valuable role for the local media in

examining the decisions of LPAs and providing "... earlier and more frequent reports on [planning] applications under consideration." as protection against ineptitude and corruption (LEES, 1993, 44). To achieve this, North Cornwall was advised to improve its publicity arrangements (FYSON, 1994, 11).

These rights are fettered because, with more extensive power, members of the public may exercise that power to prejudice the legitimate interests of neighbours, future neighbours or the wider public, to an unreasonable degree. There are three other caveats which inform the desirable style of public involvement. Firstly, individuals and groups who are privileged through high levels of income, education or time are better able to exercise their right to participate and thereby influence decisions. They may make representations based on their own sectional interests which might disadvantage less privileged groups. Enhanced avenues of influence should not exacerbate the tendency for the voices of disadvantaged people to be eclipsed. The interests of those who are ill-equipped to voice their concerns must be investigated and upheld even if they express them less articulately or persuasively than others. For example, when advocating the use of newspapers as a vehicle for publicity one must not neglect groups who can not, or do not, read newspapers. Secondly, enhanced rights of access to information on planning may predominantly be exploited by rival developers and those with a professional interest in planning (ILSLEY et al, 1997, 5). A third consideration is that increased levels of involvement may be to the detriment of rapid decision-making. Central government concern over delays is reflected in DoE Circular 15/92 which "... stresses that obligations to publicise applications should not jeopardise the target of deciding 80 per cent of applications within a period of eight weeks." (CULLINGWORTH & NADIN, 1997, 295). This is justified only when decisions are improved to an extent which outweighs harm caused by delays. In a situation where objections are being prompted by alarmist reports of developer activity, accurate information can actually reduce unnecessary fears and hence the time devoted to processing superfluous objections.

Public involvement is an alloyed good. Involvement usually comes at the development control stage when tangible interests are threatened. Too many representations are negative or self-serving because people lack knowledge of, or involvement in, policy-making; a process which promotes an understanding of the dilemmas and conflicts inherent in land-use planning. Above all, interventions should be well-informed. Contributors with knowledge of the planning system and of the variety of interests it attempts to reconcile are more likely to offer constructive comments. Newspaper reports and public notices which reach a

wider audience may counteract the tendency of the other main methods of publicising planning applications - neighbour notification and site notices - to provoke only local, and usually oppositional, representations. A dilution of the prevailing negativity of most representations should make planning officers more receptive to initiatives which promote public involvement, thus creating a virtuous circle. The local press is a key catalyst for cultivating a well-informed public.

Newspapers can contribute to public participation in planning in three ways. Firstly, and most obviously, by informing its readers about current development and plan-making initiatives which they might wish to comment upon. Secondly, and more nebulously, the discourse in the media is a crucial factor reflecting and shaping the salient concerns of people in its circulation area. Healey echoes this when quoting Geertz:

Social networks, and the displaced networks of education and the media, develop 'a communal sensibility, present locally to locals, a local turn of mind' (Geertz, 1983, p.12). This recognition has led to a re-emphasis in much western thought on the social situatedness of knowledge and action and the cultural frames of reference through which action is articulated (HEALEY, 1997, 38).

A local newspaper will educate its readers about the geography of its circulation area, the socio-economic and environmental issues which affect it and the mechanisms of the planning system. How the planning system strives to manipulate these characteristics of the area will also become apparent. Lastly, newspapers with an identifiable editorial stance will act, sometimes self-consciously, as a proxy of the prevailing state of public opinion. Decision-makers, and especially those with an electoral mandate, will treat the opinions of the newspaper very seriously; regarding it as an articulation of the current majority view or of a view likely to prevail as a result of repeated endorsement in the newspaper. It should be borne in mind that in most markets there is only one local newspaper which has a monopoly of editorial influence.

Conditions for generating involvement

High levels of activism are associated with an educated, affluent and stable population, yet local planning authorities have little influence over these variables. Other important elements *are* within their purview, including:

- i) provision of accurate, available and accessible information;
- ii) raising awareness of the existence of this information;

- iii) providing this information at the correct time;
- iv) embedding a conviction that is worth getting involved because:
 - a) local government in general and land-use planning in particular act competently in the public interest;
 - b) problems are tractable; and
 - c) contributions will be heeded.

i) Provision of information

Acquiring knowledge is the route to empowerment. The guardians of information and knowledge often resist calls for extended access because their power will be eroded. Those who lack the information on which decisions were based are unable to scrutinise, and if necessary, challenge those decisions.

Good information can provide for a more balanced use and development of land, and strengthen further the democratic basis of local government and the town and country planning system. It serves also to improve the general understanding of the role, scope and nature of the land use planning system in modern communities and is a pre-requisite for the effective involvement of the public (ILSLEY et al, 1997, ii)

The Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 was introduced with the intention of enhancing democracy by ensuring that councils met minimum standards of access to information. It guarantees public access to committee meetings and requires the establishment of procedures for ensuring easy and cheap access to comprehensible planning documents. Activism can only be effective where accurate information is available and made accessible in a suitable format. Otherwise activism can be misdirected, its energies dissipated in the gruelling search for information and consequently restricted to the persistent few.

Perhaps the most valuable knowledge which is required by activists who wish to influence planning decisions is an appreciation of the distinction between material and non-material planning considerations. This is also vital for understanding the scope of planning powers and thereby avoiding disillusionment with the planning system when it fails to prevent or secure a desired outcome. An additional benefit would be a proper attribution of blame - planners will avoid being held responsible for outcomes over which they had minimal control.

The press is in an ideal position to straddle the world of the professional and the layperson, translating the technical verbiage without sacrificing the essential facts and arguments. Yet the press tends to amplify the 'human interest' angle on a story which is precisely the type of issue which is normally excluded

from consideration by the land-use planning system. If LA planners comment on cases where reporting has exhibited a poor grasp of what the planning considerations are, they are at a disadvantage because they cannot address these extraneous issues other than to say that they do not fall within the remit of the planning system. As a result they may appear churlish, pedantic or even heartless. A key aim of any planning publicity strategy must be to make clear the limits of planning powers. By developing realistic expectations of what planning can achieve, public contributions can be addressed to material planning considerations rather than matters which, whilst important, are outside the compass of planning legislation. In addition to basic accurate reporting, features articles are particularly appropriate for this educational role.

This relates to a wider problem, identified but not elaborated on in the seminal Skeffington Report (SKEFFINGTON, 1969); that the public does not think in terms of local government service divisions, but rather in terms of practical problems which may straddle the jurisdiction of departments and even agencies (CULLINGWORTH & NADIN, 1997, 287). Newspapers also tend to downgrade the technicalities of legal powers and functional responsibilities. The lay perspective can provide an invigorating jolt to organisations obsessed with the minutiae of their patch by urging strategic thinking. However, the mechanics of process and procedure cannot be eliminated, and must therefore be heeded by commentators.

Developers attempt to persuade the public and decision-makers to support their development proposals by claiming that various economic, employment and environmental benefits will result. The prospect of investment may silence critics who risk being accused of ignoring the need for jobs; particularly in economically depressed areas. These pronouncements should be questioned. Local journalists are generally credulous in their reporting of developer's claims because they lack the requisite technical expertise necessary to make an informed evaluation of development projects (KANISS, 1991, 5). They only raise a note of scepticism if an authoritative source challenges the figures. LPAs are the "only organisations qualified to evaluate claims and counter misinformation. They should be vigilant to ensure an information imbalance does not arise.

By weeding jargon out of communications and by calling attention to important planning issues that might otherwise be obscured by the sheer volume of data in consultants' reports or proposals, planners may avoid the assault on comprehension that can paralyse citizen action. (FORESTER, 1989, 37)

This role places planning officers in a difficult position. They might be accused of prejudicing the decision over a planning application by giving succour to the

opponents of a scheme. It is a legitimate activity to provide factual information to a newspaper, even if it is incendiary. To distance the officers from any accusations of bias, ward councillors or planning Committee Chairs may consent to act as conduits for this corrective information.

There is strong evidence to suggest that the public's trust in political institutions is so eroded that they suspect all information provided by government. For instance, information on the state of the environment and exhortations to alter lifestyles are perceived by many as alarmist or self-serving. Bureaucracy is seen as a vested interest which will continually seek to perpetuate itself by curtailing peoples' freedoms. Until trust has been rebuilt it is logical to assume that the provision of more information risks compounding the sense of alienation and of manipulation experienced by many people (LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, 1995, 76). It is important, therefore, to monitor the reception of information through surveys and focus groups, to ensure that it is not greeted with scepticism or scorn.

ii) Publicising information

It is insufficient to merely adhere to the letter of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, which requires information to be placed in the public domain (POLICY STUDIES INSTITUTE, 1995, 2). Knowledge of the rights conferred by the Act is a pre-requisite to using them. This applies to both the public and the press. Awareness of the Act is low amongst journalists (POLICY STUDIES INSTITUTE, 1995, 4). To rectify this, a leaflet stating the rights conferred by the Act could be sent to newspapers by central or local government (POLICY STUDIES INSTITUTE, 1995, 47). Without channels of publicity to inform busy citizens what information is available and how to access it, very few people will make use of the facility. A distinction between active and passive methods of publicity is useful.

Passive methods rely on the public already being in contact with the authority - they include notices at council offices or on committee papers. These methods were likely to work well for those already 'in the know' but have a limited impact on the wider public. Active methods involve taking information out to the community, by means of posting notices in libraries, using the local press and so on. (POLICY STUDIES INSTITUTE, 1995, 2)

The use of active methods of publicity has been linked to higher levels of attendance at council meetings (POLICY STUDIES INSTITUTE, 1995, 42). Local planning authorities have a multiplicity of publicity media at their disposal. Direct forms of publicity include leaflets attached to council tax bills, notices in council

properties, municipal newsletters and public exhibitions. Local newspapers fall into a different category, that of indirect publicity vehicles. These media are more risky as the intended message can be distorted by intermediaries, yet they reach a wider audience and carry a credibility which a direct communication, perceived as partisan, may lack.

iii) Timing information

Early involvement in planning processes is preferable to later involvement and publicity must be timed accordingly. It is useless to potential contributors if the news is only issued immediately prior to or after a decision has been taken (SKEFFINGTON, 1969, para. 109). In this respect, the comprehensive weekly list of applications sent by many LPAs to the press well in advance of the decision is more useful than the development control committee agenda sent between a week and three days before the meeting. The weekly list should be expanded to contain information about appeals (LONDON BOROUGH OF WANDSWORTH, 1995, 8).

Securing early publicity for planning applications is problematic. The quasi-judicial nature of development control obliges planning officers to be cautious not to infringe the *sub judice* rule. Strident comment on an application under consideration could have the effect of prejudicing the outcome, which could conceivably lead to a legal challenge. The disgruntled applicant or third party could apply to the High Court for judicial review on the grounds that the decision of the planning committee had been biased by comments made to the press, constituting an infringement of natural justice. Such an application would only be successful if it could be proved that the decision was *Wednesbury* unreasonable. It would be impossible to seek publicity for all applications equally energetically. However, any selection may imply a dubious hidden agenda. If publicity is sought on particular applications they must be chosen using consistent and defensible criteria.

A related problem is that of commercial confidentiality during section 106 negotiations. The public and journalists will be eager to follow the progress of these discussions as they offer the prospect of tangible and newsworthy community benefits. However, planning officers should refrain from disclosing the substance of their discussions until a deal has been struck. This secrecy is an inevitable but undesirable symptom of the section 106 mechanism for obtaining 'planning gain'. As the publicity constraints cannot be slackened under the present system, it is the system itself which needs reform to produce a more transparent method of collecting 'betterment'.

It is perennially difficult to involve the public in plan-making exercises. This problem has become more acute since the advent of the 'plan-led' system in 1991 increased the status of the development plan. Developer interests have mobilised to reflect the heightened status of development plans, but this has not been matched by the public. Where there is a mismatch of interests the balance of power has been further tilted against the latter. Public involvement at the development control stage is belated. It is therefore regrettable that public involvement is only a statutory requirement at the deposit plan stage when policy is well developed and criticisms are registered as objections.

The opportunity to object formally to a plan is not a general extension of 'participation'. It merely provides a limited opportunity for individuals and groups to air particular grievances. But, at this stage, the local authority will be committed to the plan, and any significant modifications will be effectively a challenge to the overall strategy (CULLINGWORTH & NADIN, 1997, 300).

The product of early, inclusive deliberations will command the support of those who have participated in its production. Skeffington recommended that the press and local radio should be enabled to be present at these formative debating stages of the plan-making process as, "[r]eports of such debates can lead to a better public knowledge of the issues involved." (SKEFFINGTON, 1969, para. 103) It is of some concern, however, that participants might be inhibited in speaking freely if their speculative or hypothetical contributions were irresponsibly reported. Representatives in such discussions may also be inclined to posturing if they are conscious that their words will be reported.

iv) Ensuring involvement is perceived as worthwhile

Competence:

The publicity strategy of the LPA must be guided by its key objectives. A central objective should be to improve the quality of public involvement in the planning process for the reasons outlined above. Hence it is not sufficient to seek publicity merely to boost the prominence of the council or project relentlessly positive images of it. The value of courting public esteem is only fully realised if it succeeds in stimulating active engagement in policy and decision-making. Publicity strategies which feed banal 'feel-good' stories to the press or avoid confronting the substance of justifiably critical reports do not achieve this end. Planning authorities must both act competently and be seen to act competently, otherwise public cynicism will grow (WALKER, 1997, 115).

If an LPA is not perceived as competent it is unlikely to inspire enough confidence in the public that their opinions will be heeded and utilised to the benefit of planning decisions. If reports of planning activity are disparaging then this will damage the potential for eliciting constructive engagement by the public in the planning process. The reputation of local government planners, like social workers, is particularly vulnerable to negative press coverage, because these professions lack the broad-based representation in popular culture which teachers or the emergency services enjoy (GOLDING, 1991, 101). Such coverage may provoke hostile comment, which is an unwelcome form of participation. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between coverage which encourages people to participate *per se* and that which elicits constructive contributions, and then to seek the latter.

It is difficult to detach the reputation of the planning department in the public mind from that of the LA and even local government as a whole. Local government has for many years been stigmatised by sections of the national press for its alleged waste, petty bureaucracy and championing of 'politically-correct' causes. These caricatures are firmly rooted in the national consciousness. This is an inevitable problem which will confront anyone who attempts to improve the image of LA planning. Reputation building by local authorities, local government organisations and professional institutes contributes to combating these misconceptions, but lies beyond the scope of this study.

Tractability of problems:

Being motivated to participate is linked to having a sense of agency. Knowing that your views will be treated with respect and incorporated into the decision-making process is an important factor in nurturing this sense. People who feel empowered in this way tend to believe that problems are more tractable than those who feel impotent.

... there are grounds for surmising that the public's sense of agency (its sense of its own power, directly or through representative political institutions or pressure groups, to bring about improvements) may be a central variable in the attitudes expressed about the relative seriousness of particular environmental issues; the more amenable to 'solution' the issue is felt to be, the greater the anxiety it is felt worthwhile to express in opinion poll responses. (LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, 1995, 13)

Fatalism about the intractability of problems and the impossibility of reconciling competing interests in the planning arena are further obstacles to participation (LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, 1995, 75). Land-use planning mediates between

public and private spheres and conflicting notions of the public interest. The conflictive aspect of planning practice can be exaggerated by inflammatory reporting, because journalistic conceptions of newsworthiness highlight conflict as an ingredient of a seductive news story. Planners can only seek to mitigate this tendency by urging journalists to report the nuances and full facts of a story.

Receptiveness:

The best way to convince members of the public that their views have been heeded is to make decisions which accord with their stance. This is only possible some of the time as the balance of material considerations may recommend another course. Prompt and courteous treatment by administrative staff and case officers will help to convince people that their views have been carefully considered in the process of reaching a decision. Explanations of decisions which engage with the specifics of a person's representation and do not rely on jargon or formulaic statements are also valuable. This is one aspect of public relations which local newspapers cannot assist. In fact, if planners are quoted in newspapers urging readers to express themselves on planning matters when such a receptive attitude or an infrastructure is not in place to cope sensitively with those contributions, then disillusionment will be swift to follow. It is also imperative that reported statements by planners and councillors are not glib or dismissive towards public concerns.

Objectives

The theoretical underpinnings of the research have been presented in this introductory chapter. These have been translated into a series of ten objectives which give purpose to the investigation.

- 1: To build trust and respect between an LA and its citizens.**
- 2: To make the planning system more transparent.**
- 3: To secure relevant and constructive public contributions.**
- 4. To ensure all stakeholders have an equitable information base.**
- 5. To ensure the law on planning publicity secures its aims.**
- 6. To defend the LPA by persuading newspapers to improve coverage.**
- 7. To work with newspapers to improve coverage.**
- 8. To optimise the use of scarce resources.**
- 9. To improve the collaboration between the LPA and the PR unit.**
- 10. To avoid discriminating against applicants and infringing the law.**

Chapter Scheme

Chapter 2 describes the sources and methods used in this research. Chapter 3 assesses the current state of the local newspaper industry and the practice of journalism. Chapter 4 critiques the statutory requirements for planning publicity in newspapers. The results of a nation-wide survey of LPAs are analysed in chapter 5. Some of the observations in earlier chapters are illustrated in chapter 6, with comparative case studies showing how the two Cambridge-based District Councils liaise with their local newspaper. The dissertation concludes with a series of recommendations for reform in chapter 7 which emerge from the preceding discussion. Implementing them offers the prospect of better utilising newspapers to foster public involvement in the planning process.

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CHAPTER 2

DATA SOURCES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the epistemological framework for the research. It then explains what the parameters of the study are and why they were chosen. Finally, it lists the source material collected and explains the methodological approach to processing this empirical data. *Detailed treatment of the sources and methodologies is reserved for the sections in which the findings are presented.*

The empirical data is not grouped, but rather introduced when appropriate to the thematic flow of the work. The national survey is an exception. It is sufficiently large and cohesive to warrant a devoted chapter. However, as with all elements of the primary research, the conclusions illuminate subjects discussed in other sections.

Planning is an applied social science *par excellence*, raiding other disciplines to the benefit of its own. My research is similarly catholic in its outlook. It examines the procedural minutiae of planning, whilst probing the philosophical and theoretical reasoning behind planners' quotidian activities.

This is not a study which adopts a natural science-style epistemology. There is a multiplicity of factors influencing newspaper and LPA practice and their interaction, which means that any attempt to disentangle them and establish causative relationships by isolating and manipulating independent and dependent variables would be spurious. For instance, it would be desirable to test quantitatively whether the actions of a press officer actually improved the quality of news coverage and thereby enhanced audience understanding. As many factors impinge on the equation any calculation would be invalid. More qualitative, impressionistic questioning is required. Walker emphasises this methodological difficulty:

... there exists no intellectually reputable model for assessing the performance of a press officer in terms of column inches; measuring the number of press releases put out let alone used by newspapers or broadcasters is a poor proxy for communication. Yet there is nothing wrong with a local authority seeking to record a 'sense' - gathered by elected members, officer contacts, anecdotes - of whether, say, a change of direction in policy or some new initiative on services is being registered by the public. (WALKER, 1997, 5)

However, the concepts of validity and reliability, which are central to the scientific method, are not discarded. Holding up the responses made by survey respondents and interviewees to ideals of validity and reliability is a useful palliative against drawing unjustified conclusions from inevitably flawed data. Intimate contact with the case study authorities allowed me to explore the issues in greater depth.

An alternative and complementary approach to the question of how to involve the public through local newspaper publicity would concentrate on the reception of media messages, rather than the production of them. It would entail analysing the coverage of planning in a range of periodicals for the duration of at least a year and questioning members of the public about their reactions to it. The researcher would interrogate the audience about whether their understanding of planning had been enhanced by a news report, whether it stimulated a desire to contribute and whether their opinions had been influenced by particular pieces of reportage. A research project of this type would be much more demanding on resources of time and money than the present study. My small survey of people making representations on planning applications, which aims to discover how they became aware of the application and hence which modes of publicity are most effective, borrows from this approach (see pp.45-6). It is to be hoped that other, better resourced researchers will produce work which adopts this alternative perspective as it would be a companion study to this one.

Parameters of the research

Excluded from this research are county councils, parts of the United Kingdom other than England and broadcast news. Rewarding and important research into publicity for planning covering these bodies, nations and media needs to be conducted. However, limited resources forced me to concentrate on district and unitary authorities, England and local newspapers.

I decided to omit county councils for three main reasons. Firstly, the affairs of one county council are covered in many local newspapers making it difficult to gather all the reports for the purposes of analysis. It is also harder to assess the linkages between the county council and this disparate panoply of media outlets. Secondly, strategic planning is a small department within a county council, overshadowed by education, social services and transportation departments which monopolise media coverage. Thirdly, it is difficult to generate interest and involvement in structure planning, which is conducted at a

geographical scale without specificity of location and is therefore dislocated from peoples' immediate concerns.

The study concentrates on England because the structure of local government in Scotland and Wales has recently been restructured. It is difficult to survey organisations which are in flux. Working practices in these authorities have not yet become firmly established and employees have less time to devote to responding to a questionnaire. Planning in Northern Ireland is a special case where opportunities for participation are heavily circumscribed. It would be difficult to generalise from Northern Irish results.

Unlike regionally-based television and radio, most local newspapers have a subscription area commensurate with LA jurisdictions. Intimate, even symbiotic relationships, form between these newspapers and their local authorities. For different reasons both attempt to inculcate civic pride and identification in their constituency. In pursuit of this they achieve more by acting together rather than alone. Local authorities are 'news factories' and local newspapers are publicity machines. A significant proportion of newspapers are composed of planning stories which are a fertile and manageable source of data. Newspapers are durable and can be referred back to. Radio and television output is comparatively ephemeral and therefore has value neither for citizens wishing to monitor the progress of a planned development and perhaps comment on it, nor for a researcher concerned with the activities and needs of such citizens. Their near monopoly of the news market in many areas places local newspapers in a highly influential position to define news for their readers (FRANKLIN & MURPHY, 1991, 3). A survey of local government public relations officers found that 1.7 per cent cited local radio as the media 'most interested' in local politics, with the figure for regional television being 1.2 per cent. Newspapers accounted for the rest (FRANKLIN, 1988, 69). The statutory role of local newspapers in planning policy, which is not awarded to television or radio, cements their importance for this research.

Source Material

1. Literature in related fields

An extensive search was conducted to unearth literature about this subject. In spite of this, no work was found which specifically addressed the role of local newspapers in promoting public involvement in the planning process. Considerable literatures cover the issues of public service delivery, public consultation and participation in planning, Local Agenda 21 processes, the theory

and practice of newspaper journalism and public relations for local government. The most relevant literature from these tangentially-related subjects was absorbed and concepts and findings were borrowed.

2. National survey of local planning authorities (see appendix 1)

A postal questionnaire was sent to 149 LPAs, plus one each to the two case study authorities. The questionnaire was first piloted with the two case study authorities and their feedback led to an improved questionnaire design. The survey sought information on LPA practice in the field of press relations, with particular reference to how they liaise with newspapers to encourage public debate on and involvement in planning matters. It enquired about the role of the public relations department; who deals with the media and what training they receive; whether publicity is direct or mediated; what motivates the publicity effort; what techniques involving the newspaper are particularly effective in eliciting public involvement; what is the tenor of planning coverage and what use is made of press releases.

A representative sample was achieved by sending questionnaires to different types of authority and authorities with a spread of population densities. Due to the small number of London Boroughs, Metropolitan and Unitary Authorities, a valid result could only be obtained by sending a questionnaire to every one. Non-Metropolitan District Councils were listed in order of population density and every fifth one was selected. The sample was also checked for geographical spread. It provides a context into which the case studies can be located. An impressive response rate of 73% lends credibility to the results.

3. Telephone enquiries about survey responses.

Responses which indicated particularly innovative or interesting techniques or ideas were followed up by telephone. Discussions with planners and public relations personnel clarified intriguing comments and I requested relevant documents from them.

4. Codes of conduct for councillors (see pp.70-2 for discussion)

Those respondents who stated in the questionnaire that they had a code of conduct governing councillors' interaction with the media were contacted for copies.

5. Statements of consultation and publicity for local plans and UDPs (pp.51-4)

LPAs who adopted their local plan or UDP in 1997 were asked for a copy of their Statements, or at least that section which described the use made of local newspapers for publicising the plan.

