



September 2020



Local Democracy Reporting

Review

Dr Gavin Ellis

INDEX

Introduction	3
Executive summary	4
Mechanics	6
Governance	7
Local Democracy Reporters	17
Feedback	28
KPIs	36
Summary of findings	38
Appendices	44

INTRODUCTION

The Local Democracy Reporting pilot scheme began operating in October 2019 with funding for one year. A second year of funding has been approved and NZ On Air commissioned this review to establish a baseline for that second year in which an expanded number of LDR reporters are to be funded.

The review has been undertaken by Dr Gavin Ellis ONZM MA PhD, a media consultant and researcher with an extensive background in journalism. In 2017 he conducted a review of regional video news funding on behalf of NZ On Air.

The current review was carried out during July and August 2020 and was assisted by cooperation from the News Publishers Association (NPA), news executives representing host newsrooms, the eight LDR reporters, local authority representatives and executives, and a number of other interviewees including executives involved in the British and Canadian counterparts of the scheme.¹ Particular acknowledgement is due to the RNZ LDR administrator, Nina Fowler, who provided large amounts of information and data that greatly assisted the conduct of the review. That data included a number of surveys that have already been shared with NZ On Air and no attempt has been made here to duplicate that work.

An important caveat: A review of a pilot such as this necessarily examines the output of that scheme and, in order to do so, must include the work produced by those hired to carry it out. NZ On Air strongly expressed the view that this report should not be a review of the performance of individual LDR reporters. In order to satisfy that requirement and to avoid the possibility that individuals could be identified by references made in interviews, all material has been anonymised. Doing so has not materially affected the conclusions that have been reached in the review, which concentrates on general principles and not on territorial specifics. However, the review has involved a level of scrutiny to which reporters are not usually subjected. All journalists have their strengths and all newsrooms embody a range of experience. The reporters involved in the review reflect this, and it is inevitable that some skill areas would benefit from additional training and mentoring. What is abundantly evident in the review is a deep commitment by all LDR journalists to fulfilling the aims of the scheme. Their dedication to their roles is commendable.

¹ Matthew Barraclough, BBC Head of Local News Partnerships, and Malcolm Kirk and Gerry Arnold of Canadian Press, administrator of the Local Journalism Initiative news hub.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There can be no doubt about the existence of local democratic deficits in New Zealand that result from a decline in media coverage of those regional and local institutions to which we elect public representatives. The reduction in coverage is not new but recent redundancies in the news industry have brought the deficit into sharper focus. Not long after the Local Democracy Reporting pilot began producing stories, the world was struck by the Covid-19 pandemic and 600 jobs were lost in our media industries.

The LDR pilot is not a solution to the difficulties faced by our publishers and broadcasters but it has been an area of relief – one part of journalism that has been protected (in those newsrooms lucky enough to be part of the pilot). It has produced more than 1300 stories since its inception in October 2019. Effectiveness, however, cannot be measured in numbers: One good story can be more effective than a dozen mediocre ones. Hence this review has examined quality as well as quantity and spoken to those who administer the scheme, who produce the stories, and who have been placed under scrutiny by it.

The consensus is that the scheme is doing its job. It is not perfect, but it is producing stories that would not otherwise have been written and which assist the audience to understand the decisions and actions done in its name.

The overarching conclusion of the review is that the Local Democracy Reporting scheme merits the second year of funding it is to receive and, further, that it warrants ongoing support.

There are 19 sets of findings from which the following main conclusions and recommendations have been drawn. The following are core take-outs of the review, but it is hoped that each of the findings will provide food for thought.

1. The scope of the LDR pilot and focus on NPA members was appropriate but it is strongly recommended that it now be widened to include other media. Governance and contracts/service agreements should reflect any broader representation. Consideration should be given to extending the scheme to reporting of courts [Findings 1&2].
2. RNZ should continue in its role as ‘honest broker’ but the administrator and incoming LDR editor should negotiate terms of engagement for the latter’s role with the working group and editors [Finding 3].
3. Current and planned (Year 2) levels of funding are adequate. Government support should be sought for extending the scheme, with a three-year funding agreement (either two-plus-one or annually reviewable) for each host newsroom. Funding levels

per reporter appear higher than their Canadian and British counterparts, which should be further investigated [Findings 6&7].

4. LDR output covers a good range of subjects in the field of local democracy but is variable across the host sites in quantity and quality. The numerical story quota initially included in service agreements is an imperfect measure of performance (a two-centimetre brief about footpaths may be as significant to locals as a half-page story on planning applications) and was rightly abandoned. However, editors should monitor the LDR reporters to ensure they are achieving their objectives. The following areas need attention:
 - a. Recruitment is variable and the attraction and retention of quality reporters has been made difficult by remote locations and uncertainty of funding. Remedying the latter will assist in overcoming 'location bias'.
 - b. Variation in quality is an issue, as is the slightly-above-average assessment of story quality overall. Expectations on reporters and their host newsrooms should be higher and formal mentoring should be provided, where required, under the guidance of the LDR editor.
 - c. Periodic monitoring of quality is vital to the success of the scheme. Consideration should be given to continuing the content analysis of selected stories that is part of this review on a quarterly basis. [Findings 7-11]
5. Timely filing was raised during the course of the review, with some noting the penalty they incurred if their publication cycle had early deadlines or was less than daily. Local agreements may be possible in contested areas, but the public service ethos of the scheme suggests as-soon-as-possible filing discipline remains the most appropriate [Finding 5].
6. While there is some reporting of te ao Māori, coverage is patchy and discussions should be held with the working party, newsrooms and LDR reporters on how best to address deficiencies in order to meet Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles for all organisations involved in the LDR scheme [Finding 9].
7. There are recurring calls in media organisations for reporters to provide multimedia content. It is a valuable addition to digital coverage but must be weighed against the time penalty incurred. Video skill levels and audio recording capability require attention before any further multimedia demands are made on LDR reporters [Finding 12].
8. The uptake of content is very good in some local media and by RNZ but most stories are of limited interest to wider media because they are, unsurprisingly, local. There is scope for the LDR editor to develop a coordinated use of the LDR team to collaborate on stories with cross-regional implications, but the ways in which this is achieved should be set out in the LDR editor's rules of engagement. Collaborative stories should not, however, be at the expense of local coverage. The LDR's primary

responsibility must be to the community on which the host media is focused [Finding 13].

9. Feedback on the scheme is very positive, with the exception of a few locations where relationships with the publication, rather than any fault of the LDR reporter, have coloured local authority views. There is scope for improvement to the systems of regular dialogue between the LDR reporters and with the administrators [Findings 14-18].
10. Existing measures of output, performance, and engagement have their limitations. While accurate measures are difficult to implement, some improvement is possible [Finding 19].

MECHANICS

TERMS OF REFERENCE

- Conduct a detailed content analysis of a minimum of five stories per provider across the period of a fortnight from each supplier (selected by the reviewer to span range, diversity and depth). This would result in a minimum of 40 pieces of content analysed in total.
- Provide a generalised assessment of production quality, range of topics, content value, and cut through; is quality consistent across suppliers?
- Evaluate the distribution platforms and accessibility/visibility of the funded content.
- Discuss audience feedback with each supplier and analyse data supplied by RNZ
- Assess if there is clear support from within the regions and from the local institutions and organisations that the content is valued
- Consider the impact of any other significant issues brought to light during the review.
- Discuss whether, individually and collectively, funded LDR content output is important and worth continued support in a constrained funding environment. If so, discuss ideas for future improvement
- Involve RNZ, the NPA, NZ On Air, the host newsrooms, the local democracy reporters (including former local democracy reporters), and non-host media partners.
- Provide a baseline for the second year's evaluation.
- Consider the Treaty of Waitangi and New Zealand's cultural and ethnic diversity as well as the needs of other minorities in the community.

METHODOLOGY

The review involved a three-stage content analysis. The first phase was quantitative and drew on both RNZ-supplied data and a one-month sample of content from the LDR CMS hub. The second phase was a comparison of five 2019 and 2020 issues of each host's principal print publication. A page by page analysis was undertaken and stories emanating from local and regional entities with publicly elected representation (principally territorial authorities, DHBs and Māori authorities) were logged. During the pilot period, all such stories were logged but a separate tally was kept of stories carrying LDR reporter bylines. The third phase

involved a detailed content analysis of six articles by each LDR reporter evaluated across six qualitative criteria. The matrix for that analysis is included as Appendix 3 but the full dataset has been withheld to prevent the possibility of individual identification.

A total of 36 interviews were carried out during the review. Senior editorial executives of the host publication groups were interviewed by telephone and asked to respond to a set of 10 questions (Appendix 1). Each LDR reporter was also interviewed by telephone and asked to respond to a set of 12 questions (Appendix 1). Eleven local authority representatives (mayors, chief executives and communications managers) were interviewed by telephone and asked to respond to a set of eight questions (Appendix 1). Video conference calls were made to two representatives of Canadian Press, which is RNZ's counterpart in the Canadian Government's Local Journalism Initiative (discussed below) and the BBC coordinator of the Local News Partnerships scheme. Several interviews were conducted with the RNZ administrator of the scheme, Nina Fowler, who also provided sets of analytical data on the LDR pilot and documents relating to funding applications and operations. The editorial director of the NPA, Rick Neville, was interviewed and provided material on the formative stage of the scheme. The president of the Community Newspaper Association, David Mackenzie, was interviewed by telephone, as were two organisations impacted by the pilot.

Access was provided to the LDR CMS hub, host newspaper digital editions archives (a small number provided pdf files or hard copies of 2019 editions), and to the Canadian and BBC hubs.