6. Case study investigations (see pp.102-13)

I originally intended to produce case studies for a small selection of local planning authorities in different parts of the country. This would have been prohibitively expensive and time consuming. The need for this is largely negated by the national survey which provides comparative background information over a wide area. Consequently, I will confine my case studies to the two district councils based in Cambridge; Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council. These two councils offer interesting contrasts and are the principal district councils reported on by the *Cambridge Evening News*, whose coverage I assessed. The attitude and approach towards public involvement and press relations of these LPAs illuminated findings which were emerging from other source material. It is not claimed that these authorities are typical. Their distinctiveness is apparent from the comments made in their questionnaire responses. These allow the Cambridge situation to be located in the national picture, thus preventing invalid generalisations.

Specific case study sources:

- a) Planning coverage between 1st October 1997 and 31st December 1997 was assessed with particular consideration given to questions of accuracy, comprehensiveness and what the newspaper's editorial leanings are.
- b) Semi-structured but varying interviews with selected planners, public relations personnel, councillors, pressure group spokespeople, applicants and journalists were conducted to learn about their practices and attitudes and to discuss my emerging ideas with them.
- c) Survey a sample of people making representations (see appendix 2 & pp.45-6) about planning applications which were advertised by public notice in the *Cambridge Evening News* between 1st October and 31st December 1997, to find out where they learnt about the application. This provides some indication of the effectiveness of different publicity modes.

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CHAPTER 3

LOCAL NEWSPAPER JOURNALISM

Newspapers are products. The main goal of proprietors and editors of newspapers is maximising profitability. If in the process of producing and selling a newspaper the public becomes better informed and democracy is strengthened then this is fortunate, but it is not the *raison d'être* of newspapers. The room for idealism in the newspaper business has contracted as commercial imperatives have altered patterns of ownership and working practices.

These axioms must be remembered when considering how newspapers might be employed as a vehicle for planning publicity. Newspapers will report on planning stories only if they are likely to interest readers and thereby boost circulation. Appeals to 'public interest' or social imperatives are futile if they clash with the need to maximise revenue. However, some editors will consider provision of accurate and comprehensive information about planning and other local government activities to be a sensible strategy. This will be particularly true in areas with a well-educated population. Significant scope therefore exists for LPA planners to encourage and assist journalists to improve coverage. These considerations form the backdrop to the discussion and recommendations that appear in this thesis. This chapter elaborates the context of journalistic interests and practices which set the parameters for improving planning coverage in local newspapers.

State of the market

Local newspaper sales have been falling for a long time, with the result that many newspapers have closed. Circulation fell by 40% between 1976 and 1996 (JOHNSON, 1996). The number of paid-for weeklies plummeted from 915 in 1981 to 434 in 1990 but has since rallied to 473 (THOMPSON, 1996). The reasons for the decline include:

- the burgeoning range of media outlets and leisure pursuits competing for the consumers' time and money;
- diminishing leisure time as a consequence of longer working hours;
- increasing motoring has boosted the radio as a news source;
- free newspapers have stolen advertising and diminished the incentive to pay for a local newspaper;

- closure of 'paid-for' weeklies by large media groups who buy small independent publishers and liquidate their assets because of misplaced fatalism about the contraction of the market for local newspapers;
- rising cost of newsprint; and,
- increasing labour mobility weakening the allegiance to and concern about a locality.

Talk of the demise of the paid-for local newspaper is premature. Since the end of the recession revenues have picked-up. With the property market more lively and more job recruitment, advertising revenues have increased (LIND, 1996). Circulation losses have slowed - the rate of decline shrunk by a third, from a rate of -2.2% over the period 1994-5 to -1.5% between 1995 and 1996. The *Cambridge Evening News*, focus of the case-study, had managed, until last year, to record a circulation growth for seven consecutive years. The newspaper industry can draw comfort from the fact that all mainstream media are facing audience loss.

Ownership is an important factor in influencing editorial strategy. Peter Darling, former editor of the *Sheffield Morning Telegraph*, laments "the way the ownership of the regionals has been dislocated from the communities they serve, and the way a public service ideal has been subordinated to metropolitan corporate objectives." (DARLING, 1996). Consolidation of ownership in the hands of multinational media conglomerates tends to result in an erosion of local accountability and distinctiveness. A common ploy is to propagate a brand image by renaming titles (ISAAMAN, 1996). It is fortunate that a number of multinationals have recently left the industry, preferring to concentrate on other, more lucrative media sectors. In spite of these pressures, the regional press remains far more diverse than most other media, a result of the fact that local papers succeed and make profits by fitting in with their locality (LIND, 1997).

Local newspapers compete in a classic zero-sum game. They operate, by definition, within territorial limits, and every gain made by one competitor is at the expense of another (FRANKLIN & MURPHY, 1991, 33). Monopoly is often the result. A situation of monopoly shifts the balance of power in politician - media relations in favour of the latter. It is able to adopt a more critical stance towards the council if there is no risk that the council will offer preferential access to a rival publication. An extreme case of media manipulation in West Yorkshire was described by Bob Franklin:

A study in West Yorkshire revealed how the Labour leader of a metropolitan authority influenced reporting of local politics in the two local papers by withholding information from one while offering monopoly access to the other on clearly specified

conditions which detailed not only the content of the report but also its positioning and layout within the paper. (FRANKLIN, 1994, 22)

While this is clearly an outrageous infringement of the freedoms of the Fourth Estate, a diluted version of this ploy may be useful where reporting is maliciously inaccurate. The legitimacy of this tactic is endorsed by David Walker:

A local authority which found itself consistently unreported or badly reported or discriminated against in a local newspaper would be entitled to review its options. These include selective briefing, by which stories are made available to one newspaper rather than another. Much will depend on the existence of competing titles. (WALKER, 1997, 57)

Most newspapers are owned by public limited companies whose shareholders expect healthy dividends. The pressure to increase profits each year can cause a newspaper to alter its approach to news. It strengthens the influence of advertising executives in the formulation of editorial strategy, formally the exclusive domain of the editor. Shrewd editors will consult the newspaper sales staff over the type of story which will sell the paper (FLINTHAM, 1996). Previously they would have relied on 'journalistic instinct'. The subordination of any notion of the Fourth Estate as a public service to advertising and circulation imperatives is revealed by the words of Mark Hollinshead, marketing director of Midland Independent Newspapers, "It is the job of the circulation boss to ensure that we are delivering an audience in the right numbers [to advertisers]. It is the job of the editor, working from the same marketing plan, to ensure that we are delivering an audience of the right profile through development of the right ingredients." (HEADLINES, 1996). The *Kentish Express* ran a successful sales-boosting promotional offer in association with McDonalds who was opening a new restaurant in Ashford (MOORE, 1997). Any planning application which McDonalds might subsequently submit in the area would present the newspaper with a dilemma. It would be difficult for them to criticise the plans after forming a business alliance with McDonalds.

Falling circulation has engendered a crisis of confidence among journalists. Market researchers have been enlisted to discern audience preferences and suggest remedies for the shrinking sales. The pace of innovation is quick. Working practices, technologies and styles are changed in an attempt to boost sales and attract advertisers. This time of experimentation is propitious for people, including LPA planners, to make suggestions for change which might be heeded. However, the market repositioning and shedding of staff, which is a

common response to falling sales, will not favour the enhancement of serious planning coverage.

Types of newspaper

Newspapers can be categorised according to their quality, their format, whether they are free or priced and the extent of their circulation area. To succeed in exploiting the potential for publicity offered by a newspaper, one must ascertain the nature of the publication. This information will enable the development of a targeted publicity strategy or even result in a decision to discount a particular newspaper as an inappropriate publicity vehicle and a waste of resources.

Quality

A 'newspaper of record' sees its role as being a provider of reliable information and considered comment. Stories which deliberately seek to entertain are relegated to the fringes. Bridget McLaughlin, editor of the redoubtable *Brecon & Radnor Express*, describes her concerns: "If we don't tell people what decisions are being made by their council or by the national park or what's going on in the courts, they won't find out until it's too late." This includes reporting planning applications (MARKS, 1996c). Such newspapers are likely to be receptive to detailed information on planning matters and willing to disseminate the information in an unadulterated form. They may also operate as a formidable yet fair critic of the council. The *Milton Keynes Citizen* may be a unique example of a *free* 'newspaper of record'. This publication has put all the paid-for newspapers in the area out of business and the editor aspires for it to be a repository of information about everything which takes place in Milton Keynes (JOHNSON, 1996b).

Editors of newspapers with falling circulation figures will contemplate changing their editorial formula. A move upmarket or downmarket may improve their sales performance. Mike Lowe, editor of the *Evening Telegraph* in Derby, took his inspiration from the *Sun* when he changed the paper. He comments, "...the only way to describe what I've done is to say I've taken the paper downmarket. Derby is a C2 city. There's no point in producing the *Daily Telegraph* when people want the *Sun*." Council reports are his bugbear. They have been drastically shortened and logos attached stating either "How they spend you money" or "How they waste you money" depending on whether the editor approves of the expenditure. He describes Derby as a transit town where

concentration on entertainment and lifestyle features is a tactic intended to capture an audience without local roots (JOHNSON, 1996c). Such a determinedly populist newspaper offers almost no scope for fostering constructive public involvement in planning. It would be impossible to shoehorn the complex issues and blurred lines of accountability of planning into a simplistic moral universe populated by stereotypes. A decision must be taken whether to seek publicity on their terms or to eschew the newspaper. Whichever approach is taken, much damage-limitation is likely to be required. Other newspapers - the *Reading Evening Post* and the *Swindon Evening Advertiser* being examples - have travelled in the other direction, deciding that sensationalism is not a sales panacea. It might be useful to remind editors who are doggedly mischievous in their reporting of local government that their public might welcome substantial, informative journalism. Such a comment ought to be reserved for dire situations to minimise the risk of entrenching an editor's view that the council is patronising and meddling.

Format

A move downmarket may be signalled by a change in the newspaper format from broadsheet to tabloid, or the introduction of colour and more graphics. Broadsheets can fit more information on a page, enabling more detailed coverage. However, these changes may only be aesthetic, or a recognition of the manageability of the tabloid size. The size of a newspaper in Britain carries such semiotic significance that editors will deliberate carefully before going tabloid. Nigel Hastilow, editor of *The Birmingham Post* illustrates this by explaining an advantage for his newspaper of the broadsheet format: "Sometimes we can get away with things in a broadsheet because people think it's quality. You can go into more detail in court cases and have see-through tops on models." (MARKS, 1997). Most readers prefer the status quo and are disorientated when a familiar publication is altered. Any change entails the risk of alienating existing readers for the sake of securing new ones.

Price

Free newspapers made massive inroads into the market during the 1980s. Their journalistic ethic need not necessarily be different from paid-for newspapers. 'Paid-fors' rely for the majority of their income on advertisers and both are in the business of delivering readers to advertisers (MARKS, 1996a). People *will* buy newspapers solely for the advertising content, especially if they want a job, house or car. However, the loyal reader base will demand something

more - whether this be information, entertainment or opinions. The two types of newspaper secure readers for advertisers in different ways - 'frees' through universal distribution and 'paid-fors' through offering editorial content. Free newspapers are normally an advertising medium first and an information source second. Universal distribution puts free newspapers beyond public criticism and accountability because people cannot demonstrate their displeasure by stopping buying it (FRANKLIN & MURPHY, 1991, 99).

Free papers were established to fill a market niche and lack the journalistic tradition and ideals that still persist on some well-established 'paid-fors'. This is reflected in small staffs and low-budgets. They exemplify the trend in all media outlets where staffing-levels have been cut, for journalists to be more office-based, gathering information for stories over the telephone. Franklin and Murphy draw a wider conclusion from this:

Free newspapers, above all other sectors of the local press, offer the clearest possible refutation of the suggestion that newspapers, left to the forces of the market, can be relied upon to produce a wide range of critical news and reporting of their community for their readers. (FRANKLIN & MURPHY, 1991, 76-7)

Without the resources to properly investigate stories, frees are much more heavily reliant on material sent to them. This is usually published in an uncritical way. If a free newspaper is jeopardising the existence of a reputable paid-for newspaper, it might be a good strategy for an LA to desist from supplying the free paper with information. Newspapers rely on 'information subsidies' to reduce the cost to journalists of obtaining the information they need to make news (GANDY, 1982). Providing this information removes the need for journalists to leave the office and investigate stories. Withdrawing this 'information subsidy' will reduce the volume of favourable coverage which appears, but will improve the long-term prospects for a healthy local press which is valuable for local democracy...

Degree of Localism

The identification with a locality and knowledge of it, buttressed by networks of information gathering, is a local newspaper's biggest asset. They aim to be the primary source of news for people interested in their area. This is their competitive advantage. A newspaper which forgot this was the *Reading Evening Post*. It nearly collapsed because readers could not identify with its regional focus. Sales were revived by jettisoning non-local news and concentrating on Reading and its immediate hinterland (MORGAN, 1996).

By nurturing a sense of place and a concern for its welfare, local newspapers are an essential agent for priming people to take an interest in changes to their environment. Such a tight local focus can be beneficial for an LPA trying to elicit feedback on a development brief or a planning application, which will have clear and newsworthy ramifications for the appearance, environment and economy of a place. However, a narrow geographical concern can become insularity, making it difficult to transmit necessary information about the interrelationship between local and wider concerns. A selfish parochialism can be fostered, to the detriment of fair planning decisions.

An area with a big proportion of transient or newly-arrived people presents problems for a newspaper. Newspapers based in inner-London suffer from the effects of population flux. Now that populations in many areas are becoming more settled it is having a beneficial effect on the fortunes of these newspapers. For example, Islington has seen the birth of a second newspaper in its area (WASSELL, 1997). Producing a newspaper in a rapidly expanding town, which reflects the identity and concerns of that place and its people, is a special challenge. *The Evening Telegraph* in Peterborough is a case in point. The designation of Peterborough as an expansion town with housing built in discrete 'townships' accommodating the new population, has produced a centrifugal tendency. The new residents lack familiarity with the institutions and geography of Peterborough and the 'townships' and extensive parkways remove the need to regularly travel into the city centre, the seat of civic activity. The idea of Peterborough has become inchoate and the job of the newspaper to produce engaging local news much harder (JOHNSON, 1997).

The intention of forging a community, as a commercial strategy and a social good, which is apparent in the coverage of most local newspapers, is more explicit in a place like Peterborough or Milton Keynes. These places are often subjected to jibes and the populace invited to question the wisdom of moving there. Their newspapers will err towards emphasising good news to bolster the morale of their readers. Jan Henderson, editor of the *Milton Keynes Citizen* comments that, "People don't want to be told they're idiots for moving here: the last thing they want is a paper coming through the door saying you're an idiot, and the town is full of concrete cows, muggings and rapes." (JOHNSON, 1996b). Such goodwill may even extend to the council, making such newspapers fertile ground for positive publicity about actions to safeguard or enhance the local environment.

Editorial Stance

Objectivity

To comment on the accuracy or comprehensiveness of a piece of reporting requires endorsement of that perennial journalistic goal - objectivity. Debates over objectivity have been central to the study of news media. Objectivity is the key tenet of a journalist's professional ideology, used as a guide to practice and invoked to refute attacks on their probity (TUCHMAN, 1972, 660). It must be realised that where selection and interpretation is necessary, objectivity is not an attainable goal. It is certainly not met by formulaic adherence to the rule that both sides must be allowed to speak, though this is a starting point. However, abandoning objectivity deprives critics of a yardstick to measure a factual assertion or substantiating evidence against. One must then relinquish critical purchase on a text and embrace relativism. Critics of journalistic objectivity (TUCHMAN, 1972; SCHUDSON, 1978) suggest that we can never get outside our own perspective and judge it, yet these critics have apparently managed to do this. Even when we differ from others, we comprehend *that* we differ and *how* we differ. We must proceed with the assumption that there is an elusive truth which can be edged towards by striving after objectivity, even if ultimately it may never be touched (LICHTENBERG, 1991).

Newspaper Vested Interests

Newspapers are not aloof and independent of the stories which they cover. They are private businesses and as such tend to be anti-tax and anti-state (WALKER, 1997, 15-6). Although US-style growth coalitions are rare in Britain, as businesses which rely on advertising and sales revenue, newspapers here do have a vested interest in an area's development (KANISS, 1991, 2). It would be a rare newspaper which would criticise a planning application it had submitted itself, or give much prominence to its critics. Proposals for major commercial or residential development within a newspaper's circulation area offer the prospect of more customers. There is also some evidence that editors are concerned to maintain good relations with local estate agents and builders (MURPHY, 1976). This is an incentive to take a positive editorial stance towards such plans. Pro-growth coverage, however, risks antagonising existing readers whose interests might be harmed. Truly objective coverage would disregard such considerations. Newspapers are unlikely to martyr themselves in favour of spotless objectivity, especially as these motivations are hard to prove. A sub-editor at the *Cambridge Evening News* conceded that this line of reasoning was plausible. That newspaper

recently decentralised its offices from Cambridge to an out-of-town building with ample car-parking. It cannot now advocate draconian curbs on non-residential parking provision associated with new developments, in the interests of traffic reduction, without courting accusations of hypocrisy.

Campaigns

A firm editorial hand is most obvious when a newspaper mounts a campaign. Campaigns attempt to secure changes, often to public policy, by mobilising readers with sustained polemical coverage of an issue. They are only partly motivated by moral outrage or social conscience, being designed to create a bond of allegiance between a newspaper and its public, thereby boosting sales (JOHNSON, 1996d). Campaigns therefore tend to be fought on 'easy' issues which will command majority public support. Campaigns on planning issues bring notions of the public interest into the foreground. Both journalists and planners claim to be acting in the public interest and when one criticises the other they are contesting definitions of the public interest, which is a malleable and self-justifying concept. It is difficult for the target of a campaign to defend their position, however justifiable it is. Even if the target mounts a persuasive defence, the newspaper will rarely call a truce, because their credibility depends on success. In any case, a newspaper in campaigning mode will be too busy gathering damning evidence to consider more reasoned analysis. Some newspaper campaigns are commendable exposés of poor decisions and ineptitude. On other occasions, a victorious campaign will shift the harm elsewhere as scarce resources are redistributed. Campaigns place enormous pressure on the relevant organisation to yield as it can be difficult to resist the force of such publicity, especially if you are a councillor watching your electoral support ebb away.

Journalists

Expertise

Local journalism is characterised by low salaries, under-resourcing and poor training. Local newspapers are 85 per cent deunionised. It is widely perceived by recruits as a stepping-stone to national newspapers or other forms of media. The turnover of staff is rapid and this can inhibit the deepening of local knowledge among reporters. The shedding of staff to save costs has meant less specialisation and therefore less expertise. A public relations officer in the West Midlands, quoted by David Walker, opined that,

We seem to have to spend more time explaining local government finance. I can recall a time when a reporter who had done the National Council for the Training of Journalists' certificate would know about council structures, not need loads of explanation. Likewise on council proceedings, we have to hold their hands. (WALKER, 1997, 47-8)

The former director of the Newspaper Society, Dugal Nisbet-Smith, predicts that more and more specialised journalists will be shared within newspaper groups, exploiting an economy of scale made possible by the consolidation of local newspaper ownership (MARKS, 1996b). This reorganisation will cause the further separation of expertise and local knowledge, as specialist staff work on a pseudo-freelance basis. The fact that generally ill-informed journalists wield considerable power over the reputations of other people and professions can be galling for those in the professions of public management who strive for integrity and accountability in their work (WALKER, 1997, 15).

Training

The provision for training and accreditation of journalists has become less thorough. Former editor of the *Northern Echo*, Allan Prosser, contends that there is, "...a breathtaking failure to equip staff with simple, modern tools and skills to place alongside their shorthand and their native wit. The Guild of Editors, when polled, said that the priority for new trainees was to learn how to rewrite handouts." (JOHNSON, 1996e). An innovation which promises the development of journalists' skills is the Orbital Newsroom, pioneered by Westminster Press and widely emulated. Journalists are attached to 'pods' - small teams of journalists, all trained to both write and sub-edit. Each 'pod' covers a subject brief. It allows more flexibility with previously desk-bound journalists free to collect stories on the ground and writers learning the skills of sub-editing.

News Values

Due to the pressure and pace of their work journalists are constantly forced to make rapid, tough decisions, often involving ethical dilemmas. Minimal time to deliberate requires confidence that one possesses the 'right stuff' for the job. Journalists talk of having a 'feel' for what is newsworthy (GANS, 1980). Though slippery, newsworthiness determines what gets known and what remains obscure. Control of communication channels empowers journalists to determine what qualifies as news, and by extension, what merits inclusion in a news product. People who are denied sought-for coverage of their activities will contest the

definition of news. If the audience for a news product does not buy it, journalists will revise their view of what constitutes news.

To pass the definitional hurdle a piece of information must be both new and interesting to a potential audience. A story accompanied by a striking photograph has a greater chance of inclusion. Newspaper journalists value ingredients such as drama, conflict, narrative force and change. According to Phyllis Kaniss this has implications for the style in which development proposals are reported:

In order to make their stories more appealing to audiences and therefore editors, reporters are more likely to emphasise the need for a glamorous new project than to focus on the reasons why the status quo is preferable. Similarly, emphasis on the symbolic aspects of a project - its impact on the image of the city or on the city's ability to compete in a "horse race" with other cities - carries more audience appeal than a focus on qualitative costs and benefits. (KANISS, 1991, 5)

While people are interested in the lives of others, sometimes to a voyeuristic extent, what most interests people is a piece of news which affects them personally. Many elements of planning fit these loose criteria of newsworthiness, which explains its prominence in the news. However, the stress on newness means that journalism has an endemic short time-horizon that is antipathetic to a planning system committed to long-term strategy-making. A reluctance to examine the background to an issue or any structural causes means that only the newsworthy symptoms are presented. This militates against action to address the roots of a problem, or to correctly attribute responsibility for solving it. The reporting of environmental issues in particular suffers from this short-termist outlook. In addition, the individualistic political philosophy which has characterised British politics for twenty years and is reflected in newspaper coverage, is antipathetic to governance. An aspect of this is the personalisation of coverage, typified by the 'Swampy phenomenon', which militates against understanding. The newsworthiness of politics as a collectivist enterprise has been downgraded (WALKER, 1997, 18).

Sources

The success of a news source in shaping the news agenda relies on three main qualities: incentive, power and ability (GANS, 1980).

Incentive: Those most eager to secure publicity will tend to be treated with least respect, unless some other attribute elevates their status as a source. These 'advocates' will be people with an agenda or cause to promote. 'Arbiters',

on the other hand, are consulted by journalists because they are thought to possess professional expertise which will help journalists to interpret and evaluate the quality of information received from 'advocates' (WESTLEY & MACLEAN, 1957). Representatives of voluntary agencies can sometimes be 'arbiters' because their partisanship is thought to be moderated by altruism (DEACON, 1996, 180). Providing their comments are comprehensible to journalists and amenable to assimilation into their inferential frameworks, 'arbiters' are highly valued, and especially where issues are new, complex or uncertain (DEACON & GOLDING, 1994, 15-6 & 202). Deacon and Golding discovered that,

In the case of the poll tax ... some of the most influential arbiters in coverage were the local government finance officers responsible for administering the system. However, when [they] interviewed several of these professionals it became clear they were far more actively engaged in the political debate than many journalists assumed. (DEACON & GOLDING, 1994, 16)

Planning officers should seek to emulate this feat by becoming regarded as 'arbiters'. This would require a concerted effort to stress their professional detachment from party politics.

The paradox is that while 'arbiters' are not supposed to make an effort or have a vested interest in being quoted, in practice they often do. This may be to establish themselves as authoritative and high-profile commentators, to promote a subtle message, or to cultivate personal or organisational popularity with the audience. The key is to keep that interest opaque or implicit so that journalists do not redefine them as 'advocates'. Local government representatives will find this difficult as they are widely regarded as a vested interest by a predominantly critical press. Some local news commentary even seems to portray local government as a parasite, feasting on the body politic. Proactive approaches to bigoted newspapers may merely confirm these preconceptions. Of course, their need for material may override their antipathy and force them to soften their tone (SCHOFIELD, 1992, 17).

Power: People in positions of authority are more likely to make news than those who have little influence because they make decisions which may affect the lives of many (HALL et al, 1978). This theory of 'primary definers' is less applicable, though not invalid, in the case of *local* newspapers, whose ethos is to identify with and to reflect the concerns of their readership. To fulfil this brief they will frequently conduct 'vox pops', to test the prevailing sentiment about a particular issue. The opinions which are printed may not be well-informed.

Those non-governmental organisations which are accorded most respect by policy-makers will also receive extra coverage due to the influence conferred on them by inclusion in the 'policy loop' (DEACON, 1996, 193). In light of the potency which such assimilation can lend to an organisation, it is vital that organisations which purport to derive their legitimacy from representing people have their claims examined. If their accountability and support does not match their claims, then local authorities should withhold their recognition of the group as a routine consultee.