As the review was expressly not intended as an assessment of individual LDR reporters' performance, all analytical data and material from interviews that may have a bearing on performance have been anonymised. Where reporters have been given numerical identifiers, they have been randomised and do not represent a north to south sequence.

The timing of this review falls between the first-year pilot and a second year for which an increased funding allocation has already been ear-marked. The review assesses initial experience to identify strengths that may be built upon and shortcomings that may be redressed in Year 2 and beyond. To do so, the review breaks the scheme down to constituent elements and draws on the analyses and interviews where appropriate.

GOVERNANCE

RATIONALE

The Memorandum of Understanding between the NPA, Radio New Zealand (RNZ) and NZ On Air states that the pilot "is intended to address the 'democracy deficit' created by shrinking regional newsrooms". It stated that it will do so "by rebuilding coverage of local democratic

institutions, and better informing New Zealanders about the public bodies and their activities in the regions”.

The rationale of overcoming democratic deficits by focused funding of editorial resources remains sound but implicit in the second statement is an emphasis on regional level media. This emphasis was appropriate for a pilot but should not be seen as proscribing the limits of New Zealand’s journalistic democratic deficit. It exists at the metropolitan and local levels that top and tail regional news outlets and is not limited to newspapers nor to territorial elected bodies.

That said, there is almost universal belief that the rationale for the pilot is basically sound, that the pilot has had a positive effect, and that the scheme should continue.

SCOPE

With one exception, the pilot placed LDRs in paid circulation newspaper newsrooms. Three are group-owned dailies, two are locally owned dailies, and two are paid non-dailies (one group-owned and the other local). The outlier is a reporter in Stuff’s South Auckland newsroom serving free community weeklies plus the group’s digital platforms. All are affiliated to members of the NPA.

This tight grouping was appropriate for a pilot phase, although it did give rise to a comment by a non-participating publisher that it was “helping big companies and their failing dailies”. The review will show that an enlarged scheme should look beyond this grouping to other areas of democratic deficit and other media and should consult Canada’s (admittedly much larger) Local Journalism Initiative (LJI) as a scoping model.

The LJI supports the creation of “original civic journalism that covers the diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada”. It identifies civic journalism as covering “the activities of the country’s civic institutions (for example, courthouses, city halls, band councils, school boards, federal Parliament or provincial legislatures) *or subjects of public importance to society*”. The final phrase is what gives the initiative its real scope. It invites applicants to identify “specific public interest [areas] to be served” and “local or regional issues”. In other words, it asks applicants to be specific in identifying areas of need. As a result, it supports a diverse range of coverage. In its April 2020 list of grants, the initiative included:

- Local area reporters
- Indigenous affairs reporters
- Justice reporters
- Rural community reporters
- Health reporters

- Agricultural reporters
- Immigration and labour reporters
- Equity and inequality reporters

Funding is available to eligible Canadian media organisations² to hire journalists or pay freelance journalists for fulltime or part-time employment, or for one-off projects. Eligible organisations are drawn from print and online news media, official language minority written press, ethnic media, community radio and community television. The scheme is not limited to regional or local media. Host organisations include the *Toronto Star* and Quebec's *Le Soleil*. It is controlled by seven industry organisations representing different types of media and includes News Media Canada (formed by the merger of the Canadian Newspaper Association and the Canadian Community Newspaper Association), Francophone media, ethnic media and community broadcasting. The production hub for LJI content is run by the national news agency Canadian Press.

The key scoping tool is defining an area of need. LJI fund applicants must identify areas where citizens do not have access to journalistic information about community issues and institutions because there are no local media (news deserts) or communities where there is limited access because there are significant gaps in coverage due to a lack of capacity (news poverty). Identifying such needs are prerequisites to funding support.

The LJI is, therefore, broader in scope than the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service on which the New Zealand LDR pilot was based. The LDRS is based solely on reporting stories of public interest to do with local government. A recent review of the BBC Local News Partnership (LNP) scheme led by the BBC Director for Northern Ireland has recommended a widening of this brief, but through a series of phases that prevent adverse impact on a base level of local authority coverage. There is merit in this approach.

The brief for the New Zealand LDR scheme is that the programme's core purpose is to "provide impartial coverage of the regular business and workings of local authorities". However, the editorial brief does extend to "other stories which are focused on local democracy and which are in the public interest – so long as that does not detract from the core purpose of the service". It would be a stretch to extend that definition to some of the areas embraced by other schemes. Nevertheless, there are growing gaps in coverage in other

² To be eligible, organisations must be majority owned and controlled by Canadians or otherwise meet the requirements of Section 19 of the Income Tax Act; engage in coverage of democratic bodies/institutions and civic function journalism as core principles; be edited, designed, assembled and published in Canada and directed primarily at Canadian audiences in Canada; and have completed at least one uninterrupted 12-month publishing cycle. Some of these criteria may be problematic here (particularly in relation to ownership and, potentially, offshore production). Submission to regulatory oversight in New Zealand is a more workable measure of eligibility.

subject areas that have significant bearing on the functioning of society. Consistent court coverage is an example where the LDR scheme could be extended but it may require some amendment to the 'mission statement'.

Finding 1: (a) The tight focus in the pilot was the correct approach but there is no doubt that there are other gaps in media coverage that impact on a functioning democratic society. (b) The Canadian scheme may be broader than the likely scope of support here, but some expansion is warranted. (c) As with the BBC recommendation, any expansion should be staged and must not adversely impact existing news operations. (d) It is recommended that extension to reporting of courts should be the first extension investigated, along with an associated re-examination of the LDR 'mission statement'.

REPRESENTATION

Governance of the scheme is multi-layered. NPA, RNZ and NZ on Air liaised on the formation of the scheme and its initial dispositions. Ongoing oversight is maintained by a working party comprising representatives of NPA, NZ on Air, RNZ, Stuff, NZME and Māori media. This is entirely appropriate for a pilot programme involving state funding. Minutes show that the media organisations have absented themselves from discussions relating to their own publications. Operationally, RNZ is tasked with managing the pilot.

Examination of the BBC and Canadian schemes does not suggest that their governance structures offer workable alternatives to the current LDR arrangement. The differences in scale, industry organisation and funding models are significant. The Canadian scheme has seven Administrator Organisations that have responsibility for deciding where to spend LJL funds. The BBC, which funds the scheme from its licence fee and therefore directly awards supplier contracts, uses a bidding process. Decisions are made by the BBC Local News Partnership team.

The Canadian model does show the virtue of representation that reflects the diverse nature of media that are eligible for funding. The widely distributed nature of its administration is not necessary here, but the New Zealand scheme's structure should nonetheless reflect the full range of eligible organisations in any expansion.

It is apparent that the LDR's governance reflects the fact that it is a pilot – the title 'working party' is a function of that – and even its extension to a second year does not necessarily suggest permanence. However, should the scheme take on a more sustained status and a wider scope, structural change may be desirable.

Transparent governance and operation are fundamental to such a scheme. A formal body representing all eligible sectors should have high level oversight and consideration could be given to the appointment of a voluntary independent chair. That body could then delegate

a smaller group to liaise with NZ on Air and RNZ over the choice of funding candidates (according to agreed transparent selection processes) and to maintain regular operational oversight.

NZ on Air's mandate in the dispersal of public funds would require it to have the final decision on where funds should be applied. It is also appropriate for RNZ to continue to be the manager of the scheme, which parallels the work undertaken by the BBC and Canadian Press.

FINDING 2: (a) The governance of the LDR is appropriate for a pilot but expansion and a more permanent status would recommend changes that reflect those developments, including a representative council for overview of the scheme and a sub-committee detailed to oversee operations and liaise with RNZ and NZ on Air. (b) Neither the Canadian nor British governance systems are appropriate models although the imperatives that are applied in identifying appropriate areas of need could inform decision-making and the scope of the Canadian scheme is worthy of investigation. (c) While RNZ and NZ On Air should continue to be involved in the selection processes as custodians of state funding, the knowledge and expertise of the media sectors mean they should play a full part in determining which applications should go forward.

STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONAL ORGANISATION

The LDR scheme is currently funded by NZ On Air, administered by RNZ, and overseen by a working party comprising representatives from those two organisations plus senior executives of the NPA, NZME and Stuff. Māori broadcaster Maramena Roderick joined the working party in August 2020.

The working party has oversight of the scheme's operations and any proposed changes. While it was involved in drawing up criteria for the scheme, it is noted that individual media organisations did not take part in the selection of host newsrooms and placements.

LDR reporters in host newsrooms work to the direction of respective editors but also liaise with RNZ LDR manager, Nina Fowler,³ on editorial output and administrative matters. The CMS hub into which all LDR content must be placed is administered by RNZ. As with the BBC and Canadian Press, RNZ is in the role of honest broker. RNZ, with the working party's agreement, proposes to add an LDR editor to assist the current administrator. The role of the editor will be:

- Organising multimedia mentoring and training for the local democracy reporters
- Identifying strong original stories and liaising with media partners to promote them
- Spotting national themes and trends and doing their own reporting as needed

³ Nina Fowler received strong support and approval of her performance as LDR manager from LDR reporters, editors and executives.

- Supporting host newsroom editors and local democracy reporters as needed
- Ensuring the scheme's success through high-quality content
- Standing in for the service's manager as needed

While this new role has potential to add significantly to the LDR scheme, two issues arise.

The first is the fact that it adds materially to overheads which, for a scheme involving only 12 journalists, should be kept to a minimum. As the role is now being advertised, that must be seen as acceptable to the parties. However, no further increase would be warranted unless the scheme grew significantly.

In addition, although the job description notes the need to liaise with newsrooms, there is potential for discord if it is felt the LDR editor is interfering with lines of authority within newsrooms (where editorial 'sovereignty' is tightly guarded). "Identifying strong original stories" and "spotting national themes and trends" are worthy aims but may draw the LDR editor into the de facto assignment of LDRs to specific stories – a task that is the preserve of newsroom executives. Cooperation between LDRs (particularly in collectively creating stories that have broader appeal than within a single locality) must be encouraged but 'rules of engagement' in directing LDR reporters to specific tasks will be a prerequisite to avoiding conflict with the LDR editor and between newsrooms.

Mentoring⁴ is a key role for the LDR editor under the job description. Newsrooms in the scheme vary in size and composition. While some have the capacity for internal mentoring, others do not. The recruitment of the LDR editor should place a high priority on this skill. Mentoring of all LDR reporters by the LDR editor would provide continuity and development of common standards although here, too, care will be required to ensure consistency with the protocols in the host newsrooms. The Canadian scheme provides hosts with an editorial policy template (<https://nmc-mic.ca/lji/news-organizations/resources/>) but is at pains to emphasise that it "encourages you to tailor this policy to fit your own circumstances and purposes". The British scheme draws attention to the BBC editorial guidelines but does not presume to impose them. In New Zealand, conformity with the principles and guidelines of the two regulatory bodies (NZ Media Council and Broadcasting Standards Authority) should be sufficient. One interviewee raised the possibility of a style guide for New Zealand LDR reporters, but the BBC's approach seems appropriate: "While meeting the highest standards of accuracy and impartiality, written content may conform to an employer's normal style."

Day to day operations of the LDRs is determined within the respective newsrooms, although many have a high degree of autonomy in determining what they will cover each day. Each

⁴ Clarification is required in what is meant by "multimedia mentoring" to prevent the assumption that it relates to multimedia reporting. The assumption should be that it means the use of various forms of technology to undertake mentoring among a geographically dispersed group.

LDR files a weekly advisory which is posted on the LDR CMS hub. This signals upcoming meetings to be covered, story ideas being pursued, advice on significant stories about to be filed, and upcoming leave. The reporters also have an informal Facebook page started during the Covid-19 lockdown as a means of maintaining contact. It has been continued but reporters make varying use of it to provide story links and to check with each other on whether issues in one region are being experienced elsewhere. This suggests a closed section on the hub for LDR reporters would be useful but the cost of the necessary development may not be warranted while the scheme has such a small number of users.

The hub itself is best described as ‘workmanlike’. It has no frills and its inability to handshake with host CMS systems means transfer of stories is cumbersome. However, given the scale of the scheme, a more sophisticated system cannot be justified. Neither the BBC nor Canadian CMS systems provide vastly better text handling processes, although the Canadian system in particular has a superior appearance and both have easier processes for handling multimedia content. The NZ LDR authoring tool is essentially fit for purpose, audit trails – including editorial sign-off – are adequate as is the partner view from which articles can be downloaded. None of the reporters or editors interviewed expressed concerns over the hub. It should be noted, however, that any major expansion of the LDR scheme (including any increased emphasis on video or audio content)⁵ – or use of the CMS as the production platform for other (as yet unspecified) state-funded initiatives to fill media gaps – would necessitate further development. A visual comparison of the Canadian, British and New Zealand CMS hubs is attached (Appendix 2).

Finding 3: (a) Oversight is more than sufficient for the present and immediate future but should be revisited if the scheme continues beyond year 2. (b) The present LDR manager is efficient and well respected by all parties to the scheme. (c) The impending appointment of an LDR editor is surprising in an enterprise of this size but that appointee can play a crucial role in addressing quality and uptake issues. However, no further expansion of the administration of the scheme should be contemplated unless there is a significant upscaling. (d) As soon as the appointee takes up the position, the working party and all editors⁶ should be consulted on terms of engagement relating to the deployment of reporters on LDR editor’s initiatives. (e) An examination of the LDR CMS hub indicates that

⁵ The BBC has a firm view on this content, which is discussed later in the review.

⁶ Each of the newsrooms in the scheme is unique and is under the control of an editor with particular operating methods and personal qualities. By consulting them, as well as the working party, a rules of engagement document is likely to reflect – and accommodate – most of the ‘fish-hooks’ that are likely to be encountered when the normal chain of command is interrupted. Editors in large group operations already work with extended decision-making but those in smaller or stand-alone publications do not. None is used to having reporters directed by an external organisation. Hence, it is advisable to reach an advance agreement on how the LDR editor will interact with their newsrooms.

it meets current needs but will struggle with increased demands, particularly in multimedia reporting.

CONTRACTS

In any novel arrangement, the drawing up of contracts can be a protracted process and the LDR pilot is not different. The process was further complicated by the need to fit the scheme within a pre-existing funding stream. It also needed to accommodate the wishes of three parties – NZ On Air, RNZ and NPA – with each having its own perceptions of how the scheme should work. Using the BBC contract documents as a source helped – but complicated – the negotiations. Year 2 will be under a different funding arrangement and therefore a new contract. RNZ’s internal budgeting schedule is based on the financial year and this does not align neatly with NZ on Air’s annual funding application schedule. It would be useful if, in future, the two processes could be coordinated, perhaps by adding a separate LDR application date negotiated between the parties. Both the initial negotiation, the need for further contract discussions to accommodate the Year 1 extension, and the Year 2 contract has produced an unusual level of what has been described as ‘anxiety’. It would be wise, therefore, to approach the Year 2 contract mindful of potential expansion beyond NPA members and, perhaps, the need for a more generic approach. If the LDR system is ongoing, it should not require new contracts in order to accommodate different funding streams, expansion in industry groups, types of host newsrooms, LDR employment, qualifying publishing partners, or eligible areas contributing to local democracy. Ideally, the new contract should not be characterised as Year 2 but as the contract for ongoing service.

Finding 4: (a) The LDR contract process involved venturing into new territory and it is understandable that negotiations were more protracted than might otherwise have been the case. The limited scope of funding also focused negotiations on the present, without necessarily considering future changes to a more permanent scheme. (b) There would be merit in seeking a better funding schedule alignment. (c) As the Year 2 contract is being rewritten, it would be advantageous to do so with a view to the future and the desirability of flexibility to allow changes to the scheme without major renegotiation.

HOST SITES

The host sites are subject to detailed supply agreements that were the subject of negotiation between RNZ, NPA and NZ On Air and obviously draw on the BBC Local News Partnership terms and conditions. It is outside the brief of this review to relitigate that process. However, attention is drawn to the use of numerical targets that are retained in the Year 2 application (Schedules 1 and 2 of the Standard Supply Agreement). Quotas, for want of a better name, may make for ease of monitoring but do not attest to the true performance of the service. They are classic examples of “never mind the quality, feel the width”. For the LDR reporters,

a production quota is a poor indicator of how hard they are working. For publications, an LDR publication quota does not reflect the differing circumstances of each newspaper nor the manner in which LDR content is treated. An alternative is advisable and is discussed later in the review under KPIs.

Beyond some basic issues related to democratic deficit, it has been difficult to determine why individual host sites were chosen. NZ on Air has indicated that determination of the individual host sites beyond 'basic issues related to democratic deficit' included: geographic spread of providers across the motu, and a balance of national parent company-owned titles and locally owned and operated independent titles. It is apparent, however, that industry preferences have had an influence. That is the nature of a pilot driven by the initiative of one industry group but the focus on that group created anomalies that can be addressed as the scheme moves beyond a pilot phase.

It is, for example, anomalous for the community newspapers owned by Stuff to benefit from the scheme through the parent's membership of NPA while independent community newspapers were ineligible as hosts. This could be resolved by inviting the Community Newspaper Association to join the hosting scheme on a suitably modified basis. Similarly, although Te Whakaruruhau o Ngā Reo Irirangi Māori (Iwi Radio), Pacific Media Network, and the Access Radio Network serve regional and local communities, the print emphasis on the pilot denied them the ability to participate as hosts. That, too, should be remedied. So, too, should the anomaly that allowed the digital services of hosts or their parent groups to benefit directly from hosting an LDR reporter while established stand-alone independent digital news platforms did not. Magazines do not appear to have figured in the LDR equation, but any move to allow one-off projects could also bring those publications within its orbit

Even within the NPA membership the pilot created tensions between haves and have-nots – where one publication has an LDR but an adjacent rival does not. This tension has not been lessened by the fact that the latter can apply to be a recipient of content. It can, in fact, exacerbate the problem when there are perceptions that LDR hosts are not observing the spirit of their agreements by such things as late filings. The situation is not unique to the New Zealand scheme. Similar issues have arisen in the UK's Local News Partnership and the BBC's LNP management unit has attempted to resolve them on a case-by-case basis. It has not sought to anticipate issues by, for example, requiring bidders for LDRs to disclose possible conflicts with rivals (an unlikely eventuality, at best) as the contract evaluation process is already onerous. It has, however, made it clear to hosts that repeat episodes of failing to abide by the letter of their agreements could place their contracts in jeopardy.

A further criticism from non-hosts was that, if they were ineligible because they were covering local democracy issues well, they were being "penalised for doing a good job". This criticism has been encountered elsewhere. However, it is highly unlikely that they were, in

fact, covering *all* aspects adequately and, the UK for example, it has been suggested that they identify the gaps in their coverage and make applications to cover them (assuming they meet other criteria).

There is no easy solution to territorial rivalries. In fact, they are the stuff on which journalism thrives. Therefore, tensions *will* occur. However, rivalries may be kept in check if two approaches are observed.

The first is that the selection process must be demonstrably robust and as transparent as possible. It must be obvious to the marketplace that an LDR bid was successful because – on a level playing field – it stated the best case for filling an identifiable need.