Protest groups often derive what power they wield from being adept at attracting publicity for their activities. Lipsky has most effectively encapsulated this situation:

To the extent that successful protest activity depends upon appealing to, and / or threatening other groups in the community, the communications media set the limits of protest action. If protest tactics are not considered significant by the media, or if newspaper and television reporters or editors decide to overlook protest tactics, protest organisations will not succeed. Like trees falling unheard in the forest, there is no protest unless protest is perceived and projected. (LIPSKY, 1970, 227)

Calm reasoning is rarely sufficient to secure publicity. Unlike those who have had power conferred upon them by appointment or electoral mandate, activists must resort to newsworthy performative gestures if they want a voice (DEACON, 1996, 178). This may be misjudged and lead to accusations of hysteria or eccentricity.

Ability: Sources who are able to provide information in a form and with the regularity demanded by the news media will make more impact. This favours those organisations with the resources to invest in promotional activity.

A journalist who has assembled a collection of reliable sources whom they consult regularly will, "... have a vested interest in accurate reporting since they have to keep ringing the same contacts and can't afford a cavalier approach" which might alienate them (FRY, 1991, 63). Alienated former contacts may choose to offer preferential access to a journalist on a rival publication instead, and alternative sources are likely to be inferior. Specialist reporters in particular therefore depend upon the longevity of relationships with news sources.

Future Trajectory of Local Newspaper Industry

Producers of newspapers are in the business of providing information and entertainment. At the moment this happens to be disseminated through paper-based newspapers. Only the complacent will assume that this situation is immutable. The recent disposal by the multinationals of their local newspaper

assets was prompted by, "...the lure of the electronic highway, a siren song greatly intensified when transmitted through the sounding board of City analysts." They are investing instead in electronic data transmission infrastructure (LIND, 1996).

The current format has some practical advantages - it is easy to see what the contents are, words on paper are comfortable to read and newspapers are portable. The consumer of newspapers may also have some sentimental attachment to them. However, consumers are becoming increasingly demanding, with politicians, television and supermarkets preaching the creed of choice. Electronic means of communicating, which have made giant technical advances through digital convergence and the proliferation of the Internet, will challenge the newspaper as the preferred form of dissemination for local news and advertising. Regional newspaper managing director Douglas Bonn believes that, "...due to the quantum change in what broadcast and direct electronic delivery media can now do, a huge wealth of local information, in short all that we do so well now, can and will be able to bypass our medium totally, and appear for example on screen at the push of a button or two." (BONN, 1996).

The old and the new technologies are not mutually exclusive. Access to the Internet will not reach critical mass for the foreseeable future, so it is unlikely that newspapers in their present guise will wither. More likely is that newspapers will gradually mutate into gateways to realms of deeper information. Paul Morris, a media consultant, speculates that,

"...we might see a '*Daily Portal*' - a newspaper with numbers at the bottom of stories like the ones used to programme videos (VideoPlus), so that I can dial up for more information. Perhaps I would like to see ... detailed plans of the new by-pass which at present are available only from the Town Hall and you have to be really keen to get it this way!" (MORRIS, 1996).

This is an exciting proposition from the perspective of planning. A newspaper in electronic or paper format could offer links to the local planning department's Web site, at which details of planning applications (including plans for layout and building design), development briefs, development plans and consultation exercises could be displayed. The London Borough of Wandsworth was the first planning department to make such information available on the Internet, and others (including Cambridge City Council) are following. The next phase in this development would be for LPAs to explore the possibility of establishing hypertext links with newspapers' Websites so that usage of the facility is promoted.

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CHAPTER 4

NEWSPAPER PUBLICITY FOR PLANNING - A CRITIQUE OF THE LAW

Introduction

It is the desire of central government that planning applications and development plans should be widely publicised so that any potentially interested parties are aware of them. Statutory consultees and neighbours to certain categories of proposed development are notified by letter. The law also prescribes site notices as a method of publicity designed to alert a population who live and work in the vicinity of land which is subject to certain types of planning application.

The publicity medium we are primarily concerned with here is public notices in local newspapers. These are employed to inform the public about a range of planning-related matters, including planning applications, appeals, development plans and refusal to comply with the reports of Ombudsmen. Statements of consultation and publicity for development plans are also considered.

This chapter consists of a critique of the current statutory requirements, enabling conclusions to be drawn on whether the provisions of the law could be better implemented or even revised to achieve more effective publicity. It complements the description of the law, presented in appendix 3.

Operation of the Law

Local Newspaper Public Notices

When new rules on publicity were introduced in 1991 the government acknowledged that they represented an extra burden on local authorities (para. 34, DoE Circular 15/92). They also pledged to monitor the adequacy of the requirements, at least as they relate to development plans (para. 4.10., PPG 12). In fact, it would be remiss if the government were not to monitor the operation of the law in all its details. There is no evidence that this has been done in relation to press publicity for planning. Such a review would be guided by the principle articulated in para. 22 of DoE Circular 15/92 of establishing, "... a balance between considerations of cost, speed of decision making, and providing a reasonable opportunity for public comment." Such an assessment is offered in this chapter.

The most important fact to determine is whether public notices are proving sufficiently effective in alerting interested parties to the existence of a planning application or development plan, bearing in mind their cost. To develop some tentative conclusions about this a survey of people making representations to Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council was undertaken.

Survey Method:

The planning applications included are those which were advertised in the *Cambridge Evening News* during the research period (October - December 1997) and were determined by committee between October 1997 and March 1998. Applications classed as 'major development' are excluded. These are often the subject of campaigns of opposition and the network of information is more complex. Any further research should recognise the distinction between patterns of representation for applications of different magnitudes.

The survey sought to discover where people making representations (respondents) first learned of the applications they were commenting on. If this was not clear from their representation, they were sent a letter requesting the information (see appendix 2 for copy). In cases where respondents were told about an application by an acquaintance, it is possible that the acquaintance learned about the application from a newspaper advertisement. Failing to acknowledge this would have led to an underestimation of the effectiveness of the medium as a publicity tool. A specific question covered this contingency.

Survey Results (table 1):

Respondents included: Cambridge City = 7 (2)
 (number of applications South Cambridgeshire = 34 (12)
 in parentheses) Total = 41 (14)

<i>Alerted by:</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>Notification from planning department</i>	25
<i>Acquaintance*</i>	8.5
<i>Site notice**</i>	4
<i>Parish Council***</i>	2.5
<i>Public notice in local newspaper</i>	0
<i>Total****</i>	40

Table 1 - Cambridge Respondents Source of Information

Explanatory notes:

* Of those informed by an acquaintance, 4 were told by the applicant, 2.5 were told by someone who had been notified by the planning department and 2 did not disclose the identity of their informant. Where a respondent to the survey ticked two sources, half marks was awarded to each.

** Of the fourteen applications all were subject to neighbour notification and newspaper advertisement, while only five had site notices. A comparable figure for respondents reacting to site notices would therefore require 4 to be multiplied by 2.8 giving 11.2 respondents.

*** Due to the greater number of applications from South Cambridgeshire, a rural authority, the figure for parish councils is likely to be inflated. Parish councils are notified directly by South Cambridgeshire DC.

**** One person of the seventeen surveyed failed to respond.

Survey Conclusions:

The small number surveyed means that any conclusions drawn from these figures must be tentative. Even with this caveat in mind, the fact that not a single person commented as a result of spotting the application in the public notices of their local newspaper is arresting. My survey appears to contradict research conducted in 1995 by MORI on behalf of Wandsworth Borough Council. It found that planning notices in the local papers were the source of information about planning which the respondents were most likely to recall seeing or hearing. Inexplicably, the MORI survey did not include newspapers in a subsequent question which asked, "From this list of ways of increasing awareness of planning issues and applications, which two or three, if any, do you think would be the most effective?" (MORI, 1995, 44 & 50). It is one thing to report what has been noticed and another to investigate what information is acted upon. My survey attempts the latter and is designed to reveal what enables people to become involved.

The case for retaining this apparently ineffective method of publicity needs careful examination. Any decision for abolition must pay heed to the fact that, "The legitimate public interest in planning extends beyond those most directly affected by a proposal (and subject to neighbour notification) to a wider community of interest in the wise development of the local environment." (ILSLEY et al, 1997, 16). Public notices in newspapers are intended to involve this constituency. Less established groups who are not routine consultees and do not receive the weekly list of planning applications may find newspaper notices useful. Parish notice boards are one alternative place where planning applications could

be advertised to a wider constituency than just those passing a site or receiving neighbour notification letters. The potential role of parish councils for planning publicity is recognised in Circular 15/92 (paras. 3 & 11). Further research is needed.

Costs:

Newspaper advertisements are a considerable drain on the finances of the LPA; expenditure which can only be justified if tangible benefit was derived from them. Yet the benefit appears to be negligible. This is not a situation condoned by the Government's Code of Practice on Local Government Publicity, issued by the Secretary of State for the Environment under section 4(1) of the Local Government Act 1986. Paragraph 6 says that, "For publicity, as for all other expenditure, the aim should ... be to achieve the greatest possible cost-effectiveness." Local authorities are required by Section 4(1) of the Act as amended by section 27 of the Local Government Act 1988 to have regard to the Code in coming to any decision on publicity. Yet local authorities are obliged to meet statutory requirements for publicity that appear not to meet this criteria. Central government should adhere this code when it legislates on local government procedures. The government made a pledge in DoE Circular 15/92 (para. 32) to take the increased cost of publicity into account when next assessing the level of planning application fees. DETR officials were unable to confirm whether this has been done.

As an example of the cost involved, the *Cambridge Evening News* charges £11.60 per column centimetre, which means that an average charge for the weekly public notice of planning applications for Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council is £800 each, making an annual amount of approximately £40000 each. This figure will vary between authorities but it is an indication of the additional financial burden placed on planning authorities by the requirement for notices in the newspaper.

Public notices are more expensive than normal advertisements. This is because public bodies with statutory obligations cannot be deterred by price from taking advertising space. They are effectively a captive market. There is only scope for negotiating cost reductions where rival papers circulate in an area which would both fulfil the requirements of the law. Planning authorities may withdraw advertising from a newspaper if a cheaper rate can be secured with its rival. It is not unknown for authorities to withdraw advertising from a newspaper which subjects a council to consistently negative coverage. Such a move needs to be carefully considered, because it is tantamount to blackmail. It would be

considered reprehensible if any other advertiser operated this policy, and should not normally be countenanced by an LA.

The London Borough of Newham planning department have negotiated a lower rate for advertising with the *Newham Recorder* by promising a long-term commitment to advertising and a supply of planning information which is used by the newspaper to compile a weekly planning page. All but the most insignificant applications are printed on this page, which overcomes the objection that the law unjustifiably prioritises conservation areas and listed buildings when other applications may warrant similarly privileged publicity (SCOTTISH OFFICE ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT, 1994). The act of advertising such applications gives them extra gravity which might be thought to unwarrantedly prejudice the likely decision against permission (HARRISON, 1994, 220).

If placing public notices ceased to be a statutory requirement and planning authorities removed their advertising it is conceivable that editors would resist attempts by LPAs to inject greater coverage of planning into the newspapers as a substitute. This would be detrimental to the aim of increasing effective planning publicity. This possibility is sufficiently remote not to inhibit a decision to change the law.

Which Newspaper?

Two main problems arise when deciding which newspaper to choose for public notices - are free newspapers adequate and which newspaper best covers the LA's area? While free newspapers have a bigger circulation and are cheaper to advertise in, they may be discarded unread by many people and are not the place where people would naturally look for news about important developments in an area. Free newspapers do have the advantage of reaching those who cannot afford to buy a newspaper regularly. LPAs which decide that newspaper public notices are an ineffective mode of publicity might opt to fulfil the statutory requirements to the most minimal extent by using free newspapers for their advertising. Another consideration is the difficulty which people whose first language is not English experience when reading official documents. An argument can be mounted for publishing notices in appropriate ethnic minority periodicals.

There is a lack of fit between media markets and LA boundaries (WALKER, 1997, 53). Many councils have several local newspapers circulating in their area and deciding which is most consonant with the authority boundaries can be difficult. To avoid missing out part of the area, it might be necessary to split the applications and advertise them in separate newspapers. This can be more

expensive because the explanatory information at the top and bottom of the notice must be duplicated between newspapers, taking up more space overall. The confusion will only be alleviated if the government provides some clarification on this point.

Format and Content:

The format of public notices is heavily prescribed. The required wording is legalistic and forbidding. Providing this basic information is conveyed, planning authorities are at liberty to include extra information which will make the notice more accessible to the lay person. The phrase, "change of use from office (class A2) to restaurant (class A3)" in a notice could refer to the establishment of a drive-through fast-food take-away. This example illustrates the need for extra information in some cases to convey the true nature of an application. Walker suggests that statutory notices might "... be accompanied by more 'user-friendly' explanations of the council's adjudicative role in development issues, or 'topped and tailed' by indicators of the council's overall view of development / land use" (WALKER, 1997, 81). Possible additions mentioned in paras. 23 and 24 of DoE Circular 15/92 are details of when an application is likely to be determined and a caution that "... only remarks relating to land use considerations will be taken into account in reaching decision." This opportunity is generally not taken; perhaps because it is hard to know when applications will reach committee and any additional words will increase the cost. It is vital to explain the fact that decision-makers can only consider material planning concerns (normally relating to land-use matters), if energy is not to be wasted on making futile representations. Given the limitations of the medium, and the complexity of the definition, this can probably be conveyed better at another stage, perhaps in a leaflet offered to people who consult the planning register.

Nevertheless, even without additional explanatory material, some public notices are distinctly more digestible than others. It is usually difficult for the eye to scan the notice and spot applications which relate to a particular area. Considerable thought should be given to improving the format of notices. Obviously the address of the site should be most prominent, rather than the application reference number as is too often the case. At the very least it should be clear why an application has warranted publicity. It is not sufficient to say that an application falls within article 8 of the GDPO 1995. The particular feature of the application which places it within article 8 should be stated. Likewise, the distinction between conservation area and listed building applications must be explicit. It should not be left exclusively to the newspaper advertising department

to design the notice as they will not know what priority should be give to different bits of information. The LPA should be careful to stipulate the size of advertisement required or the newspaper is likely to err on the large, costly side.

Calling for improvements to the format and content of public notices in newspapers may seem incompatible with a view that a cessation of their use is preferable. If the requirement to use newspaper advertisements is not removed from the statute book, an improvement within the current unsatisfactory parameters is desirable. Three such areas for refinement concern applications for outline planning permission, duplication of effort and time periods for response. Firstly, the lack of a requirement to publicise and consult on submission of reserved matters, details which are likely to be as important to neighbours of a proposed development as the original outline application, is illogical (HARRISON, 1994, 221-2). Secondly, the current prioritisation of conservation area and listed building applications for newspaper publicity is a duplication of effort because conservation interests tend to be statutory or informal consultees. Thirdly, all types of application requiring newspaper publicity appear together. This means that the 21 day response period for listed building and conservation area applications unavoidably tends to apply to other applications publicised in newspapers even though they officially require only 14 days. An unnecessary one week delay is introduced.

Resolving these problems and others is unlikely to overcome the limitations of press notices to the extent that they should be retained. It should be remembered that, "Coverage in the local press is normally a better way of getting publicity on planning matters than press notices, as coverage appears in the general news sections which are most likely to be read." (LONDON BOROUGH OF WANDSWORTH, 1995, 3). If the advertising procedures are made voluntary, then the expenditure formerly made on newspaper advertisements should be redistributed to improving other, more effective, publicity and consultation techniques.

Ombudsman Rulings

In the Local Government Ombudsman Annual Report for 1995/6, Mr.J.R.White writes,

In six cases I required councils to publish a statement in the local press explaining their reasons for non-compliance with the Ombudsman's recommendations. If the council persists in refusing to carry out the remedy, the complainant is left with an injustice which has not been remedied. I can only hope that the exposure to scrutiny by the press that such a statement brings will achieve

justice for the complainants (COMMISSION FOR LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN ENGLAND, 1996, 18).

Whether it ever does is unclear because no research has examined the persuasiveness of shaming through local newspapers. An ombudsman interviewed for this research suggested that the cost of paying for a large advertisement, which is likely to be more expensive than compensating the complainant, was probably more persuasive than the threat of negative publicity. The cost and therefore the deterrent value of this power would be enhanced by insisting that statements are highly detailed and attractively formatted. This sanction could be strengthened by the Ombudsman issuing an authoritative press release to local media outlets explaining the case and expressing their displeasure at the conduct of the LPA. The newsworthiness of the case would be heightened if the press release included a reproachful comment from the relevant government minister.

Statements of Consultation and Publicity for Development Plans

It is a statutory requirement for LPAs to produce these documents and place them on deposit with the development plan. They describe the publicity and consultation exercises conducted as part of the plan-making process. They offer the best insights into the role played by local newspapers in encouraging public awareness and involvement in plan-making.

All LPAs who adopted their local plans or UDPs in 1997 were asked to supply a copy of their Statement for this research. An assessment of their contents follows:

Of the forty-two English LPAs who adopted their local plan or UDP in 1997, twenty-two sent relevant details of their Statement of Consultation and Publicity. Any references to the use of local newspapers were noted. Four Statements did not mention any actions which went beyond the basic requirement to place public notices. The remaining eighteen did exceed the statutory requirement and their actions are summarised in table 2.

<i>Action</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>Press releases</i>	9
<i>Additional public notices</i>	4
<i>Press launch</i>	3
<i>Supplement / leaflet insert</i>	2
<i>Series of articles organised</i>	1
<i>Consultation paper & leaflet sent to press</i>	1
<i>Special centre page feature</i>	1
<i>'Poster' advertisement</i>	1

Table 2 - Newspaper Publicity Mentioned in Statements

It is not possible to prove which of these actions were effective in deepening public knowledge of the plan-making process and involvement in it because no monitoring was undertaken by the LPAs. For the sake of improving plan publicity, it would be useful to ask those making representations on a local plan where they learned about it. This is successfully undertaken in relation to recruitment advertising and should be extended to other LA functions which are publicised.

Although it is not possible to verify the effectiveness of particular approaches, intuition and anecdote suggest that the more proactive approaches to securing newspaper publicity are the most effective in raising awareness. Active LPAs and their methods are listed below.

- Bury Metropolitan Borough Council: i) several press releases sent; ii) press launch prior to eight week consultation period; iii) persuaded local newspaper to give extensive coverage to UDP, especially a specially prepared centre page feature explaining the purpose of and policies in the UDP. Details of how to comment were included.
- Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council: i) Press launch held to announce publication of the draft. Details of the contents and the consultation process were publicised; ii) Public notices in four newspapers in Urdu and English.
- Carlisle City Council: Copies of the consultation paper and leaflet were sent to a number of local newspapers resulting in articles.
- Crewe & Nantwich Borough Council: i) Supplement was bought in the main weekly newspaper; ii) Press releases at every stage yielded articles.
- Darlington Borough Council: i) Press launch held to which local newspapers, radio and television were invited; ii) Two further press releases followed the launch to update the press on the progress of the consultation exercise.
- Northampton Borough Council: Press launch followed by the mayor opening a series of exhibitions throughout the town.
- Oxford City Council: A series of 6 topic-based articles was organised with the Oxford Mail to appear during the 6 week consultation period. The topics were: the Green Belt & Environment, Transport, Housing, Employment, Tourism and Community Services & Shops.
- Shepway District Council: Explanatory leaflet was distributed with the local free newspaper to 35,000 households in the district inviting people to attend the exhibitions and register their views.

- Weymouth & Portland Borough Council: i) Two page supplement prepared by the Council and inserted in the Dorset Evening Echo; further copies of which were provided for distribution from other outlets; ii) press releases issued during consultation and preparation of plan were the subject of several news articles and editorials which have highlighted the opportunity and importance of responding to consultation documents.

Bury and Oxford demonstrated that some newspaper editors *will* respond to a suggestion that the development plan is of sufficient importance and interest to warrant extensive publicity. Planning officers will have to devote some time to thoroughly explain the function of the development plan, the competing interests which it seeks to satisfy and the salient policies it contains. At every stage it must be emphasised that the LPA wants the public to comment.

The law of diminishing returns suggests that there is a point at which extra effort is unprofitable. If a newspaper has made it clear that it believes its readers would not be interested in an in-depth feature article on the local plan or regular updates on its progress, then the LPA should admit defeat. Press launches, used by three of the respondent LPAs to launch their draft plans in a blaze of publicity, are risky. If there are few media outlets in the area or if nothing novel or exciting is proposed in the plan then a press launch will be anti-climactic. This will induce media scepticism about council publicity methods and they are less likely to attend a subsequent, and perhaps more important, event.

The status of these statements is low. PPG12 expresses the sentiment that, "The Secretary of State hopes that this procedure will assist authorities in considering carefully those whom they consult at the pre-deposit stage." (para. 4.9.). It is clear that production of the Statement is supposed to act as an incentive to consult, and as consultation relies on publicity to generate its participants, also to publicise. Statutory requirements can become a hollow ritual (as the discussion on public notices above demonstrates). To be meaningful the incentive depends upon the knowledge that the Statements will be scrutinised. It is widely known that this does not happen. Contact with the Planning Inspectorate and Government Offices for the Regions for this research has confirmed what LPAs suspect - that Statements are not read, but merely acknowledged. My request for Statements even alerted one LPA to the fact that they had failed to produce one, which they now intend to rectify with urgency. Had an aggrieved objector known about this procedural omission, they could have applied to the High Court for judicial review. They would only have had a

realistic chance of success if the absence of a Statement reflected an inadequate consultation exercise, resulting in peoples' interests being substantially prejudiced.

It is evident from the laxity of current practice that the pledge in para. 4.10 of PPG12 to keep the operation of the pre-deposit publicity and consultation requirements under review has not been honoured. It is difficult to envisage circumstances in which the Secretary of State's reserve powers to direct an LPA to carry out further public participation would be exercised, given that his representatives do not look at Statements of Consultation and Publicity.

The value of public involvement in the production of planning strategies is recognised in the case of supplementary planning guidance (SPG). The weight attached to SPG is greater if it has been subjected to public consultation. Oddly, this same principle is not applied to statutory development plans, the rules for which only require consultation to exceed a minimum threshold and any efforts beyond that are not rewarded by enhancing the status of the document. If the potency of the policies was commensurate with the extent to which they have received public approbation, then the emphasis on public involvement in plan-making would be bolstered.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has proven that elements of the law on publicity for planning applications and development plans fail to ensure that members of the public are adequately informed. The cost of generating this ineffectual publicity does not represent value for money. This chapter has hinted at some of the lines of inquiry which should be urgently pursued by government-sponsored research. On the basis of the material presented above, such research is likely to recommend at least revision of guidance documents and possibly even statutory reform.

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CHAPTER 5

SURVEY OF LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITIES

Introduction

In order to shift the focus of this research beyond the fulfilment of statutory requirements, a survey was designed to provide information about discretionary practices (see appendix 1). The survey provides detailed insights into current LPA approaches to dealing with local newspapers, showing who is given the responsibility for communicating with the press and how they go about it. It offers a commentary on the quality of planning coverage from the perspective of planning officers. The questions required respondents to consider what coverage about planning issues in their area would best inform people, thereby empowering them to become involved. The degree of enthusiasm for embracing the local press as an agent of publicity can be gauged from the responses. The disposition of journalists towards planning and their understanding of the planning system is discussed. Perhaps most usefully, through the survey planners offer their thoughts on what LPAs can do to improve coverage in the interests of educating their readers about planning and equipping them to make a serious, constructive contribution to the process of reaching good planning decisions.

The survey mixes qualitative and quantitative questions. Answers to quantitative questions, while expressed numerically, may only use numbers to express and simplify more impressionistic states. Equally, the answers to qualitative questions usually fall into patterns which can be captured in numerical form to show the frequency or popularity of a particular practice or mentality. The significance of responses to both types of question are only made meaningful when framed by a discussion of the phenomenon to which they relate. It is to illuminate both the survey results and the wider debate that I have chosen to integrate them in a long chapter.

The answers to each question are presented sequentially. A commentary on the subject area investigated by the question, which is informed by the survey results, is accompanied by comments on method where necessary. The commentary does not present advice about the minutiae of press relations practice, but rather talks about general approaches and techniques. There are many manuals and guidance pamphlets which describe how to write successful press releases or organise a press conference. Any practical advice of this nature

which is included will be specific to planning and overlooked by mainstream publications.

Survey Methodology

Sampling (see appendix 4 for a list of LPAs surveyed).