The second approach is for host newsrooms to refrain from taking a proprietary view of the LDR. Although the reporter is domiciled in a newsroom and is under the control of that newsroom, she or he is paid from the public purse. That places on the reporter and the newsroom an obligation to see their endeavours as public services which should be delivered impartially. In other words, the LDR is not ‘our reporter’ but ‘a public service journalist operating from our newsroom’. The LDR’s output should be available for the widest possible distribution in a timely manner.

Both the Canadian and United Kingdom schemes emphasise these factors and it has had a ‘defusing’ effect.

Suggestions for avoiding - or at least ameliorating - conflict are discussed further on page 32.

On a positive note, the LDRs report good working relationships in their host newsrooms. The majority of recruits were immediately welcomed into the newsroom as much-needed resources. Where there were initial misgivings by incumbent reporters who felt their ‘patch’ was being taken over, those concerns have been addressed and resolved. All report good working relationships with respective editors.

Finding 5: (a) The initial host selection process was, not unnaturally, conditioned by the scheme’s prime movers. (b) Future selection processes should be robust, transparent, and inclusive in order to extend the reach to other media and to forestall complaints from rivals. (c) More emphasis should be placed on the public funding/public service aspect of the LDRs in order to ameliorate perceived competitive advantages. (d) Relationships between host newsrooms and LDRs are sound.

FUNDING COMPARISON

The total cost of funding the New Zealand LDR scheme in Year 1 was \$1 million and covered eight LDR reporters and administration. The planned budget for Year 2 – on the basis of

increasing the number of LDR reporters to 12 and also employing an RNZ LDR editor – is \$1.5 million.

The Canadian Local Journalism Initiative is a five-year \$C50 million (\$NZ57.6M) initiative funded by the federal government and supports 200 reporters. The British scheme is funded by the BBC from its annual licence fees and is an £8 million (\$NZ16m) a year commitment covering up to 150 reporters (currently 140).

The total payment to host newsrooms per reporter under the Canadian scheme is a maximum \$C60,000 p.a. (\$NZ69,137) while the annual per reporter payment in the UK is £37,500 (\$NZ75,232)⁷. The New Zealand maximum average LDR costs for each reporter in year 1 was \$89,600 and covered salary, equipment, communications/software and travel. The comparable figure in the year two application covering 12 reporters is \$89,300.

The UK scheme has an administrative staff of five. The Canadian system cannot be directly compared as it operates on a distributed structure, with its CMS hub managed by Canadian Press. With the appointment of the RNZ LDR editor, the New Zealand scheme will have an administrative staff of two.

Finding 6: (a) The scale of the Canadian and British operations are such that their administrative overheads are lower on a per capita basis but structural differences make direct comparisons difficult. That is not the case, however, in comparing the direct costs per journalist. The New Zealand direct costs are much higher than in Canada and still significantly higher than the British cost per journalist. This suggests either (i) the absorption of costs by newsrooms in both cases as it is unlikely that journalists' pay rates are higher in New Zealand than in those jurisdictions, or (ii) the New Zealand scheme is pitched higher up the pay scale than in the other schemes. The differences merit further investigation, particularly if the New Zealand LDR scheme is further expanded. (b) Using the BBC scheme as a benchmark, the NZ LDR administration should not be advanced beyond two people for the foreseeable future.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTERS

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment of LDRs has not been easy, in spite of the growing number of journalists made redundant since 2018. There have been two principal reasons: A reluctance to move to small regional centres, and the uncertainty of funding beyond the pilot phase. The funding

⁷ A supplement for the Greater London area increases the per-reporter cost to £39,500 (\$NZ79,245) in the capital.

uncertainty may have been a factor in a higher-than-desirable turnover of LDR staff and the fact that not all LDR positions were filled for the full nine months under review.

The recruitment process itself is sound but, doubtless as a function of the above, there have been variations in experience and skill levels across the pilot intake. That said, some host newsrooms have attracted high quality candidates.

The rollover of funding to a second year removes a little of the uncertainty but, as that second year is now looming, the scheme is effectively back to where it started as far as potential recruits (and existing LDRs) are concerned: Funding is only guaranteed for a year. If talent is to be attracted from larger markets and retained, some guarantee of continuity of employment may be required. It is unrealistic, however, to expect small publishers to commit to retaining LDRs if funding ceased (perhaps in other roles) when they cannot give such guarantees to long-serving staff in the current media and economic climate.

Recruiting into relatively remote areas is also an issue faced by the British and Canadian schemes although, in the case of the latter, its vast size means 'remote' has a different scale of meaning. The pool of available talent may also be less than imagined. The experience in the UK – and probably elsewhere – is that redundant journalists are turning their backs on the profession and seeking other jobs.

There is, however, more certainty over the length of tenure in LDR roles. The Canadian scheme is funded by the federal government over five years and the BBC contracts are for two years with an option for a third.

Finding 7: (a) Bringing talent into the newsroom has been a perennial problem that extends beyond the LDR scheme. However, variation in experience/ability should be addressed by the host newsroom in conjunction with RNZ. (b) Greater certainty of funding is necessary if high quality candidates are to be attracted and retained. A three-year funding cycle – subject to annual performance reviews of both the LDR and host site – would greatly assist the process.

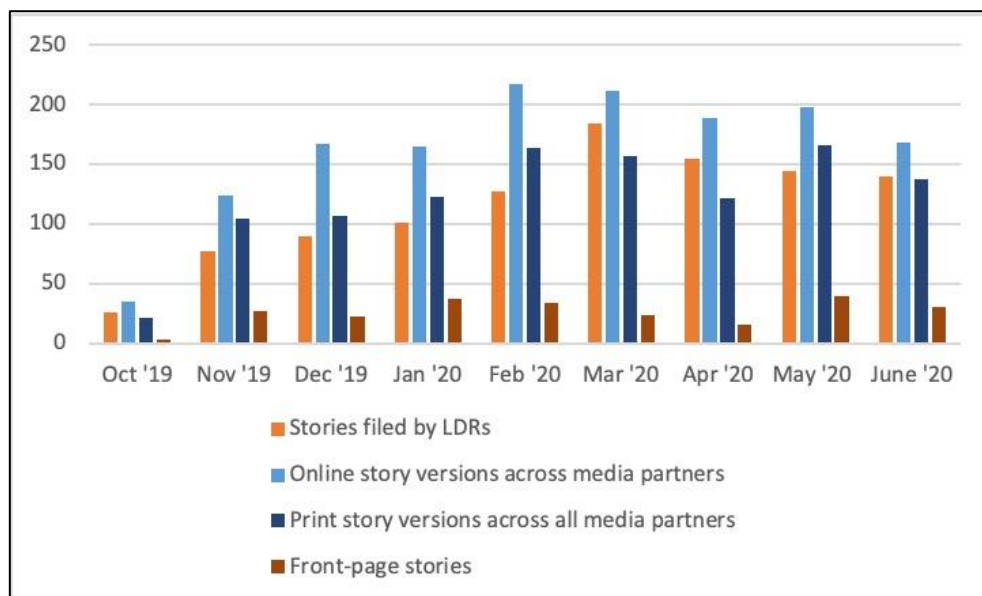
OUTPUT

Between October 2019 and June 2020 a total of 1042 stories were filed by LDRs.⁸ This number is unremarkable in itself – the story production is no better than average. The significance lies in the fact that a proportion, perhaps a large proportion, would not have been written were the LDRs not in place. The fact that at least 232 appeared on front pages in the nine months to June 2020 is evidence of the importance attached to their work.

⁸ The latest available comparative dataset.

Numerical targets are a fraught measure of editorial output and, during the course of the pilot, a *requirement* that each LDR file a minimum of two stories a day was dropped. That was the right move to make. A reporter is more productive writing one well-researched and significant story than in producing two or more stories chosen largely because they were easy to report. There are better measures, as discussed under KPIs on page 37.

RNZ monitors output and use. The following chart indicated aggregated results across users and platforms on a month-by-month basis.



A survey of 193 stories written between 3 June and 3 July 2020 were analysed to determine the range of subjects covered by the LDRs. It revealed a wide range of topics across the spectrum of local government, with a particular emphasis on territorial authority and district health board finances and on the environment.

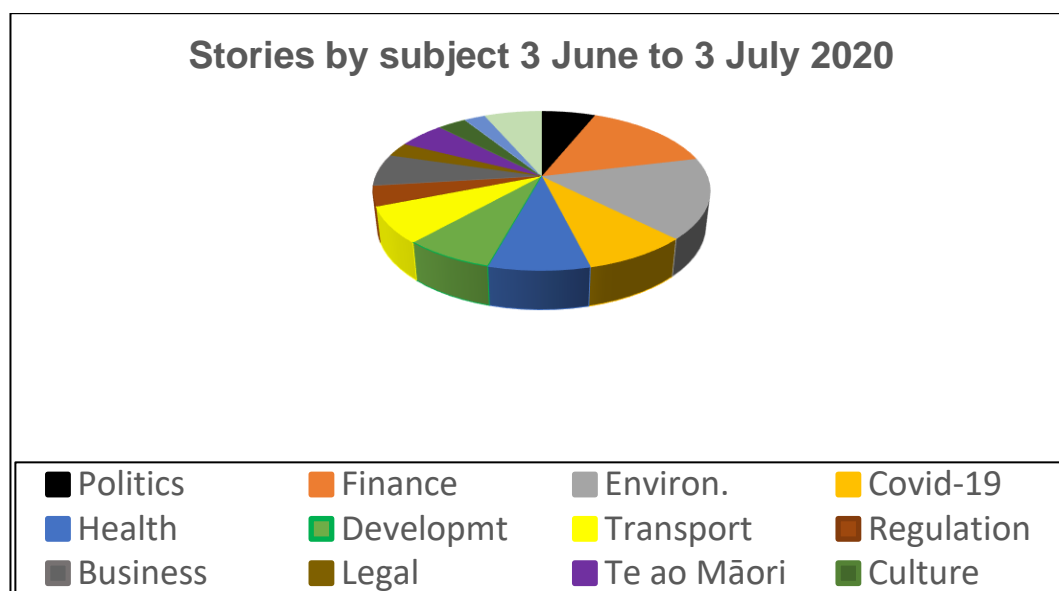
Coverage of Covid-19 related topics was an abnormal demand on reporters but, nonetheless, was a vital subject that continues to occupy areas of local democracy.

The survey reflects only the work of LDRs and not necessarily the total output on these subjects by the host newsrooms. It was evident, for example, that many newsrooms have opted to share responsibility for some coverage between the LDR and other editorial staff. The most common area is health. Some newsrooms have opted to have LDRs cover DHB meetings and leave other areas to a health reporter. Some leave the DHB meetings to health reporters, and others appear to cover DHB meetings on the basis of availability. Similarly, not all territorial local authorities are the sole province of LDRs. In a number of cases established local body reporters have retained coverage of some councils and leave others to the LDR. This is most obvious where more than one publication is serviced by a newsroom.

It was apparent in a broad survey of LDR CMS data that when the LDR is absent, some areas go uncovered. This was confirmed during interviews with individual LDRs. In other words, there may be at least a partial return to democracy deficit.

The most conspicuous area where coverage was unexpectedly low was te ao Māori. Given the explicit reference to Māori incorporations and trusts, plus the inclusion of te reo Māori as a desirable skill for LDRs, it is reasonable to say that this is an area where the pilot has under-delivered. Only 13 stories relating to te ao Māori were filed in the month, compared to 16 on leisure subjects. The role and prominence of Māori incorporations and trusts varies from area to area but even in regions where it might have greater significance, coverage by LDRs was comparatively light. Gaining the confidence of iwi institutions takes effort and some LDRs acknowledge they have had insufficient time to develop trust and good contacts. Where stories have been written they have been well received and coverage had been appreciated. Nonetheless, expectation remains higher than the delivery.

In general, however, the LDRs have covered a suitably wide range of subjects, within the context of their association with elected bodies in their areas. Some subjects are event driven and local coverage of politics would be expected to increase before elections.



Finding 8: (a) The scope of LDR coverage is encouragingly wide but would benefit from periodic audits in each host newsroom to ensure that a reasonable balance is maintained. For example, planning hearings can produce a large number of interesting stories but should not be at the expense of other coverage. Although shared coverage between LDRs and other reporters does not appear to have created insurmountable problems, it is an area that should be discussed by RNZ and host editors when LDRs are appointed to ensure that (a) best use is made of the appointment and (b) avoid confusion in the institutions being covered. The drop in coverage during lengthy LDR absences is concerning. Either host

newsrooms need to commit to using other reporters to fill the gap or the scheme expanded to allow for the employment of locums. Some gaps can be avoided by ensuring that LDRs take leave during periods of low local authority activity i.e. late December and January.

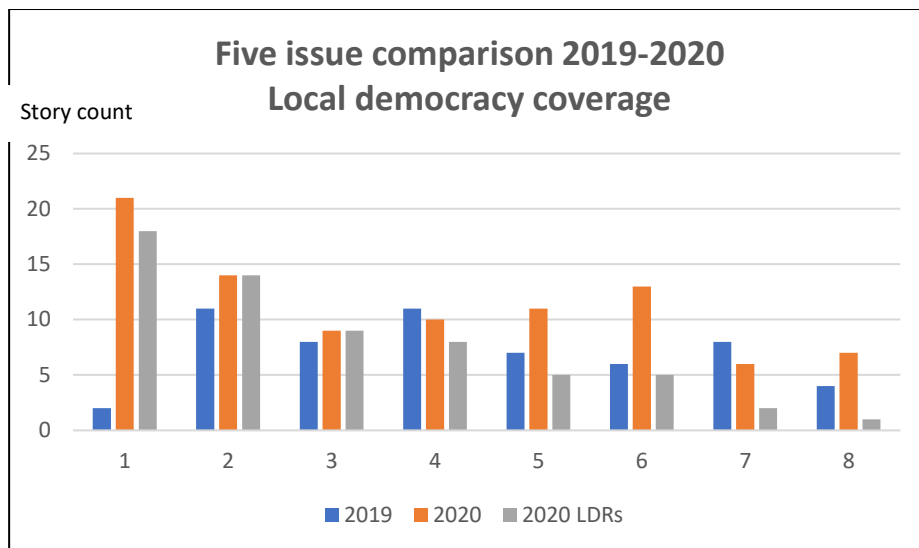
Finding 9: (a) Although reporting on te ao Māori requires special skills and knowledge, the amount of coverage of Māori representative bodies is less than expected. This is a significant subject area in all regions and vitally so in some. (b) The limited coverage of te ao Māori should be redressed.

COVERAGE COMPARISONS

An attempt was made to compare local democracy coverage in each host's principal nominated publication before and after the introduction of LDRs. The exercise proved problematic as it was difficult to define time periods when all LDR posts were active. Leave (both scheduled and parental) and vacancies prevented a single time period being applied across all publications. For this reason, issues before the arrival of the LDR were drawn from June-July 2019 but issues during the pilot were spread across May, June and July 2020 and, in one case, required analysis of August issues to validate the findings. Only stories with Local Democracy Reporter identifiers were attributed to LDRs in the 2020 analysis.

The exercise was further complicated by the fact that not all coverage of local democracy during the pilot was carried out by LDRs and that the work of LDR reporters also appeared in other titles published by the host.

Nonetheless, a comparison of five editions of each host title before and after the arrival of LDRs showed significant variations. Due to the fact that individual performance is expressly outside the brief of this review, it deals with comparisons in a manner which does not lead to identification. The following chart is ranked by LDR output in the given editions and reveals significant variation in LDR coverage. The chart indicates total 2020 output and the proportion contributed by LDRs.



The most prolific LDR output across five 2020 editions of a newspaper (column 1) also was a dramatic illustration of the filling of a democratic deficit. Others (Columns 2 & 3) showed that the LDR contributed all the local democracy coverage in those 2020 issues while others (columns 5-8) suggested the LDRs' contribution, for one reason or another, was minor. Here a note of caution is required. A quantitative analysis does not provide a full picture. Some of the variation between sites is due to differences in pagination and availability of local news space. In all but two case there was, in fact, an increase in local democracy reporting overall and in four cases most or all of that increase was down to the LDR. In some cases where the LDR input constituted only part of the total, this was due in large measure to other reporters covering the most significant local body in the circulation area while the LDR filled gaps in coverage elsewhere in the region. It is also a reflection of the limitations of numerical analysis: A small total may disguise the fact that a reporter spent a large amount of time on a significant long-form story that, nonetheless, adds only one to the total. Nor does it reflect the fact that in some cases stories were carried on digital platforms rather than in the print publications. Unfortunately, wide differences in the level of digital activity among the hosts ruled out comparisons across those platforms. In addition, several publications with an apparently low numerical output by the LDR produced a proportionately higher number of lead stories than others with a higher overall output. In total, almost a third of the 40 editions from 2020 that were analysed had LDR front page leads. RNZ monitors front page stories across the host newspapers and associated titles. Not all of the 232-plus stories it recorded were leads but the sample in this review suggests a reasonably high proportion have led their respective newspapers.

The 62 LDR-written stories in the chosen 2020 editions ranged from front page stories to relatively short stories well back in the paper. A high proportion were sourced to scheduled events – council and board meetings or planning hearings – and in many cases were straight-forward reports of debate and decisions within those meetings. Such coverage is an

important aspect of local democracy. Reporters are the effective eyes and ears of the public at these gatherings and such coverage is standard fare. However, it should not be seen as the beginning and end of local democracy reporting. It is part of the LDRs' brief to interpret and interrogate the decisions of elected representatives and officials. And to look beyond agendas. Some, but not all, do so.

At the other end of the scale, are the decisions that merit no more than a few lines but which are important in local areas e.g. a contract to repair footpaths, a new pedestrian crossing, or planting in a local reserve. LDRs have not been encouraged to write these brief paragraphs because (a) they can distort numerical quotas and (b) they are too short to merit LDR identifiers. Several LDRs reported that they had been discouraged from writing them. Another thought they were banned. Carefully chosen, they have value beyond their size.

There was little evidence in the selected editions of coordinated work by several or all LDRs, in spite of the fact that initiatives such as the Provincial Growth Fund ran across many of their territories. While the LDRs may use their closed Facebook page to discuss stories, the Planning Advisory section of the LDR CMS Hub – which can be seen by other newsroom staff – is largely limited to notes on upcoming stories or the week ahead in individual regions. It is not used to discuss coordinated stories to which each can contribute and which would have much wider appeal than eight stories focused on single regions. The narrow focus is unsurprising, given the initiative is about *local* democracy and all of the LDRs are situated in *regional* newsrooms. The LDR editor will be responsible for coordinating a wider focus where appropriate. That is a sound proposal, particularly as it serves a subsidiary purpose of monitoring quality, as will be seen later in the review.