Sampling was necessary, as a survey of every LPA in England was beyond my resources. The intention was to produce a national overview of LPA press relations, yet also to show where practices and achievements differed between types of authority. It was conceivable that certain types of authority were more progressive than others, and the sample needed to permit identification of any variations, while also allowing a composite picture to be formed should such distinctions be absent.

The main requirements for the sample were that the categories be large enough to produce valid results and that the main relevant characteristics which differentiated the authorities were present in the same proportions in the sample populations as in the total population. From preliminary reading and discussions it seemed that political distinctions had little effect because each of the main political parties are conscious of the need for communicating with the public. Whether a council is dominated by a single party or hung may affect the status of the PR department and the publicity rules it promulgates. This is discussed on pp.69-72. The population density of the authority seemed to be a decisive factor in determining the sophistication of media liaison. Urban authorities on the whole are bigger, with the functions of a unitary authority; have better resourced newspapers, located close to the seat of local government; possess larger communications departments and planning departments which deal with larger and more controversial development proposals. Rural authorities tend to have less formal arrangements for press liaison as a result of being smaller, with more infrequently published newspapers and more rarely subject to fierce criticism from the media. A key feature of recent local government change has been the employment of staff dedicated to improving communications both within and outside local authorities. It seemed probable that Unitary Authorities (UAs), with the same range of functions though less urban than Metropolitan Authorities (MAs) and London Borough Councils (LBCs), would have seized the opportunity presented by reorganisation to modernise their methods of working, including the establishment of public relations departments.

The sample was stratified according to authority type. All 36 MAs, 33 LBCs (including the Corporation of London) and 28 UAs (pre-April 1998) were sent questionnaires. Their small numbers necessitated universal coverage to obtain a valid result. If a sample of each type had been taken any biases would have been amplified when the results were multiplied to produce a composite picture. A sample of district councils (DCs) was necessary. To obtain a full spectrum of DCs from urban to rural, they were arranged in descending order of population density and every fifth one was chosen. When calculating the national result for the questions the figures for DCs were multiplied by five to give a correct weighting. A by-product of this sampling approach was that a political and geographical spread was achieved.

Response Rate

A low response rate would have jeopardised the validity of the results, especially for MAs, LBCs and UAs. To maximise the response all those LPAs who had failed to return the questionnaire after fifty days were telephoned. Those who elected to answer were sent another copy. The strikingly high response rate (Table 3) means that the credibility of the results is unlikely to be undermined by any aberrant characteristics of non-respondents.

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>No. Sent</i>	<i>No. Returned</i>	<i>Response Rate (%)</i>
<i>MA</i>	36	23	63.8
<i>LBC</i>	33	23	69.7
<i>UA</i>	28	21	75
<i>DC</i>	52	42	80.8
<i>Total</i>	149	109	73.2

Table 3 - Response Rate

Notes on the Presentation of Results

The total number of authorities, both within categories and overall, fluctuates between questions because they may not be applicable to certain LPAs in light of their responses to earlier questions. Occasionally, respondents answered 'don't know' or left the space blank. These non-committal answers were removed from the calculation.

Percentages are rounded up to whole numbers. To take the figures to one or two decimal places would have been misleadingly precise. The relatively small survey population added to the vagaries of survey responses offered by a single

individual on behalf of an organisation. The unavoidable imprecision of many of the impressionistic questions means that many of the results are fuzzy glimpses of the actual situation. Conclusions therefore must be tentative.

The categories DC1 and DC5 in the tables relate to the figures before and after multiplication by five. As explained above, this is required to correct the distortion caused by surveying one in five DCs and thereby to achieve the correct weighting for DCs when calculating overall results for English LPAs. No percentage figure is entered in the DC5 rows because it is identical to that for DC1.

Many of the questions (4a, 10ai, 10aii, 14, 17, 18A, 19, 25a & 25b) attribute numbers to particular qualities, on a scale of 1 to 5. For example, for question 4a, which gauges the autonomy of planning departments from the media / public relations unit when issuing publicity, 1 = 'planning department always acts independently', while 5 = 'never acts independently'. If a planning department *usually* undertakes publicity initiatives independently of the media / public relations unit, then a respondent will probably circle number 2. The numbers are then added together and the amount divided by the number of LPAs. This yields a Mean Response Value which, in this case, indicates the general level of autonomy experienced by LPAs when undertaking publicity initiatives. In case the Mean Response Value conceals an interesting distribution of results, the frequency for each number on the continuum is tabulated.

Several questions seek a supplementary comment in addition to the multiple choice question which precedes it. The question numbers for these are followed by the letter 'C'. For most of these questions, responses are counted to see how many people report the same attitude or practice. The column title 'frequency' refers to the number of times a particular feature is mentioned. More interesting responses are highlighted and discussed.

Question 3 asks for the name of the pre-eminent local newspaper in an area, which is defined as: normally a paid-for paper, sharing a similar circulation area to the local authority territory, and which tends to be that in which public notices are placed. This question was asked because several of the later questions (17-20 & 25a) require a single newspaper to base an answer on. Nevertheless, many LPAs mentioned more than one title, thus indicating that there is often a dilemma over which to use for legal notices in areas where newspapers compete, or where newspapers cover different parts of an authority (see pp.48-9). Competition between newspapers might mean that special strategies are required to manage relations with both. It also has consequences for the validity of responses to these later questions. Unless the distinction is made between

newspapers, the figures given must indicate a general assessment of the papers as an amalgamated entity.

Presentation of the Results

Section A - Role of Media / Public Relations

Over the last three decades local government has increasingly recognised the importance of reaching out to the public to enhance understanding and appreciation of its activities. Sometimes this has extended to seeking their input into the design and delivery of services. Public relations personnel have been recruited in ever greater numbers to manage this task. Answers to question 4 of the survey showed that 83% of local authorities in England had a unit which managed media / public relations. In the case of LBCs and MAs this was 100%, and for UAs 95% (Table 4). PR activity is less prevalent in the district authorities. The larger average size of PR units in more populous authorities makes the differential greater.

Question 4 - Does your authority have a separate unit which manages media / public relations?

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% With Unit</i>
<i>MA</i>	0	23	23	100
<i>LBC</i>	0	23	23	100
<i>UA</i>	1	20	21	95
<i>DC1</i>	9	33	42	79
<i>DC5</i>	45	99	210	
<i>Overall</i>	46	231	277	83

Table 4 - results of Q4

'Public relations', as defined by the Institute of Public Relations (see appendix 5), involves the establishment and maintenance of a good reputation, leading to goodwill between an organisation and its publics. Having PR personnel is not essential to fostering public involvement in the planning process. If the sole task is to burnish the image of the local authority then it may even be counter-productive. However, PR departments are increasingly embracing a broader communications agenda which recognises the importance of listening as well as speaking. This is reflected in the diversification of names attached to

these departments. (Although to avoid confusion, this thesis uses the acronym PR to encompass all these titles and activities). Walker observes that, "... the very diversity of the function - it goes under an array of different titles and comes in many shapes and sizes - indicates how little agreement or even understanding there is about purposes let alone methods." (WALKER, 1997, 95). A PR department with a brief to work with a planning department to improve the quality of information the public receives about planning and to facilitate the feedback of information can be an effective combination. The PR department will bring to the task important specialist skills and resources which will amplify the message and the response.

Managing relations with the press has always been a core function of PR departments. Indeed, many PR people are former local journalists; often from the newspapers they now deal with (WALKER, 1997, 100). As the discussion in earlier chapters has shown, positive and informative newspaper coverage of planning is important in order to improve public awareness and involvement in planning. The new agenda, sketched by this research, requires more than this. The *raison d'être* for planning publicity as promoted by LPAs in combination with PR units must be to empower members of the public to express their views constructively.

The greater accountability of local government now compared with three decades ago is a central reason why PR activity in local government has burgeoned. Another reason which specifically pertains to press relations is the system of 'information subsidies' which has become established (GANDY, 1982). The contraction of local newspaper staffs due to cost-cutting and new technology has meant that the remaining staff are more pressurised, with less time to cultivate contacts, investigate stories or develop areas of expertise. Journalists have become reliant on information sent to them by outside individuals and organisations. Without these 'information subsidies' they could not fill their pages. Franklin & Murphy explain the term:

The press releases [from LA PR departments] are perhaps best characterised as 'information subsidies', since the staffing and monetary costs associated with gathering and distributing the information are borne by the organisation issuing the press release and not by the newspaper. This constitutes an in-built subsidy from the public purse for the local press. (FRANKLIN & MURPHY, 1991, 100)

The suppliers of information are not disinterested and select information which will reflect well on them. In this way they are able to manipulate the news agenda.

Another reason why PR units are increasingly regarded as a necessary organ of local government is that a corporate voice is now considered important. This can be as mundane as insisting that all press releases are sent on paper with the council logo or as sophisticated as identifying publicity possibilities which straddle departments and ensuring that publicity reflects the 'mission statement' of the council. PR people will endeavour to maintain an intelligence network throughout the council which enables them to be forewarned about brewing crises and prepare a response (WALKER, 1997, 45-6), spot newsworthy stories and be a single point of contact who will guide journalists through the labyrinthine complexity of the council (POLICY STUDIES INSTITUTE, 1995, 50). The need for this type of glue is more important since services have been contracted out and departments have been made separate 'cost-centres'. One reason why district councils have less need for PR is that they have fewer functions than other types of local authority, which can be co-ordinated more easily.

Both parts of question 4 examine the independence of planning departments from corporate PR. It is not possible to tell from the survey whether the autonomy granted to LPAs is increasing as it offers a static picture of departmental interdependence. An Audit Commission report in 1995 found that, "Increasingly, in larger councils, the PRO role is being split, with a small team at the centre giving advice to the chief executive and council corporately, while departments manage their own routine press enquiries and publicity." (AUDIT COMMISSION, 1995, 42). The results for question 4a confirm that for those LAs with a PR unit, there is considerable PR involvement in planning. The mean response value of 3.4 indicates that LPAs tend not to undertake publicity initiatives independently of the PR unit (table 5). Table 6 shows that 44% of local authority PR units have managed public consultation and education exercises on planning matters at some time. It appears the LBC PR units are more active in this sphere than those in other authority types, as they register 61% on this table. There is, however, an apparent contradiction between this result and the finding in table 5 that LBC LPAs are the most independent.

Question 4a - Does the planning department undertake publicity initiatives independently of the media / public relations unit?

Always = 1
Never = 5

Response	Council Type					Overall	% per response
	MA	LBC	UA	DC1	DC5		
Always = 1	2	4	0	2	10	16	7
2	2	3	1	5	25	31	13
3	10	5	8	11	55	78	34
4	7	6	8	7	35	56	24
Never = 5	2	4	3	8	40	49	21
Overall						230	99
Mean response value	3.2	3.2	3.6	3.4		3.4	

Table 5 - results of Q4a

Question 4b - Does the media / public relations unit ever manage public consultation and education on planning matters?

Council Type	No	Yes	Total	% Yes
MA	14	9	23	39
LBC	9	14	23	61
UA	12	8	20	40
DC1	19	14	33	42
DC5	95	70	165	
Overall	130	101	231	44

Table 6 - results of Q4b

None of the nine respondents whose council lacked a PR unit believed that they were disadvantaged by not having one (table 7), thus rendering question 5C superfluous.

Question 5 - Does the lack of a media / public relations unit disadvantage you?

Council Type	Yes	No
MA	N/A	N/A
LBC	N/A	N/A
UA	0	1
DC	0	8

Table 7 - results of Q5

Question 5C - If the lack of a media / public relations department disadvantages you, in what ways is the planning publicity effort disadvantaged?

Section B - Officers' and Councillors' Interaction with the Media

It is important that planning officers should be equipped to react quickly and effectively to enquiries from journalists. There should be a agreed policy on who is authorised to speak to the media which is cleared with councillors, who may resent officers stealing their limelight (DAVIES, 1997). The designated officers should not be chosen on the basis of seniority alone. It is imperative that they should be in possession of the relevant facts and be skilled in media liaison techniques. While these skills can be taught, some people have a natural aptitude for communication which should be exploited.

The majority of LPAs have recognised the need to introduce such a policy stating which planning officers are authorised to speak to the media (table 8). Overall 62% have such a policy. This figure disguises the fact that district councils are much less likely to have formulated a policy. Use of the term 'policy', which may imply a written document, could underplay the true number of LPAs with some shared understanding about who deals with the media. As PR units are often the driving force behind the establishment of protocol in this field, and fewer DCs have them, this offers some explanation for the differential.

Question 6 - Is there a policy stating which planning officers are authorised to speak to the media?

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% With Policy</i>
<i>MA</i>	19	4	23	83
<i>LBC</i>	16	4	20	80
<i>UA</i>	16	4	20	80
<i>DC1</i>	23	18	41	56
<i>DC5</i>	115	90	205	
<i>Overall</i>	166	102	268	62

Table 8 - results of Q6

The most common criterion for electing a spokesperson is seniority (table 9). In some cases this choice is a matter of crude hierarchy. More commonly, seniority is prized because it entails an ability to speak authoritatively, accountably and tactfully from a strategic vantage point (table 10). More junior officers are often allowed to transmit factual information, but rarely to offer comment or opinion. There is no apparent difference between authority types.

Question 6aC - If you have a policy, which officers in the planning authority are authorised to talk to the media?

<i>Person</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>Senior Officers</i>	38
<i>Senior Officers for comment, case officers for facts</i>	8
<i>Persons authorised by PR unit</i>	7
<i>Chief Planning Officer only</i>	6
<i>Persons authorised by CPO</i>	5
<i>Persons authorised by Senior Officer</i>	3
<i>Director & Assistant Director</i>	2
<i>None - PR only</i>	2

Table 9 - results of Q6aC

Categories of people who received one mention:

"All but most junior"; "all who are capable"; "assistant director only"; "all give facts, members give opinions".

Question 6bC - If you have a policy, what considerations inform this decision?

<i>Consideration / Attribute</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>High level of political awareness</i>	9
<i>Knowledge of matter</i>	9
<i>Seniority / authority</i>	7
<i>Awareness of corporate issues / strategy</i>	6
<i>Consistency of approach</i>	4
<i>Tact and discretion</i>	3
<i>Overview</i>	3
<i>Able to avoid being misquoted / manipulated</i>	3
<i>Experience with media relations</i>	2
<i>Trained to handle media</i>	2
<i>Ensuring management control</i>	2
<i>Accountability of senior officers</i>	2
<i>Dictate of Chief Executive</i>	2
<i>Interaction with members</i>	2
<i>Ability / authority to marshal info from diverse sources</i>	2

Table 10 - results of Q6bC

Considerations which received one mention:

"Experience of major issues"; "common sense"; "comfort with media exposure"; "heed advice from PR unit on a case-by-case basis"; "complexity"; "protection of junior officers"; "media ability"; "junior officers insufficiently competent or cautious"; "PR can infuse with corporate 'spin'"; "availability for a speedy response"; "avoiding giving conflicting professional views".

An ideal policy would be one which permits anyone with knowledge of the matter being enquired about to comment, providing they are sufficiently tactful, articulate, confident and accurate to deal with the particular situation. Tact is especially important given the quasi-judicial nature of development control work. Officers should be trained in media relations so that they can discern when a more senior or knowledgeable person should answer. Permitting all officers to deal with the media when appropriate is risky. Mistakes and indiscretions will be perpetrated from time to time. However, the benefit of providing a swift and open response to journalists is likely to outweigh any harm. As officers grow accustomed to fielding media enquiries their ability to offer a succinct, accurate and informative explanation will improve. Being alert to media probing requires a better awareness of the whole departmental agenda - an important aspiration in itself.

One of the most liberal policies on media liaison is that operated by Cherwell District Council, where there is no restriction on who can speak to the press. The relevant case officer will deal with the enquiry. All officers receive media training which ensures that mistakes are only occasionally made. They also have a performance related pay scheme which rewards those who best promote the image of the authority in the press (HANDLEY, 1997). The element of compulsion in the pay scheme is questionable and it would be a hard achievement to measure, but it does illustrate their commitment to building a productive relationship with the local press.

The value of media training for local government personnel has been extolled by both the Audit Commission and the Lees Report (AUDIT COMMISSION, 1995, 52; LEES, 1993). This message has been heeded because a considerable amount of training is provided. It enables departments to increase their capacity to work at arms length from the PR unit, with the latter becoming involved only when specialist skills are required. Overall, 64% of councils offer some officers training, with the figure for councillors at 50% (table 11). It is unsurprising that LAs offer less training to councillors than officers, because councillors frequently equate media training with a constraint on their ability to speak their mind. There is considerable variation in the amount of training local authorities offer. Whereas LBCs offer much less media training than other authorities, UAs are particularly active in this sphere. It is not clear why this is the case. Table 10 does not show who participates in training sessions. Although the response to question 7C was poor, table 13 shows that it is almost exclusively senior councillors and officers who receive training. Future training initiatives

should involve more junior officers, enabling them to play a greater role in media liaison.

Question 7 - Do either officers or councillors receive any training in how to deal with the news media?

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>Officers</i>				<i>Councillors</i>			
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Yes</i>
<i>MA</i>	13	10	23	57	9	9	18	50
<i>LBC</i>	6	16	22	27	6	14	20	30
<i>UA</i>	14	6	20	70	10	5	15	67
<i>DC1</i>	28	13	41	68	18	18	36	50
<i>DC2</i>	140	65	205		90	90	180	
<i>Overall</i>	173	97	270	64	115	118	232	50

Table 11 - results of Q7

There are many skills and techniques to learn (and it is beyond the scope of this research to itemise them all). Only 14 people actually described the training in answer to question 7C, so the results featured in table 12 are of little value. It does, however, imply that training programmes are narrow and unmemorable.

Question 7C - If training is offered, describe the training, who receives it and who provides it?

<i>Description of Training</i>	<i>Frequency of Mentions</i>
<i>TV / radio interview technique</i>	7
<i>Preparing press releases</i>	3
<i>Guidance notes circulated</i>	3
<i>Presentation skills</i>	1

Table 12 - results of Q7C

<i>Persons Receiving Training</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>Senior Officers & Councillors</i>	8
<i>Committee Chairpeople</i>	3
<i>Committee Chairs & Vice-Chairs</i>	2
<i>Chief officers</i>	2

Table 13 - results of Q7C

People who received one mention:

"Councillors on request"; "some councillors"; "one officer so far"; "all who might encounter media"; "all officers & councillors"; "all planning officers".

Three key competencies which officers must master are offered by Walker:

... to detect and make allowance for any pre-existing media agenda; inquire about or intuit the gist of the 'story' as conceived by the journalist; and present the local authority's case clearly and cogently without crossing the bounds of professional neutrality on political issues. (WALKER, 1997, 45)

Councillors are at liberty to venture into political territory. However, they still must exercise restraint if they are not to bring discredit to the council (see question 8). Learning these things requires an ability to empathise with the journalists' aims and methods. Journalists themselves are best able to explain these matters which is why they often take on consultancy work in media training after retiring from journalism. While there is commonality between all local newspapers, individual newspapers will have their own publication schedules and news-gathering routines which it is useful for planning officers to be aware of. Consequently, it is worth LPAs exploring the possibility of getting reporters and editors from their local newspapers to give training, as four of the survey respondents had (table 14). This has the added advantage of building familiarity between planners and journalists in an area.

<i>Training Provider</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>Counsultancy</i>	27
<i>In-house: PR unit</i>	20
<i>Local newspaper & radio staff</i>	4
<i>In-house: Personnel department</i>	3
<i>In-house: Line managers</i>	1

Table 14 - results of Q7C

Elected members are important intermediaries between the council and the public. Public perceptions of them as individuals and as members of a political party determines the length of their tenure in office. The UK has only one councillor per 2600 head of population, which means that the electorate rarely knows their local representatives personally. In the absence of other means of

verification, the local media is therefore a particularly potent force in affecting reputations. Hence, most councillors are concerned about their media image and assiduous in monitoring the local media; particularly the press.

Councillors who are keen to voice their opinions and advertise their achievements in the press must be careful not to inadvertently damage the interests of the council in the process. Journalists recognise the eagerness of councillors to appear conscientious and will encourage them to comment on stories. Councillors should not be lured into commenting on remarks that other members or officers are alleged to have said without obtaining independent confirmation that the journalist's information is accurate. Councillors should be wary about journalists attempting to circumvent the embargo placed on other peoples' 'off-the-record' remarks by extracting the information from them instead. Confidential (and usually newsworthy) items of council business, such as legal advice over enforcement action, for which the press and public are excluded from committee meetings under part 2 of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, must not be informally disclosed to journalists. It is also prudent not to offer detailed or feisty comment about a planning application before it has been decided, unless it is necessary to correct misinformation.

Party politics intrudes less into planning than many other local government functions. Nevertheless, the distinction between corporate policy, party policy and the thinking of an individual member must be vigilantly upheld, even where a single party dominates the council and dictates policy. Senior councillors are in a particularly awkward predicament in this respect.

... [T]he member position on public relations is complex. Leading members voice its corporate policies; but they are also politicians and bring the texture of political debate into their public statements. (AUDIT COMMISSION, 1995, 8)

The passage into law of the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988, which prohibit councils from issuing party political publicity, made maintenance of this distinction even more important. In councils where a majority party is the author of most policies, there is a risk of its policies becoming synonymous with those of the council. If this leads to council activities and initiatives being promoted in the media before they have been adopted as official council policy, then it risks a contravention of the law. The constitutional process must be complete before policy identified with a single party is publicised (SCHOFIELD, 1992, 7). The requirement to wait before issuing publicity or commenting to the press until decisions have been formally taken does not undermine the ability of LPAs to secure early involvement in planning decisions through newspaper publicity. It

simply means that a committee decision to consult the public or to encourage contributions must be taken which authorises councillors to be more vocal.

Some local authorities have introduced codes of conduct for councillors which govern their dealings with the media. Question 8 reveals that 15% of English LAs have such a code (table 15). LBCs seem to give more priority to this with eight out of the twelve respondents answering in the affirmative. The results in table 15 should be treated with even more caution than the low response demands, because subsequent requests for copies of these codes of conduct proved that some were either copies of national guidance on the 1986 and 1988 Acts or not specific to publicity. This can be balanced against those answering 'no' because the policy on conduct they operate is based on convention rather than a formal code.

Question 8 - Is there a code of conduct governing councillors' interaction with the media?

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% With Code</i>
<i>MA</i>	11	3	14	21
<i>LBC</i>	4	8	12	67
<i>UA</i>	7	3	10	30
<i>DC1</i>	28	3	31	10
<i>DC2</i>	140	15	155	
<i>Overall</i>	162	29	191	15

Table 15 - results of Q8

Seven of the LAs which reported having a code supplied me with details. The codes of conduct attempt to avoid the pitfalls discussed above. They are useful documents which help to maintain good relations between political parties and with officers. The overriding concerns are that LA publicity resources are not used to promote factional interests and that councillors do not comment hastily without checking the facts and making those affected aware of their remarks. The salient points are summarised below.

Question 8C - If you have a code of conduct, what are the main elements of it?

- London Borough of Hackney: Councillors must consult with the press office before issuing statements.

- London Borough of Redbridge: An elaborate code designed to be even-handed between political parties in a hung council. It is also clear that politically contentious terrain will be avoided by the PR unit which can only put resources into publicising decisions of the council. The PR unit applies the principles to individual cases and adjudicates in cases of dispute.
- London Borough of Sutton: Three principles for issuing press releases -
 - i) That, where necessary to publicise the views or activities of council members who are representing the council as a whole, council press releases will normally feature the Leader, Deputy Leader, or Committee Chair. In the absence of the Leader, Deputy Leader or Committee Chair, the release will feature the nominee of the Leader or Committee Chair.
 - ii) Participation by Councillors in charitable events will only be published in a council press release under special circumstances, for instance where there is a substantial council aspect to the story.
 - iii) Visits to establishments such as residential care homes would not normally be the subject of a council press release. Where the Councillor concerned was visiting as a representative of the Council (as Leader, Deputy Leader, Committee Chair or their nominee), exception might be made.
- Middlesborough Borough Council: On matters relating to council policies, statements must be checked with the Leader or the Deputy Leader of the council.
- North Norfolk District Council: An elaborate code which advises that:
 - i) Requests for a political interpretation should be passed from Senior Officers to Committee Chairmen, who might then divert the enquiry to Group Leaders or their spokespeople;
 - ii) Councillors should not comment immediately, but consider their response and / or consult with the relevant Chief Officer or the Media and Communications Manager;
 - iii) All parties should be kept informed about the detail of any media contact;
 - iv) Councillors should only respond to letters in the press in exceptional circumstances.
- Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council: The Council Leader, Deputy Leader and Committee Chairs are authorised to request that press releases are sent regarding council decisions, including an attributed quote with one from an appropriate senior officer, subject to the Local Government Act regulations over party political content.
- York City Council: Councillors deal with the political aspects of issues. They also get first refusal of TV and radio pieces.