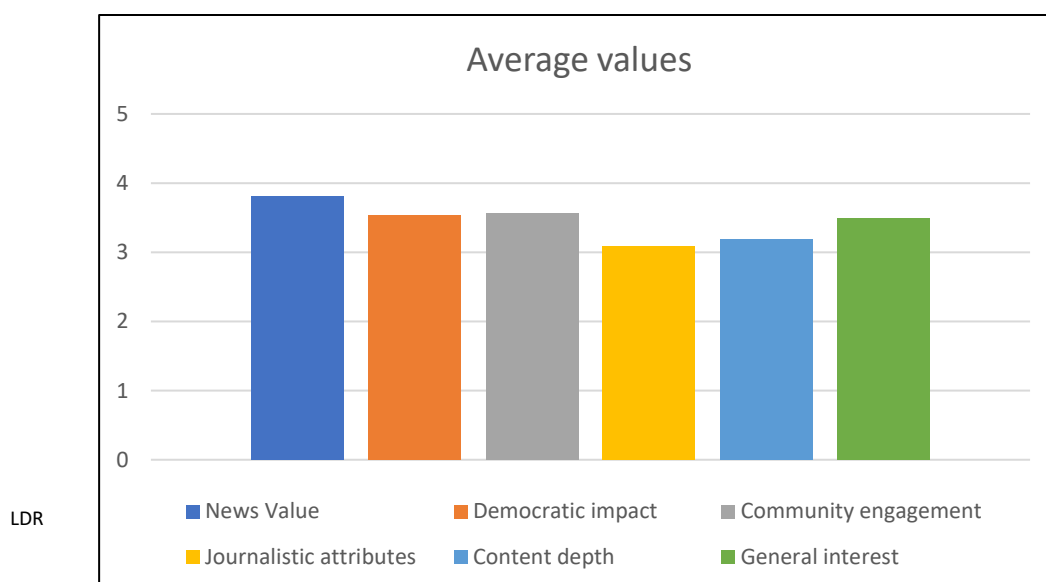
Finding 10: (a) LDRs have established a solid pattern of coverage of elected representatives and public hearings, with most publications in the sample showing gains (some significantly so) since the LDR scheme was introduced. In many cases the bulk of this gain was due to the LDR reporter. (b) There is variation in output and, while quantity is a poor measure of performance, host editors should be encouraged to compare the work of their LDR against those in other regions to determine whether their reporter is providing 'real value for money'. (c) While there are some examples of well researched coverage, there is a need for more journalism that helps people understand the decisions that are being made on their behalf and the needs of their communities that may, or may not, be being met. (d) Some LDRs will require mentoring to undertake these more demanding stories and will require coordination by RNZ where more than one LDR is involved.

STORY QUALITY

Six stories by each LDR were subjected to detailed content analysis. Again, to avoid individual performance reviews, no reporters are identified and the order in which the analysis appears

has been randomised. Each story was examined according to six criteria – news value, democratic impact, community engagement, journalistic attributes, content depth and general interest – and evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5 on each⁹. The stories varied in length between 346 and 1381 words. The template for the analysis is attached (Appendix 3).

The stories rated between average and good (average 3.4) although a small number approached the top end of the scale and individual elements of a significant group were good to very good. The areas in which many struggled to consistently perform well were in journalistic attributes – those elements that contribute to good quality, fair and balanced reporting – and in the depth of content. When each LDR's stories were grouped the quality was generally slightly above average but short of good. Some stories did not meet generally accepted standards but, on the other hand, there were examples of excellence on individual story attributes.



In the sample, the most covered subject areas were environment and (in spite of the wider sample) te ao Māori with 10 topics each. Both categories had average scores of 3.4, suggesting if LDRs had greater opportunities to cover Māori issues, they would cope well. The subject with the highest average score was politics (8 stories) with 3.5. Two stories within that group scored 4.3 and 4.4 out of 5. Finance and health (7 stories each) were also competently covered with average scores of 3.4 and 3.3 respectively.

It was encouraging to see that news value (3.8), democratic impact (3.6) and community impact (3.6) were the highest averaging attributes of stories, followed by general interest level (3.5). This suggests the LDRs are identifying and writing stories that meet the scheme's intended outcomes. Particular attention was paid by LDRs to debate within meetings, providing the audience with an understanding of representative processes. Similar

⁹ 1=very poor 2=poor 3=average 4=good 5=very good

approaches were taken in planning hearings where care was taken to report the range of views presented.

Finding 11: (a) The content analysis suggests that while quality is acceptable, recruitment issues are a barrier to achieving the levels of journalistic excellence to which the job description aspires. It should be acknowledged, however, that overall quality varies among the eight publications and LDRs have produced work that suggests many are capable of achieving high standards.(b) While they may be at times let down by gaps in their journalistic skills, it is evident that all LDRs have a well-developed sense of why they have been placed in their roles and endeavour to fill local democracy gaps where they are identified. (c) Journalistic attributes can be further developed over time. (d) Formal mentoring programmes, either by host newsrooms (which have a responsibility to their staff and readers to maximise the quality of material that is produced) or by the LDR editor within RNZ, could markedly improve the overall quality of output. (e) The methodology used in this content analysis could form the basis of periodic quality reviews (see KPIs).

MULTIMEDIA

LDRs and their host newsrooms have been diligent in posting photographs to accompany stories filed on the CMS hub. They are a mix of pictures taken by LDR reporters, by other newsroom staff, or are stock images. RNZ monitoring indicates a total of 1370 photographs have been uploaded since the inception of the scheme. A limited survey of LDR-produced images suggest they vary from serviceable to very good quality. LDR photographs appears to have been taken on mobile phones. While this is adequate for most portrait shots, digital zoom has its limitations.

A small number of videos have been shot by LDRs, with numbers dwindling during the Covid-19 lockdown. While these videos may serve the lower standards of digital platforms, none could be considered of sufficient quality for linear broadcast.

There is a rising demand for reporters to produce video and the LDRs are no exception. However, there is a time penalty involved in such production, one that is exacerbated by the minimal training that LDRs have received in this area and the technical resources they have available to produce it. It is interesting to note that in the British LNP, the LDRs are not encouraged to produce video beyond the recording of significant news events. The BBC's view is that the LDRs are not trained or equipped to broadcast standards and that it is more efficient to use the LDR stories as advisories for their own news crews to conduct video interviews where warranted.

One of the most obvious deficiencies of reporter-operated video is sound quality. Even in clips that were visually acceptable (some even very good) the sound quality was extremely poor because it was not recorded with external or lapel microphones. LDRs do not appear to

be providing audio-only recordings in their story packages but have undertaken a limited number of on-air interviews with radio hosts.

Finding 12: (a) LDR story packages are generally well-served with still images although the quality of iPhone-based photographs varies from reporter to reporter and there are limits to this technology. (b) The call for more multimedia content, while understandable, must be measured against the call on time that would otherwise be available for newsgathering. (c) If the supply of video recordings is considered justified, more training should be given to LDRs and consideration given to providing better quality sound recording (with the necessary training). There is scope, then, to also provide audio clips to radio partners.

UPTAKE

By definition, Local Democracy Reporting is local. Much of the content, therefore, has limited interest beyond the region from which it originates. That does not in any way devalue the content. Its principal purpose should be to inform those affected by the bodies under scrutiny and to provide members of the community with the ability to make informed judgements about decisions made on their behalf. The use of LDR material in a host newspaper and some associated group titles is very high. However, it is difficult to track use beyond that point.

Data on the number of online versions of stories uploaded by partners is patchy but between them RNZ, Stuff and NZME (the largest sites) collectively placed almost a thousand items on their platforms. A further 500 were logged by others but three hosts and most of the user partners did not supply analytical data or it was not applicable in their cases.

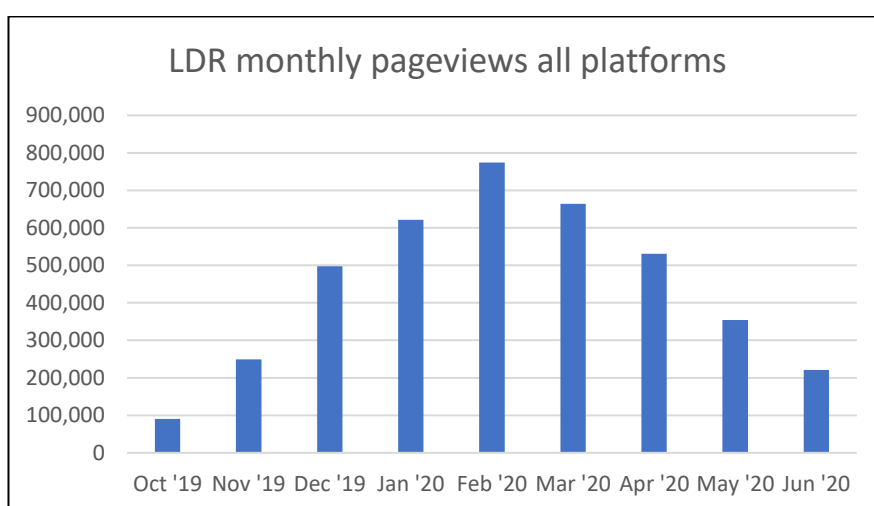
RNZ makes strong efforts to track the use of LDR material and is generally able to do so with printed content, particularly via Stuff's print audits of its own publications. It is less able to track online use beyond the main groups and among content partners who are not LDR hosts. It is also questionable whether the available metrics are accurate indicators of actual uptake of stories.

Digital metrics supplied for this review suffer from the same problem that was encountered in an NZ On Air review of regional video news which, like this study, found different analytics applied by partners. For example, some provides unique visitor numbers in lieu of pageviews. Some provided web metrics but not those from apps. RNZ monitoring indicates there have been four million pageviews of LDR material online since October 2019 but this figure is subject to those caveats.