In the case of a hung council (see Redbridge above), councillors are especially concerned that no party is obtaining favourable coverage as a result of assistance from the PR unit. In this situation extra influence is often given to PR officials who are charged with the task of ensuring fair play. The London Borough of Sutton's code makes it clear that attendance at events by councillors will only be promoted to the media through press releases if they are senior members, attending as official representatives of the council. This is consistent with section 39 of the government's Code of Practice on local government publicity issued under section 4(4) of the Local Government Act 1986, which states that, "The functions of a local authority are discharged by the council corporately. It is therefore inappropriate for public resources to be used to publicise individual councillors." It is preferable for councillors themselves or their party publicity machines to promote any activities not conducted in an official capacity. The codes should more clearly delineate the respective publicity roles of officers and councillors (AUDIT COMMISSION, 1995, 21). It would be preferable if more LAs produced a code of conduct which set agreed procedures to govern these matters.

Section C - Planning Publicity Strategy

The statutory requirements for publicity are dealt with in chapter 4 and appendix 3. The survey is an attempt to go beyond a basic adherence to the law and discover what techniques LPAs have devised which, in their estimation and to my mind, appear particularly successful in improving newspaper coverage of planning. Question 9 asks whether LPAs are exceeding the statutory requirements for planning. It appears that the vast majority do, with little variation between authority types (table 16). The high figure does not mean that most authorities are dynamic and innovatory in this field, as sending a trickle of press releases qualifies as exceeding the statutory requirements. Answering 'no' to question 9 indicates the absence of a publicity strategy. These LPAs are exempt from answering questions 10-13, which explore the methods and motivations behind an LPA's publicity strategy. (N.B. An answer 'no' to question 9 is considered an automatic 'yes' to question 11 - an LPA which limits itself to the statutory minimum publicity cannot therefore undertake newspaper-based publicity other than placing formal public notices.)

Question 9 - Does the local planning authority undertake publicity measures which go beyond the statutory minimum? *(If no, please proceed to question 13.)*

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Yes</i>
<i>MA</i>	1	22	23	96
<i>LBC</i>	1	22	23	96
<i>UA</i>	1	20	21	95
<i>DC1</i>	3	38	41	93
<i>DC5</i>	15	190	205	
<i>Overall</i>	18	254	272	93

Table 16 - results of Q9

Many publicity media are available to an LPA which wants to communicate with the public. The particular mix of methods which is deemed suitable to reach the target audience will vary according to the circumstances.

It may be that in certain authorities the structure of the local press and the authority's own sense of its publics combine to relegate media relations to a secondary position in its communications strategy. The authority may put more weight in speaking straight to the public. (WALKER, 1997, 79)

An important decision to be made is whether to rely on direct publicity, where the content is determined exclusively by the LPA but the audience may be small, and indirect (or mediated) techniques, which use the news media to amplify the message, but at the expense of relinquishing control of the content.

Question 10 seeks to gain an impression of which type of publicity LPAs favour and whether indirect or direct approaches are considered more appropriate for development plans than planning applications and vice versa. There are two dubious features of question 10 that the pilot survey did not highlight and which with hindsight ought to have been changed. They relate to the instruction to, "Consider public notices placed in a newspaper to be a form of indirect communication". Firstly, as a statutory requirement public notices should not be within the remit of the question and secondly, as bought advertising with a prescribed message, public notices should have been classified as a *direct* form of communication. The confusion introduced by this flawed methodology renders the answers of doubtful validity. With this in mind, the results in tables 17 and 18 shakily suggest that development plans are more likely than planning applications to be publicised through attempts to stimulate coverage in the news media. UAs seem to favour indirect methods more than LBCs do; especially for planning applications. Overall, direct methods are preferred to indirect methods, perhaps because courting the media is risky and potentially frustrating.

Question 10 - Is your publicity strategy for planning weighted towards direct communication with members of the public or indirect communication with them via the media? (N.B. Consider public notices placed in a newspaper to be a form of indirect communication)

Direct = 1
Indirect = 5

a) For planning applications:

Response	Council Type					Overall	% per response
	MA	LBC	UA	DC1	DC5		
Direct = 1	9	8	4	14	70	91	36
2	7	9	4	14	70	90	36
3	4	2	7	7	35	48	19
4	1	0	4	1	5	10	4
Indirect = 5	1	0	1	2	10	12	5
Overall						251	100
Mean Response Value	2	1.7	2.7	2		2	

Table 17 - results of Q10a

b) For development plans:

Response	Council Type					Overall	% per response
	MA	LBC	UA	DC1	DC2		
Direct = 1	2	4	2	6	30	38	15
2	5	6	4	8	40	55	22
3	7	6	8	13	65	86	35
4	6	0	4	7	35	45	18
Indirect = 5	2	1	2	4	20	25	10
Overall						249	100
Mean Response Value	3.1	2.3	3	2.9		2.9	

Table 18 - results of Q10b

LPAs who exceed the statutory requirements for planning publicity choose a variety of methods to communicate with their citizens. Table 19 makes it clear that newspapers are a popular vehicle for planning publicity. 66% of LPAs do more than just publish public notices. UAs are especially energetic in harnessing the power of newspapers to disseminate information on planning, with only 14% content merely to fulfil the requirements of the law.

Question 11 - Do you confine your *newspaper-based* planning publicity effort to placing formal public notices?

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Yes</i>
<i>MA</i>	17	6	23	26
<i>LBC</i>	17	6	23	26
<i>UA</i>	18	3	21	14
<i>DC1</i>	26	16	42	38
<i>DC2</i>	130	80	210	
<i>Overall</i>	182	95	277	34

Table 19 - results of Q11

In these 66% of LPAs who are pursuing active publicity strategies involving newspapers, a range of techniques are employed to improve planning coverage. Table 20 displays some of them. Figures in bold comprise a general category. Some of these include more specific comments with separate, non-bold numbers below. They are not designed specifically to foster public involvement in the planning process, as are the methods mentioned in response to question 23. However, improving the quality of news coverage is valuable as it results in a better informed readership. Logic dictates that some of these people will involve themselves in the planning process, and will be more cogent and persuasive as a result of reading their newspaper. Frequent mentions indicate a popular and proven method. Methods mentioned once may also be worth noting as novel and innovative.

Question 11C - If you do not confine your *newspaper-based* planning publicity effort to placing formal public notices, what additional efforts do you make to improve the coverage of planning in local newspapers? *(Please distinguish between coverage of planning applications and development plans, if appropriate)*

<i>Action</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>Press releases</i>	48
<i>for development plans</i>	15
<i>for major planning applications</i>	6
<i>for major initiatives</i>	2
<i>for performance returns</i>	1
<i>Liaise with local reporters</i>	9
<i>Weekly list of applications sent to newspaper</i>	8
<i>Press briefings</i>	6
<i>monthly before each DC committee</i>	1
<i>for development plans</i>	1
<i>Large advertisements</i>	5
<i>for development plans</i>	2
<i>for major developments</i>	1
<i>Press invitations</i>	4
<i>to key events</i>	2
<i>to committee meetings</i>	1
<i>to site visits</i>	1
<i>Offer interviews on development plans</i>	2
<i>Supply photographs & photo-opportunities</i>	2
<i>Responding on letters page to articles & other letters</i>	2

Table 20 - results of Q11C

Other actions mentioned once:

"Arranging full-page planning feature every week"; "incorporation of planning issues on 'council page'"; "promoting design awards"; "plugging positive stories"; "publicising prosecutions"; "newspaper inserts"; "holding press conferences on high profile applications"; "supplying material for features articles".

Press releases are the most popular form of contact with newspapers. They can be very effective for generating coverage, as answers to question 25 prove. Most advisory manuals recommend an attempt to anticipate what will appeal to journalists. This filtration can lead to a trivialisation of the content of press releases. An avoidance, or at least an explanation of jargon in correspondence with journalists is a useful discipline for planners and does not constitute trivialisation. For instance, writing in a press release that a 'Grade II* Listed Building' should be preserved from ruination by an insensitive developer is insufficient. The qualities of the building that make it worth protecting should be made explicit (DULLER, 1997). Press releases can also be over-used. It is better to employ a portfolio of methods, tailored to the particular information an LPA wishes to impart.

To lay the foundations for a positive relationship between press and planners, personal contact should be made. Many LPAs seem reluctant to approach newspapers in this way. The prospect of eliminating wasted effort on poorly targeted PR activity and perhaps establishing a mutually-beneficial

working relationship should persuade the LPA to make an overture. The LPA should enquire which journalists are given planning assignments. Harrison Cowley, the RTPI's PR consultants have a list of media contacts which LPAs should use. Journalists could be invited to the town hall and introduced to the planning staff. It is helpful to ask them whether the LPA or PR unit provides useful information. An Audit Commission study found that only 10% of LA public relations offices have asked journalists what they think about the service they provide (AUDIT COMMISSION, 1995). Face-to-face contact can dispel mutual incomprehension and promote an understanding of each parties' working practices. To help journalists understand the planning system, the RTPI should produce a booklet which LPAs could supply to journalists. The National Council for the Training of Journalists should also be sent copies as teaching material on journalism courses.

Some LPAs use the letters page of the local newspaper to respond to letters and articles which are factually inaccurate or objectionable in some other way. This can be a useful corrective to misinformation. It is a measure to be sparingly used and the Chairperson of the planning committee is usually the best person to write. They have the authority and the purview to reflect the feelings of their colleagues on the committee. However, such rebuttals should be avoided if the correspondence might degenerate into a protracted debate which keeps a negative story in the public gaze for longer than it otherwise would be.

In crisis situations the potential for an authority's reputation to be damaged is enormous. A torrent of bad publicity, whether warranted or not, can stigmatise an LPA for a long time and affect the attitude of the public towards it. If the probity of members or officers has been impugned, then those who subsequently have dealings with the LPA are likely to be suspicious about whether their concerns are being dealt with fairly and competently. One elementary point must be made - openness is vital. A bunker mentality will give succour to critics who impute the worst of motives into an LPA's silence. Unless legal action is pending, it is best to confess, apologise, outline a plan of action to remedy any harm, and, in mitigation, explain the dilemmas involved in making decisions (BOYLE, 1997).

Planning as an activity and as a profession is generally held in low esteem. It is difficult to break the association of planners with insensitive large-scale urban renewal projects and bureaucratic time-wasting. The images of tower blocks and filling cabinets full of jobs are too vivid. It is hard to convey the creative aspects of a regulatory activity like Development Control. Reporting of it may convey an impression of petty mean-mindedness unless environmental assets of agreed value

are being protected. There *are* exciting and accessible activities that fall within the remit of planning or are allied to it which, if trumpeted, might begin to dispel these caricatures. Planning Achievement Awards and Town Centre Management are examples. Careers Supplements published by local newspapers offer a good way of building the profile of the profession and selling it to a wider public, as well as boosting recruitment. Planning Aid could raise its profile by publicising the service through RTPI branches. The RTPI, in association with Harrison Cowley, send a bi-monthly newsletter called 'Planning Issues' to journalists nation-wide. RTPI branches and individual LPAs should use them as ideas for features articles based on local examples. Press releases and background information could be timed to coincide with the publication of 'Planning Issues' (TAYLOR, 1997).

Publicising enforcement action can depict planners as environmental guardians, vigilantly protecting cherished environmental assets. However, this can backfire and planners might appear to be bureaucratic bullies. Enforcement successes selected for publicity should be chosen carefully so that coverage has the desired effect. Publicity for enforcement can also ensure that people appreciate the possible consequences of breaching planning controls. Publishing the names of those who have been successfully prosecuted might enhance the deterrence effect. A supplementary question to the survey, sent to thirty-nine authorities, sought to test the popularity of this proposition. It read, "Hypothetically speaking, would you support the publication of the names of people who have been successfully prosecuted under planning enforcement legislation? (in the same way that some authorities do this to recalcitrant tax payers on the principle of deterrence through public shaming.)". The sample was not representative of LPAs, as table 21 shows. However, the fact that 62% approved of the suggestion means it is worth pilot testing. One LPA is experimenting with enforcement publicity. An institution committed a clear breach of planning law. Instead of entering a lengthy and costly enforcement prosecution, the institution volunteered to remedy the offence and issue a press release to the local newspaper containing details of its deed and avowals of contrition. This offer is being seriously considered by the LPA which is attracted by the deterrent effect achieved through newspaper publicity.

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Yes</i>
<i>MBC</i>	2	0	2	4	
<i>LBC</i>	11	1	4	16	
<i>UA</i>	11	3	5	19	
<i>DC</i>	0	0	0	0	
<i>Overall</i>	24	4	11	39	62

Table 21 - Approval for publicising successful prosecutions

Most LPAs publicise planning matters with a vigour greater than that prescribed by law. Question 12 seeks to ascertain why these LPAs try to stimulate publicity. Their motives differ. The questionnaire presented three options: securing active public participation, boosting the profile of the council and obtaining public approval. Respondents could offer their own aims. The aims were then ranked in descending order of importance. Many aims volunteered by respondents illustrated the incoherence of the motivation to publicise. Examples of these are: "providing information"; "publicising matters of public interest"; "ensuring appropriate people are aware of the proposal"; "explaining the services of the council / planning". They beg the question, "why?". What use do they envisage the information will be put to? Admittedly the options in the question can also be interrogated, but they lie at a level closer to the presumptions and deep motives involved. The answers given do not allow us to reach a profound understanding of motivation.

Table 22 shows that overall, 71% of English LPAs gave "securing active public participation" as their primary motive for publicity. UAs, MAs and LBCs even more emphatically supported this option than the average. This implies an impressive commitment to accountability and democracy. However, the suggestibility of the research topic, the slightly unsavoury sound of "boosting the profile of the council" and the fact that most of the questionnaires were completed by planning officers rather than public relations personnel, may have created a bias in favour of this option.

Question 12 - Rank in order of importance the aims of your planning publicity effort.

Securing active public participation = S
 Boosting profile of the council = B
 Obtaining public approval = O

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>No. of times rated 1st</i>			<i>Total</i>	<i>% S</i>
	<i>S</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>O</i>		
<i>MA</i>	19	1	3	23	83
<i>LBC</i>	16	2	2	20	80
<i>UA</i>	18	2	2	22	82
<i>DC1</i>	28	5	8	41	68
<i>DC5</i>	140	25	40	205	
<i>Overall</i>	193	30	47	270	71

Table 22 - results of Q12

These results apparently contradict the findings of a study by the Policy Studies Institute into LA compliance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985. It found that,

... authorities' policies on information provision, and the reasons for their development, were almost exclusively concerned with information and publicity about services and activities of the authority, rather than about any of the concerns addressed by the Access to Information Act - access to policy and decision-making in the interests of accountability and democracy. (POLICY STUDIES INSTITUTE, 1995, 30)

The discrepancy between my conclusion and that of the Policy Studies Institute can be explained by reference to the methodological caveats mentioned above. Plus, the PSI conclusion relates to local government as a whole, with planners more favourably disposed than most local government personnel to public involvement in its deliberations.

Promoting a positive impression of planning and deflecting criticism is not an end in itself.

The model [for press office activity] was and often still is one of planting and placing stories in the papers, securing a maximum number of positive sounding reports in local newspapers and broadcasting outlets. (WALKER, 1997, 42)

A good image is desirable but it should derive from actual achievements and not just public relations gloss. The ultimate objective should be to build consent for policies and actions arrived at through an inclusive process of consensus-building, dialogue involving a variety of participants. A good image is useful in order to improve the disposition of people inside and outside this process to the LPA and thereby increasing the chances of reaching this goal. If a good image is cultivated by means of an artificial and crude public relations exercise, it will be at the

expense of empowering the citizenry. Deacon and Golding note that, "[i]nformation designed to persuade is never the same as information passively offered as a service ..." (DEACON & GOLDING, 1994, 2). The powerful tools of public relations must be harnessed to the cause of improving accountability and democracy through the formulation of a carefully articulated strategy for publicity. This cause is not served by public relations activity informed only by the vague aspiration that an LA's image should be improved.

Adopting a publicity strategy involves deciding what the purpose of publicity is and how it is to be secured. Having a coherent strategy which everyone in the LA subscribes to allows PR personnel and designated planning officers to be proactive in their dealings with the media. A distinction must be made between making information available and making it truly accessible.

... in order to make information accessible, an authority needs to have a proactive approach. This may involve redefining its perception of itself as an open organisation. Such a process would involve moving from a willingness to answer requests to actively volunteering information. It would entail using more active methods of dissemination, and less reliance on passive ones. (POLICY STUDIES INSTITUTE, 1995, 46)

An LA which is reactive allows others to dictate the news agenda and may be subjected to irksome and unnecessary scrutiny because of its reticence. A reactive LA will spend much time on the defensive, being wounded by ill-informed criticism. It will fail to tap the publicity resources of the newspaper.

Table 23 depicts the results of question 13. Overall, 9% of English LPAs regard themselves as being reactive, 42% proactive and 49% neutral. There is not a significant difference between types of authority. The desire to depict their authority in a good light means that the 'proactive' figure is probably an overestimate and the 'reactive' figure an underestimate.

Question 13 - Would you describe the planning authority's attitude towards local newspapers as reactive, proactive or neutral?

Reactive = R
Proactive = P
Neutral = N

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% R</i>	<i>% P</i>	<i>% N</i>
<i>MA</i>	3	12	8	23	13	52	35
<i>LBC</i>	1	9	13	23	4	39	57
<i>UA</i>	1	10	10	21	5	48	48
<i>DC1</i>	4	17	21	42	10	40	50
<i>DC5</i>	20	85	105	210			
<i>Overall</i>	24	116	136	277	9	42	49

Table 23 - results of Q13

Section D - Press Coverage

This section concentrates on how LA planners view press coverage of planning. It also considers the working practices of journalists and presents planners' thoughts about how they should alter their approach to the reporting of planning issues. Chapter 3 on the local newspaper industry forms the backdrop to the results in this section. As the context is provided elsewhere, this section contains less discussion than the earlier parts of the chapter. Methods of improving coverage along the lines indicated in this section are covered in the discussion of questions 11 and 23.

In spite of the numerous deficiencies in local newspaper reporting of planning (listed exhaustively in table 25), the respondents on the whole took a benign attitude towards press coverage (table 24). The Mean Response Value was 2.2, indicating that coverage was generally welcomed.

Question 14 - Do you generally welcome press coverage?

Always Welcome = 1

Always Resent = 5

<i>Response</i>	<i>Council Type</i>					<i>Overall</i>	<i>% per response</i>
	<i>MA</i>	<i>LBC</i>	<i>UA</i>	<i>DC1</i>	<i>DC5</i>		
<i>Always Welcome = 1</i>	6	3	3	8	35	47	17
2	9	10	7	22	110	136	50
3	7	10	10	10	50	77	28
4	1	0	1	2	10	12	4
<i>Always Resent = 5</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Overall</i>						272	99
<i>Mean Response Value</i>	2.1	2.3	2.4	2.1		2.2	

Table 24 - results of Q14

Question 15C - What types of press coverage do you resent? (*Give examples if you wish*)

<i>Type of Press Coverage</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<i>Misinformed / inaccurate</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Unbalanced</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Sensationalising</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Biased</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Where council's comment not used / sought</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Factually incorrect letters of complaint</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Where council portrayed as bad guy</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Misleading</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Poorly researched reports</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Misquoting</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Negative</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Maliciously inaccurate reports</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Facile / oversimplified</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Taking statements out of context</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Too much bad news / controversy</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Unfair</i>	<i>2</i>

Table 25 - results of Q15C

Other types of coverage mentioned once:

"Hijacked by single-issue pressure groups"; "extreme reports"; "untrue articles"; "not reporting full, balanced facts"; "one-sided headlines based around 'objections' while ignoring any support, e.g.. village housing development welcomed by most of the village and in local plan and only 3-4 objections and taking opposition to the scheme as the headline"; "raking over ground already covered, e.g.. in public inquiry"; "political footballs"; "press listening and reporting only on views of small minorities"; "confusion between recommendations and decisions"; "unbalanced which obscures the broader issues / overall message by sensationalising an individual, often relatively minor concern"; "line supportive of Conservative councillors"; "where LPA misrepresented due to poor research"; "applicants refused planning permission going to local paper to complain"; "hostile"; "emotive"; "premature"; "reporting of national issues (e.g.. CPRE) without local context"; "when officers not allowed to respond because they are overlooked or deadlines too tight to gather necessary information"; "destructive"; "where public opinion not taken account of"; "stirring up opposition or support for a proposal"; "issues slanted to raise unjustified public anxiety"; "cynical"; "not including all relevant facts"; "anecdotal articles of no significance"; "deliberately mischievous"; "attempts to increase divides between parties".

Question 16C investigates the types of press coverage which are welcomed by LPA planners. The answers are grouped into five sections for ease

of assimilation. These are: a) informed / accurate; b) balanced; c) positive about council, LPA and planning; d) miscellaneous and e) encouraging public interest and participation. The results are displayed in table 26. Comments in the fifth category - encouraging public interest and participation - are too long to fit in table format and appear beneath the table along with those types of coverage only receiving one mention. The frequency for section head comments (in bold) does not include the frequencies for other comments within that section (unlike for table 20).

Question 16C - What types of press coverage do you welcome? (*Give examples if you wish*)

Type of Press Coverage	Frequency
a) Informed / accurate	38
i) Information-based / factual	7
ii) Carefully researched	3
b) Balanced	24
i) Fair	5
ii) Objective	3
iii) Highlighting balance of interests to be weighed	2
c) Positive about the council / LPA / planning	11
i) Praise for / promotion of planning	5
ii) Good news	4
iii) Identification of enforcement successes	2
iv) Supportive	2
d) Miscellaneous	N/A
i) Informative	10
ii) Coverage of projects, policies & proposals	3
iii) Those that explained planning decisions	3
iv) Development Plan publicity	2
v) Good coverage of controversial developments	2
vi) Honest	2
vii) In-depth articles	2
viii) Constructive	2

Table 26 - results of Q16C

Other types of coverage mentioned once:

Section a) "Accurate representation of facts obtained from the council"; "articles including the key relevant data"; "articles which prioritise protecting / preserving the environment to the same extent as job creation".

Section b) "Articles which recognise there can't be 'winners' all the time"; "fair treatment of complaints"; "unbiased"; "articles which show that planning is not to do with bending politicians nor with the number of 'votes' on a petition".

Section c) "Positive about the locality"; "positive about schemes the council has supported / promoted, e.g. environmental education exercises, grants and

countryside management, Conservation Area Partnership - an initiative aimed at property owners of Conservation Area buildings, LA21, nature conservation"; "complementary letters".

Section d) "Explanation of the relevant issue"; "Informative, e.g. The Evening Argus recently carried a double-page spread on a major traffic management scheme in central Brighton"; "Planning page produced after committee decisions"; "articles council have promoted"; "good debate of local issues".

Section e) "Encouraging public interest and participation"; "all publicity is good publicity if it stimulates debate and encourages dialogue between the council and the public"; "anything that reaches the public and increases their interest and actively engages and enrolls them to the council's policies and objectives"; "coverage of important issues - e.g. plans, strategies, initiatives where constructive feedback is useful"; "all which makes people more conscious and aware of planning and what is going on in the area, especially to a wider audience than can be reached by direct publicity"; "that which encourages participation, promotes informed debate and explains planning authorities' role and limitations".

If the local newspaper is generally receptive to approaches from LPAs then the potential for improving coverage through the type of limited collaboration suggested in this research is good. The results of question 17, displayed in table 27, are very promising. The Mean Response Value of 2.1 indicates that the press is generally receptive. The LBC figure is 2.5, suggesting that accessing the London media may require a little extra effort.

Question 17 - How receptive do you find journalists on the local newspaper (*that mentioned in response to question 3*) to approaches from the planning authority or the press office acting on its behalf?

Extremely Receptive = 1

Unreceptive = 5

Table 27 - results of Q17

Response	Council Type					Overall	% per response
	MA	LBC	UA	DC1	DC5		
Extremely Receptive = 1	2	3	5	12	60	70	26
2	16	5	10	16	80	111	41
3	4	11	5	12	60	80	29
4	0	1	0	11	10	11	4
Unreceptive = 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Overall						272	100
Mean Response Value	2.1	2.5	2	2.1		2.1	

An overlooked printing error meant that only some LPAs were sent questionnaires which included question 18. This explains the low figures for certain authority types. Table 28 shows that a considerable number of newspapers are hostile to LPAs (27% answer 4 or 5, with 5 meaning 'antagonistic'). The damage which systematic and regular criticism can do to the reputation of an LPA means that these newspapers require careful monitoring. Inaccuracies or prejudice could be challenged through reasoned letters to the editor and by making clear to journalists that it is only fair for LPA spokespeople to be offered the chance to answer criticisms of their work. If journalists then extend this courtesy, planners must be able and willing to respond quickly and forcefully.

Question 18 - In general, how supportive is the local newspaper (*that mentioned in response to question 3*) of the planning authority?

Very Supportive = 1
Antagonistic = 5

Response	Council Type					Overall	% per response
	MA	LBC	UA	DC1	DC5		
Very Supportive = 1	1	0	0	1	5	6	3
2	6	1	0	12	60	67	29
3	8	2	0	18	90	100	43
4	3	3	0	9	45	51	22
Antagonistic = 5	1	0	0	2	10	11	5
Overall						235	102

Table 28 - results of Q18

Accuracy is the quality planning officers most value in press coverage of planning (table 26). Likewise, inaccuracy is the most resented feature of planning coverage, by a large margin (table 25). Accuracy is a limited aspiration. It is possible to be accurate without being comprehensive. But accuracy *is* an essential precondition to providing reliable and useful information about the planning scene. Question 19 measures the respondents' assessment of the accuracy of planning coverage in the most authoritative local newspapers (see question 3 criteria). Even in these newspapers, which represent the cream of the local press, coverage is frequently inaccurate. Although the modal response was 2 (with 1 representing totally accurate), almost as many respondents circled 3 and 18% circled 4 (table 29).

Question 19 - In general, how accurate is the planning coverage in the local newspaper (*that mentioned in response to question 3*)?

Totally Accurate = 1

Invariably Inaccurate = 5

Response	Council Type					Overall	% per response
	MA	LBC	UA	DC1	DC5		
Totally Accurate = 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	13	7	10	17	85	115	42
3	6	12	7	15	75	100	36
4	4	3	3	8	40	50	18
Invariably Inaccurate = 5	0	1	1	2	10	12	4
Overall						277	100
Mean Response Value	2.6	2.9	2.6	2.9		2.8	

Table 29 - results of Q19

Attendance at development control meetings by journalists is a prerequisite to good planning coverage. Being present when decisions are taken and hearing the debates which precede them is the only way to appreciate the factors which inform a decision. By noting the arguments presented by individual officers and councillors it is possible to make the proper distinction between decisions which follow officer recommendations and those which deviate from them. Meetings at which members of the public and representatives of concerned organisations are permitted to speak can allow a journalist to convey the views of a wider constituency. In terms of gathering material for articles, attendance at *planning policy* meetings is less immediately rewarding for journalists. Hence they rarely attend. It is plausible to suggest, however, that an absence from these meetings might lead to an underestimation of the need for policy-driven consistency when determining planning applications. A special invitation or reminder issued to journalists for these meetings might result in better attendance.

The Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 made access for journalists to LA committee meetings mandatory. In addition, it became a requirement of the law to provide a public telephone from which reporters could send their stories to their newspapers, radio and television stations (1985 Act, s.50A, ss.6(c)). Journalists should be allocated their own desk or a seat at the committee table to enable them to follow the debate. The feeling of being an integral and expected part of the proceeding which derives from this welcoming gesture might encourage attendance at meetings. A further element of good

practice is to ensure the Chairperson is available after the meeting for an interview (HANDLEY, 1997).

Journalists do not attend enough committee meetings. Table 30 illustrates the current laxity of journalism. If one takes the view that 100% attendance at planning committee should be the norm, the fact that this situation only pertained in 31% of English LPAs is a cause for concern. Question 20 offered respondents four options to describe journalists' frequency of attendance at development control committee meetings (never, occasionally, usually and always). Each was ascribed a numerical value. These are merely indicative, as the 'space' between each option is not equal. The total possible attendance rating was calculated (i.e. if every respondent had ticked 'always'), and the actual rating was calculated as a percentage of that figure. The percentage rating for UAs and DCs, at 73% and 70% respectively, is considerably higher than the 48% which LBCs achieve. It seems clear that the greater PR activity in LBCs and MAs has not managed to entice journalists to planning committee meetings. In fact, some commentators have suggested that briefing material and press releases supplied by PR units actually remove the incentive for journalists to leave the office (WALKER, 1997, 48-9; HEATHCOTE, 1986, 9). Such spoon-feeding may be detrimental to serious coverage of planning.

Question 20 - How regularly does the local newspaper send a reporter to cover the proceedings of development control committees?

Never = N = 0
 Occasionally = O = 1
 Usually = U = 2
 Always = A = 3

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>N (Rat)</i>	<i>O (Rat)</i>	<i>U (Rat)</i>	<i>A (Rat)</i>	<i>Max. Rating</i>	<i>Actual Rating</i>	<i>% Rating</i>
MA	0 (0)	8 (8)	10(20)	5 (15)	69	43	62
LBC	1 (0)	12 (12)	7 (14)	2 (6)	66	32	48
UA	0 (0)	5 (5)	6 (12)	9 (27)	60	44	73
DC1	2 (0)	6 (6)	20 (40)	14 (42)	126	88	70
DC5	10 (0)	30 (30)	100 (200)	70 (210)	630	440	
<i>Overall</i>	<i>11 (0)</i>	<i>55 (55)</i>	<i>123 (246)</i>	<i>86 (258)</i>	<i>825</i>	<i>559</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Percentage</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>31</i>			

Table 30 - results of Q20

Answers given in response to questions 21C and 22C are given in full. They warrant quotation at length and in the main body of the text because they

substantiate many of the themes addressed earlier in this chapter and in other chapters. Comments are grouped under authority types, although no pattern is identifiable. Quotation marks are omitted because all the comments are transferred verbatim.

Question 21C - Do you have any particular comments on the quality / nature of the local press coverage of planning in your area?

Metropolitan Authorities:

- I believe we have established a good working relationship with [the journalists] and they welcome "stories" we provide them to help produce their paper.
- Mostly report in advance of committee from previously circulated papers.
- Larger coverage evening paper went through bad 'populist' patch, but improved again.
- Lack of understanding and knowledge by reporters - they are usually young, just setting out on their careers and don't stay long enough to gain the understanding needed to report on complex planning issues such as the Development Plan.
- Quality varies according to particular reporter. Most are poor and inaccurate; one or two are good and try to get their story using accurate facts.
- The local paper is keen to report significant local planning issues, which often are front page news. There is a good working relationship between planning staff and the newspaper, in no small measure due to the liaison role of our Press Office.
- Very patchy, Conservative bias and other agenda i.e. planning is used to target local councillors usually unreasonably. Inclined to run with stories before all the information is available.
- Tends to be (mercifully?) a generally uncritical way of filling the columns.
- Hard to predict what will be selected for coverage - tends to be the more localised issues arising from development control.
- Not enough coverage of strategic issues to set context for determination of some planning applications. Issues often over-simplified in translation to "journalese".
- Newspapers are parochial and no one paper covers the whole of the Borough. The papers are reasonably fair and accurate but it's often difficult to interest them in in-depth reporting / features.

London Borough Councils:

- Generally OK but often gets too caught up in political intrigue and misses the facts / real planning story.
- Prominence is given in all local papers to critical letters from members of the public, of which there have recently been many on major development issues.
- Tends not to be as contentious as other areas of Council activity.
- Highly politicised and very vocal minorities attract disproportionate amount of coverage. Lack of understanding of planning processes also hinders balanced reporting.
- There is some political bias in favour of the Conservatives due to the editor being a local Conservative.

Unitary Authorities:

- Print media covers in a more extensive way.
- Planning issues are high profile such that the Council generally has to do little to stimulate press interest e.g. application for Sainsbury's adjacent to Brighton station received comprehensive press coverage without the Council having to take a pro-active role.
- Fairly accurate as the reporter is also a Member of the Planning Committee.
- The coverage is, understandably enough "issue-driven", i.e. when a specific planning decision or proposal excites a great deal of public interest / opposition.
- Generally acceptable. Problem will always be 'Angle' of approach. Papers will regularly start "angry residents..." but if balance in 10 paragraph story is 6:4 you're doing OK.
- Items selected to fill out a page, often appear to be randomly selected from a Committee report. Tend obviously to look for something controversial.
- They are developing a campaigning ethos - more lively than many local newspapers though this often results in trivialisation or oversimplification.

District Councils:

- Blackpool is fortunate in having an evening paper with a limited catchment, with Blackpool being the major town. The paper itself is generally thorough in dealing with local issues.
- As usual good news rarely sells papers and it is usually only the controversial planning applications that get extensive coverage. Other work, forward planning and implementation goes unrecognised.

- Planning is a very important issue in East Herts and therefore is covered by the local newspapers regularly.
- We hold a press lunch in the summer which has improved relationships.
- Lynn News journalists are either long-standing seniors and feature writers, or a lot of passing-through trainees. It is rare for anyone to specialise in planning or local government long enough.
- We have a very good relationship - particularly with some reporters on an individual basis.
- If something is really bad / biased we complain to the editor by our press liaison officer.
- Standard has improved since media briefings.
- The reporters do not understand the planning system nor seek to clarify matters they are unsure of.
- Depends upon the reporters.
- The local papers survive on planning stories. Emphasis more often than not that it is the little-man against authority. Concern at the poor calibre and high turnover of what are low paid, first rung jobs in journalism.
- Being in a rural area (between Northampton, Milton Keynes, Daventry & Banbury) we have no single newspaper that covers the whole district. Consequently we feature less in those towns' media, but more so in the local free press, whose reporting is generally very good.
- Not critical enough on some newsworthy stories.
- Unable to distinguish members on the Planning Committee from officers in the planning function.
- Very variable depending on experience and attitude of local reporters - who change very frequently.
- Inexperienced reporters attempting to cover complex planning issues can be problematic in terms of the quality of the final material. Better coverage / attendance at meetings would be welcome.

Question 22C - In what ways would you like to see journalists alter their practice in covering planning stories?

Metropolitan Authorities:

- Check information, particularly when coming from pressure groups which can be misleading and unnecessarily scare-mongering.

- Important planning issues often not considered newsworthy.
- Attend planning committee more often.
- Find the time to acquire and understand the facts before writing their reports.
- More coverage of wider issues.
- Staying in the area longer so they can gain more than superficial understanding of the issues, especially free papers. Seeing and portraying the bigger picture more frequently.
- Don't abuse technical terms such as "Green Belt". More in-depth reporting of complex, boring but 'important' issues.

London Borough Councils:

- Being well informed always helps and usually a good briefing beforehand, researching the facts correctly will stop any misquoting. Sending the right journalist along who knows most about the way the planning system works produces the best results.
- Give LAs more time to respond.
- Tell both sides of the story, plus views of more peripheral parties.

Unitary Authorities:

- Become better informed by using meetings to understand the planning process. Lack of understanding amongst journalists as to how much discretion LPAs have in refusing applications.
- HBC would not wish to interfere in journalists' approach and style.
- Less reliance on pressure groups for information - report council's response accurately.
- I think that there could be a greater appreciation that the planning process has a positive impact on the environment / economy.
- Less sensational headlines! Sometimes to promote the planning view, not the irate third party / disappointed applicant.
- Need to understand the planning system as well as planning officer understand the journalist profession.
- Bit more balance! Seek out applicant - why are they submitting an application? Why do we need more houses? Why was a hot food take-away approved against local opposition?
- Ideally obviously to verify their stories but this would not necessarily be welcome by phone unless assured no hidden agenda, and by letter would be too long a process for their needs. Officers must be wary of expressing opinions that may not be endorsed, or may be prejudicial.

District Councils:

- Greater willingness to understand the complexities of legislation esp. planning.
- Make sure they know what they are talking about and less butchering by editors.
- Read the committee report thoroughly and listen more carefully. Stop trying to give the Tabloid treatment to headlines.
- The reporters are based some distance from where planning meetings are held and so do not often attend meetings. It would help their understanding of planning issues if they attended a meeting once in a while.
- We encourage them to check facts with us and in contentious cases to check back with their draft story to make sure the facts are correct.
- Provide a balanced view on planning applications until decision made.
- Need to better detect which are the important stories with wider ranging implications and which are trivia or minor proposals.

Section E - Successful Newspaper Liaison Techniques

Perhaps the most wise suggestion about how LPAs could work with local newspapers to involve the public in the planning process is contained in the Scottish Office publication, 'Public Access to Planning Information'. It reads,

Many planning advertisements are tucked away in the press such that they can be easily overlooked and escape the public notice. It was felt that greater attention could be paid to devising more appropriate methods of advertising in this context, such as a weekly planning page in the local press which discussed all aspects of the planning system for that area. It could report progress on the development plans, documents emerging and established planning policies and priorities and draw attention to the weekly list of planning applications. If this weekly page appeared on a regular basis then the public would soon learn to refer to it and use it as a means of gaining access to planning matters. It would also provide a wider educational function with respect to the town and country planning system. (ILSLEY et al, 1997, 59)

This might be dismissed as an idealistic hope were it not for the fact that a prototype weekly planning page has been appearing in the *Newham Recorder* since 1995. In an arrangement with the London Borough of Newham, the page, labelled '*Planning the Future*', includes statutory notices and a variety of articles prepared by the *Recorder* about future proposals for the Borough. They are based upon the planning department's press releases and other information. The

charge made to the Council for statutory notices is reduced in line with the cost to the Council of producing press releases. The newspaper retains editorial control and is at liberty to feature particularly newsworthy material in the news pages. Three of the benefits are stated in the planning committee agenda of 3rd June 1997:

- Better awareness for our customers of not only the work of the Division but, more particularly, of what it can do for them. In effect, it has helped put the Planning service 'on the map' locally and encouraged customer participation.
- A facility for getting specific messages across to readers. For example, '*Planning the Future*' has been used to publicise particular initiatives being conducted by the Division. These have included publicising opportunities for public participation in the UDP and encouraging public assistance in identifying possible breaches of planning control.
- Creation of very good working relations between the Division and the local paper. (LONDON BOROUGH OF NEWHAM, 1997, 1-2)

Peter Rose, who co-ordinates the initiative at Newham LBC explained that the relationship would not work with press office involvement. This is because the relationship depends on sustained, direct contact between himself and Pat Coughtrey, a reporter at the *Newham Recorder*. This substantiates Skeffington's observation that quality reporting is most likely to result from continuity of dialogue between planner and journalist and the channelling of material through a journalist who specialises in planning matters (SKEFFINGTON, 1969, para. 108). The fact that this excellent initiative has not been emulated elsewhere is an indictment of the sluggish pace at which planning information is disseminated and LPA's reluctance to innovate.

The weekly list of planning applications, which many LPAs send to newspapers, is a particularly effective device for securing coverage. There is considerable variation in the format and comprehensiveness of the weekly lists.

Some give relatively few details, only including information about the proposed development, the applicant and the location; others provide a more organised breakdown of the appropriate information; while others provide a comprehensive picture, which includes reference to the value of the development, the local plan area, the case officer and the local councillor. (ILSLEY, 1997, 52)

To invest more time into preparing these documents would, if they are employed by journalists in preparing articles, improve their usefulness for facilitating public involvement. For particularly contentious applications, where accurate and comprehensive reporting is most important, a dossier of background information, including non-technical summaries of environmental impact statements, could be compiled. This valuable service could be partially reciprocated by the local newspaper agreeing to include the name and telephone number of the planning officer who is dealing with the application at the end of the article to which it pertains.

Newspaper publicity can also help urban regeneration initiatives. The preparation of a development brief for a derelict site makes good news copy and is an accessible task for members of the local community to be involved in. The combination of a specific location with the prospect of investment and environmental improvement is much easier to grasp than the implications of a development plan. The opportunity to stimulate and channel newspaper interest into publicising participation exercises for development briefs should be seized. On-site press briefings can be particularly effective in securing coverage. Land assembly can also be assisted where landowners cannot be traced through conventional methods. For example, a report to Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council planning committee which said that several owners of a piece of land could not be located was reported in the newspaper and prompted many responses from readers.

The comments made in response to question 23C outline some newspaper liaison techniques which LPAs find fruitful in encouraging public involvement. Once again, the answers are quoted in full. It is unfortunate that the respondents are not explicit about how the techniques lead to public involvement. Many of the answers are therefore not qualitatively different from those given in response to question 11. Press releases are excluded from the list, although they are the most frequently mentioned. Inclusion in the list does not constitute an endorsement.

Question 23C - Are there any newspaper liaison techniques which you employ that are particularly successful in deepening the involvement of the public in the planning system?

Metropolitan Authorities:

- Establish a good working relationship by always responding quickly to requests for information in an open, positive manner and building a

partnership where the journalists benefit from their relationship with us and vice versa.

- Press coverage can be more effective than any other form of reaching the public for the purposes of feedback and consultation e.g. a report to committee saying multiple owners of a piece of land could not be found was routinely reported in the newspaper and brought a rush of responses.
- Personal contact with Environment Editor important, plus responding quickly to requests for information.
- Inclusion of "special sheets" e.g. a UDP in the newspaper.
- Occasional interviews on specific topics.
- Insert spread fairly successful.
- Supply good photos with children involved and look for a 'people' angle in press releases.

London Borough Councils:

- Sending out press releases on enforcement successes. Booking a two page spread on the work / role of the planning service in the local newspaper.
- Sending out leaflets in the local press.
- Press briefings on major sites and issues.
- Press conference / briefing.
- No need to - two competing newspapers tend to vie for information, etc.
- Regular day-to-day contact. Planning page.

Unitary Authorities:

- Direct briefings to local journalists.
- Developing a working / professional relationship with the journalists.
- Planning issues discussed with press. Background information supplied by HBC. Opportunities for photos and presence at exhibitions offered by HBC.
- Weekly application lists. Circulating questionnaires in newspapers e.g. on transport issues.
- The marketing and PR unit have an active role in shaping "stories" to engage public interest - working to a coherent, consistent strategy.
- Tip-offs on good agenda items. Regular calls on running stories. Ensuring council's view is never "no comment".
- Photo-shoot e.g. for 'Don't Choke Britain' campaign, organised a cyclist's breakfast to which Press invited - Chair and Vice-Chair also turned up with bikes!
- Indirectly by responding to letters.

District Councils:

- Availability of information on demand on telephone is usually helpful.
- Offering exclusives (not difficult as the paper is by far the main 'local' in the area, but is received well).
- Invite press in to discuss major issues.
- Lynn News publishes our weekly list of applications free - by their choice. Being ready to give factual information which fills in the corners of the paper with little items.
- Every time we answer a media inquiry the Press Officer mentions the fact that the public can speak at meetings.
- The Council employs two former reporters from the newspaper in its media section. Helps understanding of what they are seeking and the form of press releases we submit
- We do not need to issue many planning press releases because of our close working relationship with reporters. They get lists of applications, ring up about the ones they are interested in and we give them whatever information they need. We do not express a 'view' before a formal decision is reached. They will also ring the Chairman or local members. The press releases we do issue are either to publicise local plan proposals or to respond to potentially adverse publicity.
- Press statements with contact staff. Always willing to provide information. Fax 'comments'.
- Weekly list coverage.

Section F - Press Releases

Press releases are a popular and effective way of securing desired coverage in the press. Question 24a attempts to quantify the number of planning press releases issued by councils to local newspapers per year. The numbers ranged widely as shown in table 31. The fact that LBCs on average sent more press releases than DCs is undoubtedly a reflection of the greater size and prevalence of LBC PR units.

Question 24a - How many press releases are issued by the council to local newspapers on the subject of planning per year?

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>Av. (mean) releases sent</i>	<i>Range</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>4 - 50</i>
<i>LBC</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>3 - 100</i>
<i>UA</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>4 - 70</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>2 - 160</i>
<i>Overall</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>2 - 160</i>

Table 31 - results of Q24a

Producing press releases which journalists throw in the waste bin is pointless. The high success rate for getting press releases translated into articles (table 32) is either a reflection of the good quality of press releases issued by LAs or the desperation of journalists for material. It might be attributable to both.

Answers to question 24b were normally expressed as a percentage. Those given in figures were translated to percentages. The result in table 32 is therefore a mean average of the percentage uptake figures by authority, *not a percentage for all individual press releases used*. The average uptake figure per authority was 91%.

Question 24b - How many of these planning-related press releases per year are featured in some form in local newspapers?

<i>Council Type</i>	<i>Sum of Percentages</i>	<i>Sum of LPAs</i>	<i>Av. Percentage</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>1050</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>LBC</i>	<i>1425</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>UA</i>	<i>1199</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>DC1</i>	<i>2814</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>91</i>
<i>DC5</i>	<i>14070</i>	<i>155</i>	
<i>Overall</i>	<i>17744</i>	<i>196</i>	<i>91</i>

Table 32 - results of Q24b

Academic commentators perceive that press releases appear in local newspapers barely altered. They are written in the style of a newspaper article to permit this. Any shortening is achieved by cropping the end, which deliberately contains less important details. Studies have shown that free newspapers are less critical in their usage of press releases than paid-for newspapers (FRANKLIN & MURPHY, 1991, 101-1; WALKER, 1997, 52-3). My research suggests that press releases are not heavily edited in either type of newspaper (tables 34 & 35). A

small differential between frees and 'paid-fors' is apparent in MAs, LBCs and UAs.

Question 25 - In general, how heavily are press releases edited by:

a) the newspaper mentioned in response to question 3?

Reported Verbatim = 1

Totally Re-worded = 5

Response	Council Type					Overall	% per response
	MA	LBC	UA	DC1	DC5		
Reported Verbatim = 1	1	1	0	2	10	12	5
2	11	7	4	16	80	102	45
3	7	7	9	12	60	83	37
4	2	2	3	4	20	27	12
Totally Re-worded = 5	1	1	1	0	0	3	1
Overall						227	100
Mean Response Value	2.6	2.7	3.1	2.5		2.6	

Table 33 - results of Q25a

b) Free newspapers circulating in your area?

Response	Council Type					Overall	% per response
	MA	LBC	UA	DC1	DC5		
Reported Verbatim = 1	4	2	3	3	15	24	12
2	13	7	4	11	55	75	36
3	2	6	8	12	60	76	37
4	2	1	0	5	25	28	14
Totally Re-worded = 5	1	1	1	0	0	3	1
Overall						206	100
Mean Response Value	2.2	2.5	2.5	2.6		2.5	

Table 34 - results of Q25b

Conclusion

It is evident from the empirical data presented in this chapter that the practice of press relations differs widely between local authorities. Causation is difficult to establish because a multiplicity of factors affects coverage. The assessment of what constitutes good media liaison and how widely it is practiced is informed by the survey results. The principles of good practice established in this and earlier chapters infuse the case-study analysis in the next.

Representatives from the two Cambridge-based local authorities, which form case-study examples, also completed the questionnaire. The comparison of their results with those presented in this chapter situates them in the generality of practice.

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CHAPTER 6

CAMBRIDGE AREA CASE STUDIES

Introduction

The abstract discussion of principles and techniques derived from the survey would gain definition through an analysis of approaches to media liaison pursued by specific councils. The two district councils which are located in Cambridge provide this illustrative material. This chapter should be considered with the arguments and conclusions advanced earlier in the dissertation as a backdrop. Cambridge City Council (CCC) and South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) were chosen because they are contiguous and contrasting authorities which share the same local newspaper, the *Cambridge Evening News* (CEN). The chapter presents a comparative analysis of newspaper liaison in the two LAs, followed by a general discussion of the nature of planning coverage in the CEN.

It is necessary to explain the purpose behind the inclusion of these case studies. This dissertation does not advance or test a hypotheses, rather it attempts to diagnose how present planning publicity practice is flawed and how it can be improved. Consequently, the only thing that the illustrative material presented here attempts to prove is that in real, detailed instances, public understanding of planning is debilitated by coverage which could be improved through better liaison between the Cambridge-based LPAs and the CEN.

The consideration of a single area cannot provide a nationally representative picture of publicity practice to match the survey. Such a panoptic investigation may be desirable but is unfeasible given my resource constraints. This chapter offers a more contextualised approach which illustrates *some* of the survey findings by embedding them in a specific institutional context. It also introduces other actors into the process of constructing news, such as planning applicants and pressure groups.

The local plan process and formulation of policy are undoubtedly important issues which have received considerable attention in other parts of this dissertation. However, in the coverage of planning produced by the CEN, policy rarely features separately from news about particular planning applications. This accounts for the minimal discussion of policy matters in this chapter, which is driven by the news coverage which appeared during the research period, October to December 1997.