This looks like an impressive number but it needs to be seen in perspective. Variations and errors notwithstanding, some indication of digital use of material might be gained by comparing an average of the monthly LDR pageviews logged by RNZ across all partners with

the published average monthly pageviews publicly acknowledged by the largest news site stuff.co.nz. In the nine months to June 2020, there was an average of 444,745 pageviews of LDR items per month. Stuff’s media pack states its monthly pageviews average 149,957,000. Thus, the LDR content represents less than three per cent of Stuff’s traffic and to the equation would have to be added the monthly pageviews of NZME and RNZ (both of which express traffic in unique users), which would further reduce the percentage.

Of greater concern is the fact that online traffic appears to be declining. Usage peaked in February but has since shown a marked decline.



RNZ monitoring suggests Stuff has led the digital trend line with steady growth then steady decline in LDR pageviews. RNZ and NZME indicate fluctuating monthly pageviews but May-June returns suggest an across-the-board decline. The traffic pattern is puzzling, given reports of significant growth in news media digital traffic during the first Covid-19 lockdown from late March to May.

These metrics do not, however, paint the full picture. Anecdotally, digital partners in Marlborough appear to make good use of material produced by that region’s LDR and the Greymouth Star reports high uptake of its LDR material by Stuff. This suggests that other digital publishers are ready to use the content, particularly if they can do so in advance of publication elsewhere (including by the host publisher’s own digital service).

The BBC uses uptake of stories as an important measure of the quality of its LDR content – good stories get picked up. The uptake of stories outside the host newspapers (and by RNZ itself) is insufficiently developed to suggest its use as a quality measure in this country at present.

Finding 13: (a) Outside host organisations, the uptake of stories is difficult to accurately determine. However, given that the mandate of the LDRs has been a strongly local one, the absence of widespread use should not be unexpected. (b) Hosts and user partners are

already bound by the service agreement to provide monthly reports. Clearly, not all have done so to a degree that allows accurate monitoring and equally obviously some have supplied incompatible data. They should agree in future to the use of common metrics to allow accurate information to be gathered, and provide the data on a monthly basis. (c) If the incoming LDR editor is able to coordinate reporting to provide stories with broader appeal, there should be a better uptake of stories by other users. (d) A broadening of the LDR service beyond NPA members would also contribute to better uptake. (e) It would be further broadened by a drive to bring more user partners aboard. The aim should be two-fold: Expand use of LDR output to the widest possible audience, and get to the point where uptake can be used as a measure of story quality.

FEEDBACK

LDR VIEWS OF THE SCHEME

All local democracy reporters were interviewed during the review and, without exception, they remain enthusiastic supporters of the scheme. Their views of its value include clear beliefs that it *has* plugged serious gaps in coverage; had led to regular presence at council and board meetings; had increased the ability to hold power to account; had increased the depth of coverage; had significantly boosted newsroom resources; had “opened my eyes to a lot of strong local reporting” through exposure to the work of other LDRs; and has gained wide recognition in respective communities.

The scope of work varies from region to region, depending on the nature of representative bodies in the area, their geographic spread, newsroom arrangements and whether or not the newsroom serves multiple titles. In some cases, significant local authorities have remained the province of existing reporters and the LDRs fill gaps by reporting on other bodies. In other cases, there were conflicts in meeting schedules that required assignments to be split between the LDR and other reporters. Many shared DHB coverage with health reporters. The Health and Disability System Review published in June recommends sweeping changes to DHBs, including removal of elected bodies, and reforms should determine whether or not they remain within the scope of LDRs. It is already apparent that it is a grey area as far as some LDRs are concerned. Although all were aware of their *te ao Māori* responsibilities, some acknowledged they had been unable to give adequate attention to iwi authorities, incorporations and trusts. Part of the problem was gaining acceptance, which is something to be achieved over time. Lack of available time was also cited as a reason for lower than optimum Māori coverage. In one area, a dedicated reporter was responsible for coverage of Māori elected bodies. All LDRs reported having heavy workloads, although this is likely to be the case with all reporters.

Newly recruited LDRs felt their introduction to the newsroom had been well accepted by other staff and, where there had been a transfer of rounds to the LDR, any resentment had been quickly resolved. With both new recruits and existing staff members who were recruited as LDRs (and their existing role backfilled), they have been seen as very welcome boosts to scarce editorial resources.

They report good working relationships with editors and many stated they were given a high degree of autonomy to pursue stories within the local democracy sphere. They also reported good working relationships with the RNZ LDR administrator. In the course of the interviews there was only one cited instance of a conflict with the RNZ administrator over whether a certain story should be filed. Some felt that regular virtual meetings of the LDR group were overly long and other duties would be given higher priority. The availability of mentors within the newsroom was variable – many are very small – and in at least one case a mentor from elsewhere in the organisation was provided.

Among the LDRs there was widespread concern about the lack of cover when they were absent. One stated it starkly: “If I’m not there, it isn’t covered.” One must have sympathy, however, with the newsrooms concerned. All are working on reduced resources, some drastically so. The ability to cover all bases when staffing is further depleted is challenging for any of the newsrooms. They are forced to prioritise coverage. Some do manage to provide cover when the LDR is on holiday.

It is fair to say that there were no expressions of wild enthusiasm over the LDR CMS hub. It was seen as “adequate”, although one noted it was “better than when we started”. It is regarded as “clunky”.¹⁰ As a result some LDRs write content offline then load it onto the hub. This is unfortunate as it creates an incomplete audit trail and potentially could delay the availability of content to other users. The LDR comments on the hub were not unexpected. Their perceptions are accurate. However, as stated above, it *does* perform all of the necessary functions and there are higher priorities for funding than a hub ‘makeover’.

An offshoot of discussion on the hub was the requirement that all stories were available for uplift once cleared by the respective newsroom. This was an issue for LDRs in non-daily hosts who felt there should be an ability to embargo stories until their host’s next publication day. This is a problem also faced in the United Kingdom and Canada but in both cases the view was that public funding meant public service and timely availability was an intrinsic part of that philosophy.

Multimedia and the provision of video gave rise to mixed reactions from the LDRs. For some it was not a priority in the host newsroom. Others were keen to be involved, although most

¹⁰ One function that LDRs wished to see was the ability to make minor corrections to copy without editor or news director signoff on the CMS hub.

expressed the view that their training to date had been rudimentary. All, however, had a common view that creating it may be at the expense of writing other stories. One stated that it was hard to meet expectations on multimedia “because I don’t have enough hands”. One expressed a desire for advanced training in still photography.¹¹

It was encouraging to see a desire among the LDRs to participate in group projects. This suggests the RNZ LDR editor will find a positive response to such initiatives. They were also keen to see the use of LDR material expanded beyond present users. One suggestion was a weekly public subscriber email newsletter highlighting the best Local Democracy Reporting stories with links to their work which is carried on the RNZ website.

Finding 14: (a) The LDRs have a positive attitude to their roles and feel they are making positive contributions to the community. Their view is reinforced by what they describe as very good public feedback. (b) Variations in the areas of coverage and overlaps with other reporters points to the value of preliminary discussions to map the use of newsroom/LDR resources in local democracy coverage. (c) If there are fundamental changes in health administration (including abolition of the DHBs and their replacement by Ministry of Health units), the LDR should be removed from that coverage unless the scope of the scheme is widened as suggested in Finding 1. (d) The drop in coverage during LDR absences has already been noted. It was confirmed by the LDRs themselves and adds weight to the suggestion that funding should be provided for short-term replacements (outside the summer holiday period of low local authority activity). (e) None of the feedback was sufficient to alter the view that the LDR CMS hub does not require major redevelopment in the short term. Routine communication was, however, raised by the LDRs and the sole area where hub development is desirable is in communication between LDRs, between LDRs and the RNZ editor, and between the RNZ editor (and administrator) and newsroom executives. Existing systems are sub-optimal. Ideally, communication should link through the host’s own CMS system. That appears difficult to achieve at minimal cost, therefore some enhancement of the CMS messaging system – or email groups – would be desirable. (f) The LDRs also confirm the desirability of producing multimedia content (with appropriate training) but it carries with it the costs in time noted above. (g) A weekly subscriber newsletter linked to the Local Democracy Reporting section of the RNZ website is an idea worth pursuing.

EXECUTIVE VIEWS OF THE SCHEME

¹¹ Although iPhone cameras have technical limitations, they can provide professional-quality results using appropriate techniques. A number of professional commercial photographers in New Zealand now specialise in iPhone-based images. Training in these techniques may be preferable to investing in high-end photographic equipment.

The collective view of the value of the scheme mirrored the sentiments expressed in RNZ's survey of editors included in the application for second year funding: All regarded the scheme as valuable and supported its continuation.

Each noted the increasing difficulty faced in covering local government and other elected bodies and felt the LDR had made a material difference to the ability to provide cover. Many had been aware of "black holes" which had successfully been filled by LDRs. There was a wide view that the scheme had improved coverage in depth as well as breadth, particularly through a commitment to attend council/board meetings and hearings. Several noted it had increased awareness of the importance of local democracy reporting: "I think our readers expect it of us." The addition of an LDR had also allowed the newsroom to 'backfill', placing reporters in other roles that had also been difficult to accommodate.

Several confirmed the difficulty in attracting experienced staff to the regions and said that journalistic quality was a perennial problem not restricted to the LDR programme. However, where good quality journalists had been attracted to the role, there was enthusiastic recognition of the contributions they made.

The majority were happy to grant the LDR a degree of autonomy in choosing what to cover but each said there were regular meetings with the LDR to direct coverage where necessary or to coordinate with other reporting.