The empirical data on which this chapter is based was obtained by reading the planning coverage in the CEN between 1st October 1997 and 31st December 1997. In assessment particular attention was given to questions of accuracy and comprehensiveness. This coverage formed the main subject matter for a series of semi-structured interviews with two planning officers, an applicant, two councillors, a pressure group spokesperson and a journalist. The product of this Cambridge-based research is mainly presented here, but is also dispersed through the work, informing my more general conclusions. An important finding based on my research in Cambridge is that newspaper advertisements are an ineffective medium for planning publicity (see pp.45-7).

In the following discussion, those remarks which relate to a specific survey question are followed by an italicised question number in parentheses.

The subjects of study

The jurisdiction of CCC is tightly drawn around the built-up area of the city. SCDC covers the belt of countryside which encircles Cambridge. The area administered by SCDC has witnessed a growth in population from 165,000 in 1948 to 227,000 in 1991; absorbing much of the developmental pressure associated with post-war economic expansion in the Cambridge sub-region. CCC is currently run by the Labour party with a majority of one over the opposition, which is mainly comprised of Liberal Democrats. SCDC is dominated by Independents and Conservatives.

The *Cambridge Evening News* is a daily evening newspaper with a circulation for July - December 1997 of 41,418. In contrast to other local newspapers, the CEN had managed, until last year, to record circulation growth for seven consecutive years. It is published by Cambridge Newspapers Ltd. and has a monopoly of the newspaper market in the Cambridge sub-region.

Comparative Analysis of Newspaper Liaison

Both LAs were relatively slow to establish PR units (CCC in 1996 and SCDC in 1998). Previously, PR work was undertaken on an *ad hoc* basis by departments with part-time specialist assistance (Q4). CCC's PR unit is run by two people. It guides and advises departments on media relations, produces corporate press releases, monitors media output and circulates press cuttings to the relevant departments (Q4a). Jane Fannon, the Head of Communications at CCC, hopes to produce a municipal newspaper or magazine if funds are forthcoming.

Fannon believes that the political control of the council is irrelevant to the practice of her PR function (Q8). However, this is a matter of contention. The Liberal Democrats regard the PR unit as a creature of the Labour Party who set it up. They believe that local Labour Party policy and Council policy are presented as synonymous, with no room for minority party views. This is denied by the Labour councillors, who point out that as the elected majority party they effectively set council policy, which it is legitimate to publicise. It is justifiable for a council to amplify the message it wishes to project using public relations techniques, providing it is based on official council policy. Where a party group controls the council with a small majority and a policy has been contentious, it might be preferable for the PR effort to be less vigorous in deference to the strength of opposing opinion and also to avoid a breach of the Local Government Acts of 1986 and 1988 which outlaw party political propaganda which purports to be factual corporate publicity. Opposition councillors will usually have the opportunity to promote an alternative line in the media.

In an effort to quantify the benefit derived from the exercise of public relations, CCC are experimenting with a technique for costing coverage (Q5). Newspaper reports are ascribed a monetary value according to the length of the report and whether it is positive or negative towards the council. The value is equivalent to the cost of buying that amount of advertising space in the publication. Apart from the obvious crudity of the method, which is difficult to overcome, the risk is that PR efforts will be driven by a desire to achieve more uncritical, pro-council coverage (Q12). If this is the objective, then the complaint of the Liberal Democrat opposition has some validity. Subtle reports which, while not celebrating council initiatives, may be genuinely informative and empowering for the readership, will not be valued. Hopefully the implications of becoming too reliant on these evaluations as a justification for the existence of the PR function will be realised and avoided. However, while the PR function is subject to criticism from the opposition, efforts to demonstrate the value of corporate PR will continue. Jane Fannon's stated conviction that the council sometimes deserves criticism and that a critical press is vital for the health of local democracy should be an antidote to any such temptations.

SCDC has traditionally regarded itself as a media backwater. It has tried to remain aloof from media controversies. However, councillors gradually became convinced that the authority was not promoting itself effectively in the media and was therefore handicapped by a low profile and a vulnerability to criticism. The questionnaire answers indicate that SCDC regard coverage of their district to be notably more antagonistic and inaccurate than CCC do of theirs

(Q18 & 19). The coverage of three research park applications recently submitted to SCDC (see below) has been particularly stinging. The LA produces 'South Cambridgeshire News' which is distributed to all households in the district. The exercise of editorial control over the contents allow it to promote the activities and decisions of the council, thereby counteracting any influence that negative coverage in the CEN might have.

SCDC was the only survey respondent to say they were disadvantaged by their lack of a PR unit (Q5). An Information Officer was appointed in April 1998 with a four-fold brief in relation to the media: to promote SCDC; to offer a single point of contact for the media; to co-ordinate the publicity messages which the council transmits; and, specifically for planning, to fight a media battle against the imposition of housing development figures which SCDC regards as too high.

Hitherto, the main publicity tool used by both authorities has been press releases (Q9 & 24). The issuing of these has been infrequent (table 35).

<i>Year</i>	<i>Council</i>	
	<i>CCC</i>	<i>SCDC</i>
1995	25	4
1996	19	4
1997	8	10

Table 35 - Cambridge-area LPA Press Releases (issued by the planning department on matters within its remit)

The number of releases for CCC has fallen since the establishment of the PR unit, because many releases are now issued corporately, often with an input from several departments. Inexplicably, less central control is exercised over the format of CCC press releases since the establishment of the PR unit. No press releases were issued by CCC on the subject of planning during the study period of October - December 1997. Two were issued by SCDC to the CEN, with one offering a reaction to the release of a substantial piece of MoD land and the other informing the newspaper about the withdrawal of a large-scale planning application. Neither gained a mention in the newspaper.

Both LPAs advertise certain categories of planning application in the CEN, as they are required to do by law. However, the layout of these advertisements is poor. There are two key problems: firstly, that the reference number of the application is given visual priority over the location, and secondly, it is not made clear which applications have fallen within article 8 of the GDPO

1995 because they are departures from the plan and those which are classed as 'major development'.

There are departmental rules in both LPAs which determine who is authorised to speak to the press (*Q6*). At CCC Principal Officers and above are allowed to speak to the press because these people are deemed to have sufficient authority to speak on behalf of the council. SCDC make a distinction between facts and opinions with Chief Officers dispensing both and more junior officers only the former. Junior officers are believed to lack the overview to ensure that council policy is consistent. Training in media relations is offered to Senior Officers at both councils. At SCDC Committee Chairs also receive training. The exclusion of junior officers is consistent with the policy on designated spokespeople (*Q7*). Unfortunately I was unable to obtain more information on the nature of the training received.

It is the view of Michael Holden, sub-editor at the CEN, that neither LA is proactive in its dealings with the media (*Q13*). He said that they rarely approach the newspaper with stories. This is confirmed by the self-assessment in the questionnaire for which both ticked 'neutral' in response to the question which required a description of the planning authority's attitude towards local newspapers. The lack of effort made to liaise with the newspaper cannot be explained by reference to scarce resources alone. The feeling pervades the LPAs (and particularly SCDC) that it is the job of journalists to initiate contact, rather than that obligation being mutual. Both LAs exceed the statutory minimum requirements for publicity, but the meagre additional effort is mainly confined to issuing press releases. CCC will seek publicity for successful enforcement prosecutions when there is a clear breach and the offender has pleaded guilty in court. Weekly lists are issued to the press but these contain minimal information. Consequently, the list is used as a space-filler and is inadequate as a source of information for concerned citizens. The lack of contact details for case officers or ward councillors means that the newspaper will sometimes quote its own comment line telephone number and an address for correspondence, thereby siphoning off people's contributions. CEN journalists occasionally advise callers to speak to planners about their concerns.

Attendance by reporters at development control committee meetings at the two LPAs is good. A journalist is 'usually' present at SCDC and 'always' at CCC meetings (*Q20*). The unfailing attendance at CCC reflects the fact that Cambridge is the centre of the newspaper's attention and the readership in the surrounding area, which regularly travels to Cambridge, will know and care about developments in Cambridge, while the reverse is not true. Unfortunately,

journalists fail to attend planning policy meetings, an experience which might lead them to respect more the need for consistency in decision making. The reason for the neglect of planning policy meetings is that the timescale for policy formulation is much slower than for development control. It does not, therefore, lend itself to dramatic headlines. Policy is normally only enacted through the publication of a document which contains explanatory material and can be digested and reported on without attendance at a policy meeting.

The only significant intervention made by representatives of the council to influence the nature of planning coverage is by councillors. In common with councillors nation-wide, the motivation for their contribution is normally to defend the interests of their constituents. By prominently promoting a popular development or, more often, opposing an unwanted one, councillors can boost their popularity. Those who do not sit on the planning committee have greater latitude to be vociferous in prosecuting their campaigns. Councillors differ in the style and sophistication of their media relations. There is a veteran breed of councillor which quietly and dedicatedly represents their constituents, relying for re-election on a reputation built up through long-term personal contact and loyalty to an area. Other local politicians utilise the media a method of achieving their political goals. Councillors of both types can be identified on Cambridge's political scene.

Planning Coverage in the *Cambridge Evening News*

The nature of planning coverage in the *Cambridge Evening News* can be best understood through an analysis of specific planning stories. The three planning applications which were most heavily reported between October and December 1997 are discussed below. They provide an insight into the roles of different actors in the planning process in relation to the local press.

Research Park applications

At the planning committee of South Cambridgeshire District Council in November 1997 three planning applications were considered which sought the expansion of science research parks in villages around Cambridge. The three villages were Hinxton, Harston and Babraham. The similarities between these applications meant that they were treated as a single story in most of the coverage in the *Cambridge Evening News*. Collectively, these applications were the subject of six articles (including two front page leads), three editorial columns and nine letters, between October and December 1997.

At the meeting councillors decided to either refuse the applications or refer delay them for consideration as part of the ongoing local plan review. The pro-growth stance of the CEN, attributable in part to its vested commercial interests, meant that the response to these decisions in the editorial columns of CEN was heavily critical. Several of the deficiencies in the reporting of planning matters are demonstrated in this case.

The councillors were accused of being 'Luddites' by the newspaper. By obstructing the development of commercial premises associated with existing scientific research and development facilities the council was turning away jobs and damaging the economic prospect of the region and the country. An editorial column of 13th November commented that, "Only the blinkered and self-interested few will thank them for presiding over a stagnating backwater." The chairwoman of the planning committee wrote on behalf of the councillors to refute this charge. She pointed out that the district has absorbed many high technology businesses in the past. An important background detail omitted from the reporting was that the Wellcome Trust had originally been established in Hinxton after CCC has refused its planning application.

To reach their conclusions, the journalists took a rather uncritical attitude towards the claims made by the applicants. The figures offered for job creation were uncritically reported. When condemning SCDC for squandering the opportunity for job growth, the newspaper did not mention that those highly skilled jobs would not be filled by indigenous unemployed people. To state that 1,500 jobs will go elsewhere, as the CEN does in an editorial (6.11.98), is illogical because the applicants' case, which the newspaper endorses, is that the developments are only viable in close proximity to existing research facilities. It is also a typical example of pro-Cambridge chauvinism in a newspaper which functions as a self-appointed champion of economic expansion.

The migrants who came to the area to fill the jobs would need housing, schooling, sewerage systems and roads. The problems of accommodating development on that scale in small villages is underplayed. While the fears of local residents are reported in articles, these are alluded to and then glibly ignored by the editorials. It is probable that were SCDC to permit these developments they would be criticised equally vehemently for inflicting excessive development pressures on rural communities.

Another feature of the reporting is the disregard of the local plan as a document which should be respected. The councillors felt that given the advanced stage which the review of the local plan had reached, the proper place for consideration of the merits of such large developments would be at the local

plan inquiry. The newspaper says that "No-one is asking those with a duty to police proper and ordered development to throw the rule book out of the window." (6.11.97), having previously dismissed such rules as "artificial boundaries" (4.11.97).

At no point in the extensive coverage devoted to these applications was a planning officer quoted or cited. This reflects the reticence of planning officers to intervene in the debate even though their reputation is suffering and the way in which their potential contribution is undervalued by the journalists.

Wintercomfort Homeless Shelter

A planning application for a temporary winter homeless shelter in Mill Road, Cambridge was approved by the development control sub-committee of Cambridge City Council in November 1997. The decision was preceded by considerable coverage in the CEN. It featured nine articles (including one front page lead), one editorial column and one letter on the subject.

The Wintercomfort organisation regards a good public image as being vital for the acceptance of its controversial facilities for the homeless. It employs a media consultant to ensure that news organisations are supplied with information about its activities. Its strategy of sending regular press releases to the CEN succeeded in yielding favourable reporting.

Such a high-profile publicity campaign can be risky. By entering the public domain in an attempt to convince the public that a development is necessary, it encourages critics of the plans to become equally vociferous. A high profile and acrimonious debate can ensue as it did over a subsequent Wintercomfort application. Wintercomfort's response to this contention is that as their work is inevitably highly visible they prefer to make a pre-emptive strike in the media.

The director of Wintercomfort, Ruth Wyner, was designated the primary spokesperson for the organisation, and was quoted regularly in the newspaper. The result of this exposure was a risk of personal criticism. To prevent her demonisation the media consultant arranged an interview with the CEN in which she was portrayed sympathetically in a domestic setting. A letter was written to the newspaper in advance of the committee meeting by the Chair of the Council of Management stressing the responsibility of the organisation. The contribution of another representative was a deliberate attempt to avoid Wyner appearing to be a maverick.

Once again it was councillors who volunteered themselves as spokespeople, rather than the officers. Councillors Bhalla and Bradnack who

represent the ward in which the shelter was to be located voiced their opposition through the newspaper. It is significant that Councillor Blencoe, who is a political ally of theirs and fellow ward councillor remained silent. As chair of the planning sub-committee he must maintain a degree of impartiality.

The reporting was generally of a high standard, with space given to both proponents and objectors, and an absence of vacillating or illogical editorial pieces. The date of the committee meeting was repeated in articles, thus reminding interested parties who might wish to attend. The distinction between officer recommendations and member decisions was also made clear. A flaw in the reporting was that at no stage was it explained what the material planning considerations were. This might have helped reduce the number of objections which fell outside the scope of the planning system. Once again assertions by protagonists are reported uncritically - in this instance a false claim by a neighbouring language school that his business lost £150,000 when the shelter was operating the previous year. Another common feature of the coverage was the absence of comment from planning officers.

A homeless man died in Cambridge the day before the committee meeting, an event reported on the front page of the CEN. An editorial linked the tragedy to the following day's decision over the shelter. The potent influence of local newspaper coverage was demonstrated when a committee member waved a copy of the previous day's paper to emphasise the gravity of their choice.

Waitrose Supermarket

In late 1997 a long-running planning battle to build a supermarket on land in Trumpington, a village semi-detached from the southern fringe of Cambridge, was entering its decisive phase. At CCC's November 1997 planning sub-committee meeting, a modified planning application from Waitrose was approved after an earlier one had been rejected. The story was the subject of five reports, including one front page lead and prompted six published letters.

The most prominent feature of the extensive coverage was the role of an amenity society, Trumpington Environmental Action Group (TEAG). TEAG and its spokesperson, Peter Dawson, mounted a persuasive case in the newspaper against the proposed supermarket. Since the group's establishment in 1986 it has striven to position itself as an authoritative commentator on environmental issues pertaining to Trumpington. It is routinely contacted by journalists researching stories which fall within its remit. TEAG recognises the danger of fatiguing readers with repetitious remarks. It chooses the optimal moment to issue a letter to the press, which might be when it wishes to maintain an issue in the public eye

or stimulate the indignation of potential activists. On two occasions TEAG managed to insert into the newspaper the address to which objectors should send representations about the supermarket. Peter Dawson wrote a letter satirically congratulating the 'wise' decision of planners to allow the supermarket proposal and another mocking the mollifying remarks of a Waitrose spokesman who also chose the CEN as a medium for promulgating his message. As with the previous case study, this exchange illustrated the risk of joining battle in print. This case exemplifies the useful function of a letters page as a forum for debate over planning issues.

In the course of the debate which flared in the news and letters pages, no one claimed the mantle of arbiter. The field was clear for the antagonists to assert factual claims which were often contradictory. Neither the newspaper nor the planning officers chose to assess the validity of the competing claims, and offer facts which were not tainted with bias. Once again the proposition that x number of jobs would be created was credulously reported. Lamentations that the view of Anstey Hall, a grade one listed building, would be spoiled were quoted, without an explanation that it could only be properly viewed from private land. The implications of the decisive argument in favour of the scheme, advanced at the committee meeting - that supermarkets should be encouraged to reduce people's need to travel long distances to shop in them - were not explored in an editorial. Were this doctrine universally applied it would mean that easy access to a supermarket was considered to be a social necessity and that they should be located so that everyone can enjoy convenient supermarket shopping, regardless of the consequences for small retailers, architecture or traffic congestion. This superficiality of reporting is understandable but regrettable. In the Waitrose case the explanation of the planning process in the CEN was faultless. Unfortunately, however, the newspaper again missed the opportunity for a challenging debate on the principles which govern planning for the built and natural environments.

Conclusion

Measured against the general standard of local newspapers, the *Cambridge Evening News* is a quality newspaper, which is hardly surprising given the fact that Cambridge citizens are disproportionately well-educated. The transport problems, housing costs and beautiful townscape of Cambridge keep the profile of planning high. The CEN is a newspaper with a civic as well as a commercial ethos. This means that the scope for collaborative efforts to improve the provision of information which empowers the citizenry of Cambridge is greater than in most other places. Both questionnaire respondents considered

that the newspaper was receptive to approaches from their planning departments (Q17).

The coverage of planning can be criticised. The CEN has an editorial stance that is pro-growth and occasionally pontificates about planners rashly rejecting job-creating proposals. It will accept developers claims about the economic and employment benefits deriving from their proposals unquestioningly. However, it will criticise the councils for failing to resolve the problems which result from a booming economy (Q21).

The dilemmas of planning practice need to be impressed upon the editorial staff. Michael Holden of the CEN excused their lack of a reporter who specialises in planning stories by claiming that the planning system is easy to understand (Q22). This comment displays an under-appreciation of the complexity of the planning system. It provides some explanation for the comments made by CCC's respondent who writes, "Planning is often a difficult technical area to report on, so often it is the sensationalist / human interest bits that get reported." (Q21). It also explains why there is no continuity of reporters covering a story. Planning officers and other news sources in Cambridge express their frustration at having to reprise explanations and answer ill-informed questions from new reporters.

Both LPAs rarely write to the newspaper to complain about misrepresentation. The only occasion on which this was seriously contemplated by CCC was when a planning officer was personally criticised in the newspaper. Jane Fannon counselled against that course of action. SCDC had a disagreement with the CEN in August 1997 over its credulous reporting of a CPRE report which alleged that SCDC was an LPA which underestimated the number of windfall sites coming forward for housing and therefore sanctioned excessive greenfield land releases. This story appeared without consultation with SCDC and confused 'greenfield' with 'Green Belt' (Q19). A letter of complaint yielded a smaller but more nuanced report on the subject in a later issue. An excellent series of articles on the SCDC Local Plan Review appeared the following week, which Michael Monk, Principal Planner at SCDC, interpreted as a tacit gesture of contrition.

The current attitude of those who manage LPAs, summarised as a grudging acceptance of poor publicity, based on perceived impotence, could change. It should be replaced by a respect for the power of the media to shape public perceptions of the planning service, matched by an effort to influence the quality of reporting of planning and a commitment of resources to that end. Detailed recommendations to affect this change are contained in the next chapter.

The biggest priorities for action are to redesign newspaper notices to increase clarity; collaborate with other LPAs who advertise in the CEN to cut costs; issue invitations to journalists to visit the council for briefing sessions and policy meetings to improve their understanding; to send more press releases, particularly those which encourage the public to comment on proposals, and include more detail in the weekly lists of planning applications which are sent to the press. The most important initiative which could be undertaken if CCC or SCDC did adopt a truly proactive approach to planning publicity, would be to explore the possibility of producing a weekly planning page in the CEN, similar to that established by LB Newham and discussed in chapter 5. The new PR unit at CCC and the imminent appointment of an information officer at SCDC offer the prospect of innovative new approaches to public relations.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is intended to be used. It addresses practical problems thrown up by the need to find innovative ways to involve the public in the planning process. This concluding chapter distils the lessons learned from the research into a series of recommendations for action. They are grouped to show how they might contribute to realising the ten essential objectives (featured in the introduction) that have driven my search for improvements to the planning system.

The majority of the recommendations are directed at LAs. Other agencies which are advised to take action are the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (*DETR*), Government Offices for the Regions (*GOR*), Planning Inspectorate (*PI*), Commission for Local Administration in England (*Ombudsman*) and the Royal Town Planning Institute (*RTPI*). The lead agency is indicated in parentheses after the action. Cross-references to the relevant part of the dissertation are given throughout.

Objective 1: To build trust and respect between an LA and its citizens.

Action: Monitor the reception of LPA publicity through surveys and focus groups, to ensure that it is not greeted with scepticism or scorn. (p.13)
(*LA*)

Action: The following will help convince people that their views have been carefully considered in the process of reaching a decision:

- a) prompt and courteous treatment by administrative staff and case officers;
- b) if planning officers say to journalists that comments from readers are welcome, the LPA must have a receptive attitude and an infrastructure to deal with representations;
- c) explanations of decisions which engage with the specifics of a person's representation and do not rely on jargon or formulaic statements; and
- d) reported statements by planners and councillors must not be glib or dismissive towards public concerns. (p.17) (*LA*)

Action: Maintain the distinction between corporate policy, party policy and the thinking of an individual councillor by:

- a) taking a committee decision to consult the public or to encourage contributions which authorises councillors to be more vocal (p.69); and
- b) adopting a code of conduct which governs councillors' dealings with the media (p.70). It should state that:
 - i) attendance at events by councillors will only be promoted to the media through press releases if they are senior members, attending as official representatives of the council (p.72); and
 - ii) councillors themselves or their party publicity machines should promote any activities not conducted in an official capacity (p.72). (LA)

Action: Planning officers should make a concerted effort to stress their professional detachment from party politics in order to become regarded by journalists as 'arbiters' (p.38). (LA)

Action: Build the profile of the profession and sell it to a wider public by:

- a) publicising positive planning initiatives and achievements, e.g. Planning Achievement Awards and Town Centre Management; and
- b) ensuring the planning profession is included in local newspaper careers supplements (p.78). (LA)

Action: Utilise 'Planning Issues', the RTPI bi-monthly newsletter, which is sent to journalists, as inspiration for locally-based features articles. Time press releases and background information to coincide with its publication (p.78). (LA / RTPI)

Action: Publicise enforcement successes in local newspapers to ensure that people appreciate the possible consequences of breaching planning controls. Choose cases carefully so that the LPA appears as an environmental guardian and not a bureaucratic bully. Consider publishing the names of those who have been successfully prosecuted to enhance the deterrence effect (p.78). (LA)

Objective 2: To make the planning system more transparent.

Action: Consultation at the deposit stage of the plan-making process means criticisms of draft policy are registered as objections. This approach is slow and conflictive. Instead, public involvement at the pre-deposit stage should be made a statutory requirement (p.15). *(DETR)*

Action: Publicity and consultation enhances the status of supplementary planning guidance. This rule should also be applied to development plans (p.54). *(DETR)*

Action: Eliminate inevitable secrecy surrounding S106 deals by devising a more transparent method of collecting 'betterment' (p.14). *(DETR)*

Objective 3: To secure relevant and constructive public contributions.

Action: Redesign newspaper public notices to:

- a) include more 'user-friendly' explanations of the council's adjudicative role in development issues,
- b) include a 'top and tail' which indicates the council's overall view of development / land use;
- c) warn that only remarks relating to land use considerations will be taken into account in reaching decision (p.49);
- d) give prominence to the application site address, rather than the application reference number;
- e) make it clear why an application falls within article 8 of the GDPO 1995 and therefore warrants extra publicity; and
- f) make explicit the distinction between conservation area and listed building applications (p.49). *(LA)*

Action: Do not leave the job of designing the public notice to the newspaper because:

- a) they will not know what priority should be give to different bits of information; and
- b) are likely to err on the large, costly side (p.50). *(LA)*

Action: Send weekly lists of planning applications to the press. They inform the public at the appropriate time for making representations. They could include information about:

a) applicants; b) locations; c) value of the development; d) relevant local plan policies; e) case officer; f) local councillor; and h) appeals.

For particularly contentious applications, when accurate and comprehensive reporting is most important, a dossier of background information, including non-technical summaries of environmental impact statements, could be compiled and sent to the press (pp.94-5). (LA)

Action: Make clear to journalists the limits of planning powers and the distinction between material and non-material considerations (p.12). (LA)

Action: Urge newspapers to insert a note at the bottom of a report giving details of how to contact planning application case officers or ward councillors (p.7). (LA)

Action: If the public is allowed to speak at meetings, mention this every time a media inquiry is answered (p.97). (LA)

Action: Improve urban regeneration by:

- a) stimulating newspaper interest in participation exercises for development briefs (employ on-site press briefings); and
- b) tracing elusive landowners to facilitate land assembly by appealing for information in a local newspaper (p.95). (LA)

Objective 4: To ensure all stakeholders have an equitable information base.

Action: To ensure an information balance is maintained between participants in the planning process, LPAs should publicly counter any erroneous factual claims made by applicants, objectors or concerned parties. It is preferable that ward councillors or planning Committee Chairs should act as conduits for this corrective information (p.13). (LA)

Action: Publicise the Planning Aid service (p.78). (RTPI Branches)

Action: Consider publishing newspaper notices in appropriate ethnic minority periodicals (p.48). (LA)

Action: Those LPAs which have an Internet site should establish hypertext links the local newspaper's site (p.40). (LA)

Objective 5: To ensure the law on planning publicity secures its aims.

Action: Review the operation of the law on press publicity for planning, guided by the principle articulated in para. 22 of DoE Circular 15/92, that a balance should be struck between considerations of cost, speed of decision making, and providing a reasonable opportunity for public comment (p.44).

Action: Consider making newspaper notices a discretionary form of publicity. If the requirement to advertise development plans and certain planning applications is found to be effective:

- a) make it a requirement to publicise and consult on submission of reserved matters;
- b) remove the requirement to advertise conservation area and listed building applications in newspapers because conservation interests tend to be statutory or informal consultees and it represents a duplication of effort; and
- c) to eliminate an unnecessary one week delay in processing applications, reduce the twenty-one day response period for listed building and conservation area applications to the fourteen days required for other types of application (p.50).
(LA)

Action: To impress upon LPAs the importance of effective consultation for development plans and to enable the Secretary of State to determine whether to use his reserve power to order an LPA to undertake more consultation, Statements of Consultation and Publicity for Development Plans should be read and not merely acknowledged (p.53). (DETR / GOR / PI)

Objective 6: To defend the LPA by persuading newspapers to improve coverage.

Action: Systematic and regular criticism can damage the reputation of an LPA. Mischievous and irresponsible newspapers should be monitored. Inaccuracies or prejudice in newspaper reporting can be challenged through:

- a) reasoned letters to the editor explaining the grievance;
- b) explaining to journalists that it is only fair for LPA spokespeople to be offered the chance to answer criticisms of their work (p.86); and
- c) the Chairperson of the planning committee occasionally using the letters page of the local newspaper to respond to letters and articles which are factually inaccurate or objectionable in some other way. However, such rebuttals should be avoided if the correspondence might degenerate into a protracted debate which keeps a negative story in the public gaze for longer than it otherwise would be. (p.77) (LA)

Action: If an LPA is the subject of unacceptably bad reporting in a newspaper, it might consider selectively briefing a rival publication. This ploy depends on the existence of competing titles. (p.29) (LA)

Action: If the commercial viability of a reputable paid-for newspaper is being jeopardised by the existence of a free paper, the LA might consider ceasing to supply the latter with information. (p.32) (LA)

Objective 7: To work with newspapers to improve planning coverage.

Action: Planning officers should make personal contact with journalists. The LPA should enquire which journalists are given planning assignments, perhaps using the list of media contacts compiled by Harrison Cowley, the RTPI's PR consultants. Invite journalists to the town hall and introduce them to the planning staff. Ask them whether the LPA or PR unit provides useful information. (pp. 76-77) (LA)

Action: LPAs should approach their local newspaper to investigate the possibility of establishing a weekly planning page, akin to that which appears in the

Newham Recorder. A reduced rate for advertising might be negotiated in exchange for an information service provided by the LPA. The page could include information on:

- a) all planning applications received;
 - b) development plan progress;
 - c) adopted planning policies; and
 - d) news about developments affecting the area's built environment.
- (p.94) (LA)

Action: To build familiarity between planners and journalists in an area, consider asking reporters and editors from the local newspaper to provide training.

(p.94) (LA)

Action: To promote attendance by journalists at planning meetings, and particularly at those considering policy, LPAs should:

- a) issue a special invitation or reminder to journalists for planning policy meetings;
- b) allocate journalists their own desk or a seat at the committee table to enable them to follow the debate; and
- c) ensure the Chairperson is available after the meeting for an interview. (p.87-88) (LA)

Action: To help journalists understand the planning system, the RTPI should produce a booklet which LPAs could supply to journalists. The National Council for the Training of Journalists should also be sent copies as teaching material on journalism courses. (p.77) (RTPI)

Action: Avoid unnecessary jargon in correspondence with journalists. If technical terms are vital, explain them. (p.76) (LA)

Action: If journalists are receptive, planning officers could devote some time to explaining the function of the development plan, the competing interests which it seeks to satisfy and the salient policies it contains; emphasising that the LPA is keen to receive public comment. (p.53) (LA)

Action: The Ombudsman's ultimate sanction is to insist that offending LAs place an advertisement in the newspaper at their own expense, which details the Ombudsman's ruling. To strengthen this sanction:

- a) the cost and visibility of advertisements should be increased by insisting on more detail and better formatting;
- b) Ombudsmen should issue an authoritative press release to local media outlets explaining the case and expressing its displeasure at the conduct of the LPA; and
- c) any press release should include a reproachful comment from the relevant government minister. (p.51) (*Ombudsman / DETR*)

Action: In a crisis LAs should (unless legal action is pending):

- a) be open and honest;
- b) accept culpability if criticism is valid;
- c) apologise;
- d) outline a plan of action to remedy any harm; and
- e) in mitigation, explain the dilemmas involved in making decisions. (p.77) (*LA*)

Objective 8: To optimise the use of scarce resources.

Action: Decide what kind of public involvement is desired. Let this guide the content of publicity. (p.7) (*LA*)

Action: Do not over-use press releases. Employ a portfolio of publicity methods, tailored to the particular information the LPA wishes to impart. (p.76) (*LA*)

Action: Do not invest resources in newspaper publicity if it would be more productive to publicise planning through other media. To properly allocate resources:

- a) research the ethos, the market penetration and the readership of particular newspapers;
- b) apply the law of diminishing returns to planning publicity. Gauge the point at which extra effort is unprofitable by acknowledging feedback from journalists who say their readership has reached its threshold of interest. (p.53)
- c) Ask those making representations on a local plan where they learned about it. Put more resources into those techniques which appear successful. (p.52) (*LA*)

Action: If the advertising procedures are made voluntary, then the expenditure formerly made on newspaper advertisements should be redistributed to improving other, more effective, publicity and consultation techniques. (p.50) (LA)

Action: LPAs which decide that newspaper public notices are an ineffective mode of publicity might opt to withdraw advertising from a newspaper if a cheaper rate can be secured with another. (p.48) (LA)

Action: The government appears to have failed to fulfil its pledge in DoE Circular 15/92 (para. 32) to take the increased cost of publicity into account when assessing the level of planning application fees. The next review of fees for planning applications should specifically address the cost of advertising in local newspapers. (p.47) (DETR)

Action: Central government should issue criteria for deciding whether a publication is appropriate for planning public notices. (p.49) (DETR)

Action: Only organise large media launches for planning documents where sufficient media interest is guaranteed. An anti-climax will induce media scepticism about council publicity methods and journalists are less likely to attend a subsequent, and perhaps more important, event. (p.53) (LA)

Objective 9: To improve the collaboration between the LPA and the PR unit.

Action: Forge a relationship between the LPA and PR unit which harnesses the powerful tools of public relations to the cause of improving accountability and democracy through the formulation of a carefully articulated strategy for planning publicity. This strategy should:

- a) be guided by the objective of improving the quality of information the public receives about planning and facilitating the feedback and assimilation of information;
- b) use the specialist skills and resources which the PR department brings to the task to amplify the message and the response; and (p.61)
- c) enable LA personnel to be proactive in their dealings with the media. (p.81) (LA)

Action: PR people should:

- a) endeavour to maintain an intelligence network throughout the council which enables them to be forewarned about brewing crises and prepare a response;
- b) spot newsworthy stories; and
- c) be a single point of contact who will guide journalists through the complexity of the council. (p.62) *(LA)*

Action: A policy should be formulated which states who is authorised to speak to the media and under what circumstances. It should not be too prescriptive, as this can prevent a rapid response where newspaper deadlines are tight. Designated officers should:

- a) not be chosen on the basis of seniority alone;
- b) be in possession of the relevant facts; and
- c) be skilled in media liaison techniques. (p.64)

More liberal policies could be experimented with. It would permit anyone with knowledge of the matter being enquired about to comment, providing they are sufficiently tactful, articulate, confident and accurate to deal with the particular situation. (p.66) *(LA)*

Action: Training initiatives should involve more junior officers, enabling them to play a greater role in media liaison, and to discern when a more senior or knowledgeable person should answer. (p.66-67) *(LA)*

Objective 10: To avoid discriminating against an applicant and infringing the law.

Action: To avoid accusations of bias:

- a) polemical comment on an application under consideration should be avoided. It could be regarded as prejudicing the outcome which could conceivably lead to a legal challenge.
- b) Applications which the LPA selects for extra publicity must be chosen using consistent and defensible criteria. (p.14) *(LA)*

Action: Councillors should exercise caution in their dealings with the press by:

- a) not commenting on remarks that other members or officers are alleged to have said without obtaining independent confirmation that the journalist's information is accurate;
- b) being wary about journalists' attempts to circumvent the embargo placed on other peoples' 'off-the-record' remarks by extracting the information from them instead;
- c) not disclosing to journalists confidential items of council business. (p.69) *(LA)*

Conclusion

Many planning officers are cynical about public participation. It seems an appealing idea in theory, but in practice can be frustrating and demoralising. The divide between planner and public is too wide and the space is often filled with ignorance and incomprehension. Local newspapers can act as an intermediary. Planners and journalists should seek ways of working together for the good of the planning system, the newspaper and its readership. If some of the actions recommended above were implemented there is a chance that, in the medium-term, the quality and range of public involvement in the planning process could be improved.

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WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE ACT 1981

23. Are there any newspaper liaison techniques which you employ that are particularly successful in deepening the involvement of the public in the planning system?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

The final three questions may require consultation with a media / public relations officer:

24. a) How many press releases are issued by the council to local newspapers on the subject of planning per year? *(Please write a figure or 'don't know'. If the figure is approximate, write 'approx.')*

b) How many of these planning-related press releases per year are featured in some form in local newspapers? *(Please write a figure or 'don't know'. If the figure is approximate, write 'approx.')*

25. In general, how heavily are press releases edited by:

a) The newspaper mentioned in response to question 3? *(Please circle figure)*

1	2	3	4	5
Reported Verbatim				Totally Re-worded

b) Free newspapers circulating in your area? *(Please circle figure)*

1	2	3	4	5
Reported Verbatim				Totally Re-worded

Please return this questionnaire to:

Ben Webster
10 Malcolm Street
Cambridge CB1 1LL

If you have any enquiries relating to this contact: Ben Webster : ☎(01223) 460007

APPENDIX 2

Flat 1
10 Malcolm Street
Cambridge
CB1 1LL

The Occupant
31 Gills Hill
Bourn
Cambridge
CB3 7SJ

7th April 1998

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am a trainee town planner conducting research into the effectiveness of different techniques for publicising planning applications.

I am aware that you recently commented on a planning application for lighting the tennis courts at Jubilee Playing Fields, Bourn. It would assist me to know which of the information sources listed below first alerted you to the application? (Please tick)

- a) Notification by planning department
- b) Site notice
- c) Public notice in local newspaper
- d) Parish council
- e) Report in local newspaper
- f) Acquaintance
- g) Member of campaigning group
- h) Other:

If another person informed you (options f or g), where did they learn about the application?

I am grateful for your help. I have enclosed an S.A.E. for your reply.

Yours faithfully

Ben S. Webster

APPENDIX 3

NEWSPAPER PUBLICITY FOR PLANNING - A DESCRIPTION OF THE LAW

Press Notices for Planning Applications

The Planning and Compensation Act 1991 (the 1991 Act) inserted a new s.65 into the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (the 1990 Act), which allowed the Secretary of State to require, through provision by development order, notice to be given of any application for planning permission. Many of the provisions for publicity are now contained in article 8 of the Town & Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995 (SI No. 419).

Mandatory notices:

A newspaper notice is *required* for the following four types of planning application:

1. For 'paragraph 2' applications, where the planning application is either:
 - (a) the subject of an application falling within Schedule 1 or 2 to the Town and County Planning (Assessment of Environmental Effects) Regulations 1988,
 - (b) does not accord with the provisions of the development plan in force in the area in which the land to which the application relates is situated, or
 - (c) would affect a right of way to which Part III of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 applies.

2. Where planning permission is sought for development not falling within paragraph 2 but classed as 'major'. Such applications involve one or more of the following:
 - (a) the winning and working of minerals or the use of land for mineral working deposits;
 - (b) waste development;
 - (c) the provision of dwellinghouses where -
 - (i) the number of dwellinghouses to be provided is 10 or more; or
 - (ii) the development is to be carried out on site having an area of 0.5 hectare or more and it is not known whether the development falls within para. (c) (i);

- (d) the provision of a building or buildings where the floor space to be created by the development is 1000 square metres or more; or
- (e) development carried out on a site having an area of 1 hectare or more.

3. Applications for development affecting the fabric or setting of listed buildings (s.67, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990).

4. Applications for development which, in the opinion of the LPA, are likely to affect the character or appearance of a conservation area (s.73, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990).

Discretionary notices:

Local planning authorities may choose to publish a newspaper notice for other applications which they consider merit this treatment by virtue of the wider public concern they might cause (DoE Circular 15/92). This is covered by the three provisions described below.

1. The following seven types of application may warrant such publicity:

- (a) those affecting nearby property by causing noise, smell, vibration, dust or other nuisance;
- (b) attracting crowds, traffic and noise into a generally quiet area;
- (c) causing activity and noise during unsocial hours;
- (d) introducing significant change, for example, particularly tall buildings;
- (e) resulting in serious reduction or loss of light or privacy beyond adjacent properties;
- (f) those affecting the setting of an ancient monument or archaeological site;
- (g) proposals affecting trees subject to tree preservation orders.

2. DoE Circular 15/92 also notes that there is no obligation on an LPA to publish the following:

- (a) changes to applications made after they have been submitted and accepted by the authority;
- (b) applications required by a condition imposed in a previous planning permission (e.g., a time-limited permission); or
- (c) applications made for the approval of reserved matters following the grant of outline planning permission.

However, the LPA has discretion to decide whether further publicity is desirable, taking into account the following considerations:

- (a) Were objections or reservations raised at an earlier stage substantial and, in the view of the local authority enough to justify further publicity?
- (b) Are the proposed changes significant?
- (c) Did earlier views cover the matters now under consideration?
- (d) Are the matters now under consideration likely to be of concern to parties not previously notified?

3. Publicity for developments by the Crown (and by extension government departments) should be treated identically to an ordinary planning application. This requirement may be waived if the need for transparency conflicts with the imperatives of national security. In these cases the appropriate level of publicity should be decided between the LPA and the Government department concerned, with disputes referred to the DETR for resolution (DoE Circular 15/92, para. 30).

Press Notices for Other Planning Processes

Mandatory notices:

A newspaper notice is also *required* in the following four circumstances:

1. For unopposed discontinuance orders (i.e. where all persons have written to the LPA saying that they have no objection). The advertisement must state that any persons affected by the order may notify the Secretary of State if they wish to be heard by one of his representatives at a public local inquiry or other hearing (s.99 (2)-(6), 1990 Act).
2. When a local inquiry is held to consider an appeal against the refusal of planning permission (under s.78 of the 1990 Act) if the Secretary of State directs (Town and Country Planning Appeals (Inquiry Procedure) Rules 1992 (SI No. 2038); Town and Country Planning Appeals (Determination by Inspectors) (Inquiries Procedure) Rules 1992 (SI No. 2039)).
3. To announce the deposit of a local plan or UDP (s.40(4a) 1990 Act and the associated regulation 11(1)(b) of the Town and Country Planning (Development Plan) Regulations 1991 (SI No.2794)).

4. To announce the adoption of a local plan or UDP a notice must be published for two consecutive weeks in at least one local newspaper stating the date on which the plan was adopted, and the date when it became operative (reg.20, Town and Country Planning (Development Plan) Regulations 1991).

5. In the year 1994-5, one third of complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman concerned planning (CULLINGWORTH & NADIN, 1997, 301). LPAs are periodically found guilty of maladministration in the field of planning. If they refuse to remedy the injustice by compensating the complainant in the manner prescribed by the ombudsman, then the ombudsman will instruct the LPA to publish an advertisement in a local newspaper, at its own expense. "Such statements consist of the details of any action recommended by the Ombudsman, any supporting material the Ombudsman may require and, if the council wishes, a statement of its reasons for not complying with the Ombudsman's recommendations." (COMMISSION FOR LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN ENGLAND, 1997, 12). This power to shame the LPA through adverse publicity is the ultimate sanction available to the ombudsman (Local Government Act 1974, section 31, sub-sections 2D-2H). The provision came into force on 1 April 1990.

Press Notices - Legal Points to Note

1. Where an application falls within the remit of two or more publicity categories, the rules of the most demanding category apply (para. 20, DoE Circular 15 / 92).

2. When an applicant 'twin-tracks' two applications, it is not necessary to advertise the applications separately, although the notice must make it clear that there are two applications (DoE Circular 15/92, para. 20).

3. a) For press notices relating to planning applications (except those relating to listed buildings and conservation areas), local planning authorities must allow a minimum of 14 days for receipt and consideration of representations before a decision is taken (article 19, GDPO 1995).
b) Local planning authorities must allow 21 days for receipt and consideration of representations pertaining to listed building and

conservation area applications, subsequent to the publication of a newspaper advertisement (ss. 67,73, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990

c) The equivalent period for local plans and UDPs is sixty days from the publication of the notice (reg.12, Town and Country Planning (Development Plan) Regulations 1991 (SI No. 2794)).

4. Details of the wording of public notices is to be found in schedule 3 to the GDPO 1995. It specifies certain information which must be included. For instance, press notices advertising applications which fall within Schedule 1 or 2 to the Town and County Planning (Assessment of Environmental Effects) Regulations 1988 must state where the Environmental Assessment document may be inspected, where it is obtainable and at what cost (para. 16, DoE Circular 15/92). However, there is latitude for varying approaches. Paragraph 79 of DoE Circular 9/95 states that notices must be "in a form substantially to the like effect" as that prescribed in schedule 3 to the GDPO 1995.
5. Public notices must be published in a newspaper circulating in the locality in which the land to which the application relates is situated (article 8, GDPO 1995). This rather permissive requirement can cause some confusion in areas where there are no newspapers with a natural monopoly (*PLANNING, 1998*). It is the local planning authorities' prerogative to choose the publication they feels would afford the best publicity.

Development Plans - Statement of Consultation and Publicity

When placed on deposit, all statutory plans must be accompanied by, "...a statement of any other persons they have consulted when preparing their proposals, in addition to those listed in paragraph 1 [statutory consultees], and of any steps taken to publicise their proposals and to provide persons with an opportunity of making representations in respect of those proposals." (Regulation 10(3), Town and Country Planning (Development Plans) Regulations 1991). The statement must be available for inspection.

The DoE's development plans good practice guide "...stresses the Secretary of State's wish that local people should participate in plan preparation from the earliest stages...". So although the LPA has discretion over the extent of its consultation and publicity effort, the Secretary of State retains the reserve

powers to direct an authority to undertake further consultation. These powers have rarely been used, with the London Borough of Lambeth's 1977 Waterloo District Local Plan a notable exception.

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TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING (GENERAL DEVELOPMENT PROCEDURE) ORDER
1995 (SI No. 419)

WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE ACT 1981

APPENDIX 4
LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITIES SURVEYED
(asterisk indicates non-respondent)

Metropolitan Authorities

Barnsley
 Birmingham
 Bolton*
 Bradford*
 Bury
 Calderdale*
 Coventry*
 Doncaster
 Dudley
 Gateshead
 Kirklees
 Knowsley*
 Leeds
 Liverpool
 Manchester*
 Newcastle-upon-Tyne
 North Tyneside*
 Oldham*
 Rochdale*
 Rotherham
 St. Helens
 Salford*
 Sandwell
 Sefton
 Sheffield
 Solihull
 South Tyneside
 Stockport
 Sunderland
 Tameside
 Trafford
 Wakefield
 Walsall

Wigan
 Wirral*
 Wolverhampton*

London Borough Councils

Corporation of London
 Barking & Dagenham
 Barnet*
 Bexley*
 Brent
 Bromley
 Camden*
 Croydon
 Ealing*
 Enfield
 Greenwich*
 Hackney
 Hammersmith & Fulham
 Haringey
 Harrow
 Havering*
 Hillingdon*
 Hounslow
 Islington
 Kensington & Chelsea
 Kingston upon Thames
 Lambeth*
 Lewisham*
 Merton
 Newham
 Redbridge
 Richmond upon Thames*
 Southwark
 Sutton
 Tower Hamlets
 Waltham Forest
 Wandsworth
 Westminster

Unitary Authorities

Bath & North East Somerset

Bournemouth

Brighton & Hove

Bristol*

Darlington

Derby*

East Riding of Yorkshire

Hartlepool

Isle of Wight

Isles of Scilly

Kingston upon Hull

Leicester

Luton

Middlesborough

Milton Keynes*

North East Lincolnshire*

North Lincolnshire

North Somerset

Poole*

Portsmouth

Redcar & Cleveland

Rutland

South Gloucestershire*

Southampton

Stockton-on-Tees

Stoke*

Swindon

York

District Councils

Babergh	Runnymede
Bassetlaw	South Hams
Bedford	South Hertfordshire
Blackpool	South Oxfordshire
Bridgnorth	Stafford
Cannock Chase	Suffolk Coastal*
Chorley	Teesdale
Cotswold	Test Valley
Derwentside	Warrington
East Hertfordshire	Wellingborough
Ellesmere Port & Neston	West Devon
Epping Forest	Windsor & Maidenhead
Epsom & Ewell	Wokingham
Exeter*	Worthing
Fareham	Wychavon*
Fenland*	
Fylde*	
Gosport	
Guildford	
Halton*	
Harborough	
Hart*	
Hereford*	
High Peak	
King's Lynn & West Norfolk	
Mid Bedfordshire	
Newcastle-under-Lyme	
New Forest	
North Hertfordshire*	
North Norfolk	
North West Leicestershire	
Pendle	
Reading	
Redditch	
Reigate & Banstead	
Restormel*	

APPENDIX 5

GLOSSARY

'Editorialise' - When journalists consciously or unconsciously infuse their writing with values and opinions. This may occur through inclusion or omission.

'Newsworthiness' - The qualities of an event or issue which an editor considers qualify it for inclusion in a newspaper.

'Planning articles' - articles in newspapers which impinge on or directly discuss issues within the statutory remit of local planning authorities as they exercise their powers under the Planning Acts.

'Press release' - A piece of information packaged specially for distribution to newspapers in the hope that its contents and format will ensure that editors will deem it sufficiently newsworthy for inclusion in their newspapers.

'Public' - as it relates to planning it includes all individuals and organisations who are not directly involved in the proceedings in question (ILSLEY et al, 1997, 5).

'Public involvement' - acts through which members of the public contribute to debates and decisions relating to matters within the purview of the Planning Acts. Consultation and participation are different types of involvement, which embody different models of democracy. They are mechanisms of representative and direct democracy respectively. Consultation implies that while the views of the public are sought, the ultimate decision-making power remains with councillors. Participation involves members of the public taking decisions themselves, alone or with others.

'Publicity' - "Any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public." (Section 6(4) of the Local Government Act 1986)

'Public notice' - A notice placed in the classified section of a newspaper by an LPA informing readers about the receipt of an important planning application or

the occurrence of a plan-making exercise and inviting them to make representations.

'Public relations' - As defined by the Institute of Public Relations "... is about reputation: the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you." Public relations practice, "... is the discipline which looks after reputation - with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics."

Bibliography

ILSLEY, B.M., LLOYD, M.G., LYNCH, B. & BURBRIDGE, V. (1997), **Public Access to Planning Information**, The Scottish Office, Edinburgh.

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