RNZ is seen by editors as "an honest broker". There was some disquiet over the impending appointment of an RNZ LDR editor with a number being unsure of the role that person will have. They were concerned that there could be attempted inroads into their editorial 'sovereignty' but felt this could be avoided. Several stated they did not have regular contact with the RNZ administrator but that relations were cordial. In a number of instances, regular liaison is through a group executive rather than individual editors. One made a plea that the administrative scheme does not become "too complicated" if it grew while another cautioned against "creation of another level of bureaucracy".

There were diverging views on the sharing of copy. Some were very firmly of the view that the service would only work if the parties cooperated – "by its very nature it's a cooperative" – while a small number were concerned by the ability of others to publish LDR material on websites or in print before the host newsroom was able to publish (many smaller titles place their content online *after* print publication). They recognised they had signed up to timely uploads but hoped some accommodation could be made. One user partner complained that material was filed too late for its deadline. A possible solution is offered in Finding 15 below.

There were also diverging views on multimedia production. Larger organisations with well-established websites were keen to see video coming from LDRs while others were less enthusiastic and preferred the LDRs to concentrate on text.

When asked about the value of the LDR relative to other potential targets for assistance, the executives were happy for government funding to go to the LDR scheme and wished to see it funded beyond the present allocation. However, some expressed a desire to see any *additional* assistance from government channelled into court reporting, health, and improved coverage of te ao Māori. There was general support for a longer funding cycle and acknowledgement that a single year of funding for the pilot (now extended for a second year) had contributed to difficulties in attracting LDR staff.

Finding 15: (a) The organisations hosting LDRs are strong supporters for a continuation of the scheme. They are convinced that the service has repaired ‘democratic deficits’ in their regions and made material contributions to the content of their publications. (b) Attracting talent is a problem not limited to the LDR scheme but it is clear that multi-year funding would assist. (c) While the hosts are not opposed to the appointment of an LDR editor, it is apparent that they wish to negotiate rules of engagement that do not impinge on their editorial independence or the relationships they currently have with their LDR staff. There is also a desire that the administration of the scheme does not grow beyond that appointment. (d) Copy sharing is a vexing issue that will be exacerbated if the scheme is extended beyond the NPA, particularly if community newspapers are allowed to host (perhaps part-time) LDRs. (e) The public service principle adopted by the BBC for its LDR content – requiring as soon as practicable filing – is a worthy one that should apply to all current hosts (who have committed to observing it). It is worth signalling, however, that this is an issue that *will* present itself in the future. Neither Canada nor the UK allow for amendments to the timely filing principle but New Zealand is a small country where such issues may be magnified, particularly if there is expansion beyond the current scope of the scheme. There is a danger that making exceptions will create complexity. The answer may lay in overlapping organisations reaching their own agreements. The LDR scheme could facilitate such agreements between third parties by including the following questions in the funding application criteria:

- Have you considered potential conflicts with adjacent or competing media organisations who may view an LDR in your newsroom as an unfair competitive advantage?
- If such potential exists, what efforts have you made to reach an accommodation with that organisation for joint use of LDR material? Note that, because it is government-funded, the work of LDR reporters carries a clear public service imperative meaning it must be made available to all in a timely manner.
- If no potential conflict has been identified prior to application but a dispute arises in the course of the agreement, will you agree to binding mediation by the administrators of the LDR scheme?

LOCAL AUTHORITY VIEWS OF THE SCHEME

All of those contacted said their respective bodies were well aware of the LDR scheme. There was particularly strong recognition of the LDR identifier on stories. With only two exceptions, local authorities welcomed the presence of an LDR in their area. The exceptions felt the scheme had led to an increase frequency of media requests (one stated they were often of a “trivial nature” – and had “given an over-amplified voice to those in the community who have gripes with the council”). As a result there was a major increase in workload and reporters were “looking at the wrong things”. These responses are likely to be a combination of two things: The relationship with the host newspapers is somewhat hostile, and the LDRs are simply doing their job in subjecting the local authority to a level of scrutiny that had not previously been applied.

Most noticed an increased coverage and the vast majority either accepted or welcomed it. The fact that the host newspaper had a reporter dedicated to local democracy was viewed very positively. In a few instances, the reporter who had been covering local authorities moved into the LDR role. Even in those cases, the fact that they were able to dedicate their attention to elected bodies was welcomed, not least because it allowed an accumulation of knowledge by the reporter.¹² In a limited number of cases the LDR covered regional and more distant district councils while the principal district council stayed with an incumbent. In those cases there was less perception of change at local level but more at regional level.

A selection of views:

- “The level of content has definitely increased. There has been a huge increase in coverage of council”
- “X tells stories in a well-balanced and reasonable way. X asks the right questions and challenges us where necessary.”
- “Having one reporter concentrating on this area is very important. We very much want the LDR scheme to continue.”
- “This has definitely improved coverage and the visibility of local government.”
- “In terms of the number of stories there has been an increase but the reverse is the case with objective understanding and engagement. We have a political environment.”¹³
- “I would recommend it [the LDR scheme] continue as a way of getting good quality reporting on local issues.”

¹² In some cases this also reflected perceived inexperience on the part of the LDR reporter and the hope that knowledge would improve with time.

¹³ The authority in question has a volatile council that results in ongoing dissent and often vociferous debate.

Authority representatives noted not only regular attendance at full meetings but also selective attendance at committee meetings and planning meetings that had seldom been covered in the past. Mayors and chief executives reported having direct contact with LDRs outside meetings to discuss stories on which they were working. Contact with communications staff is, of course, a regular occurrence.

The Covid-19 lockdown interfered with the normal interaction between authorities and reporters but remote access and telephone contact was maintained throughout. Many council publicly streamed video of their meetings (with varying degrees of success). Several have continued to livestream proceedings and others are investigating technical improvements that would allow regular streaming. Where that occurs, the nature of reporting of meetings may merit re-examination, particularly if publications are able to place on their websites video clips from the livestreaming.

A drop in coverage during LDR reporter absences was also noted by local authorities. While some newsrooms had stand-ins that was not always the case and informal stories (i.e. not linked to authority meetings or proceedings) diminished.

With the exception mentioned above, few difficulties directly attributed to the scheme were reported by authorities. Where criticisms were expressed, they were generally of a nature that might be levelled at the newsrooms in general and, from the reviewer's experience, are not uncommon and are not new. They are issues for the media industry to deal with, rather than the LDR scheme.

The strong consensus among local authorities was that the LDR programme should continue. Several expressed a wish that it have better continuity of funding.

Finding 16: (a) Praise for the LDR scheme far outweighed criticism of it among local authority representatives and executives. There was a widespread view that it had contributed to an increase in coverage and public understanding. (b) Not all of the publications, however, have good relationships with the local authorities in their area, which are critical of the coverage they receive. In those cases, caution is required in attributing criticism directly to the LDR scheme. On balance, the scheme itself does not appear to be at fault and attitudes are more reflective of the editorial directions under which the LDR's work is undertaken and published. The local authorities' argument is with the editors. (c) The over-riding view is that the LDR scheme should continue in the areas where they are currently hosted and that this positive view can be applied more generally.

COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER VIEWPOINT

Some community newspapers already benefit from the hosting scheme due to their parent company's membership of the NPA. However, the 85 non-NPA community newspaper

publishers who are members of the Community Newspapers Association were not included in the pilot hosting arrangements. Perhaps due to a misunderstanding, CNA members did not initially believe they could participate in any level of the scheme. However, they now understand they have been eligible to access content.

There is a general perception among the independent community publishers that the scheme was tailored to the needs of the NPA. As noted earlier, one independent publisher described it as “helping big companies and their failing dailies”.

The Community Newspaper Association identifies timing as the major issue it faces in participating in the LDR scheme. Community publishing cycles are such that much LDR content “looks like old news” by the time it appears in a weekly title. If stories were written from a more holistic viewpoint rather than being tied to scheduled meetings, more use could be made of them. The publication cycle issue would be exacerbated if communities hosted LDR reporters, with an understandable desire to hold stories until publication because most communities have a print-before-digital policy to give their newspapers currency.

The association sees more scope in the scheme being expanded to allow applications for one-off funding of special projects or part-time employment in specialist areas such as reporting on local iwi.

Finding 17: (a) The association correctly identifies the most significant inhibitor to its participation – fundamentally different publishing cycles. In addition, many do not operate on a scale that would warrant the appointment of a fulltime LDR reporter. There is merit, however, in the suggestion that the LDR scheme could fund freelancers to write about specific local issues requiring a level of investigation that is beyond the resources of small community newspapers, but which have significant local democracy impact. (b) The association’s recognition of te ao Māori as an area requiring better coverage suggests there may be scope for part-time reporters tasked with meeting the needs of both daily and weekly publications.¹⁴

A DIGITAL START-UP PERSPECTIVE

Both the British and Canadian scheme decline to fund digital start-ups in their formative stage and require consistent production for a minimum of 12 months before they will even entertain applications. In New Zealand there are a number of digital news start-ups that passed that threshold but they do not qualify as hosts under the present LDR scheme.

The local nature of LDR reporting is seen as an impediment to participation, even if they signed on as user partners and had access to content from regional hosts. A suggested

¹⁴ Filling both requirements is common in both major newspaper groups that publish weekend titles as well as dailies.

solution is the theme or thread that compares common problems of local democracy across NZ.¹⁵ Similarly, major investigative projects involving the network of LDR reporters or commissioned investigative reporters could ‘put LDR on the national map’. This is an interesting discussion point as it creates a different dimension to local democracy: the crossover between local stories and national stories of local significance.

A further interesting suggestion was the use of the LDR scheme to mentor young reporters outside its orbit on skills and knowledge associated with local democracy.

There was criticism of the “bland” nature of LDR reporting and absence of reporter commentary as another reason why uptake of stories was light. This, however, was accompanied by an admission that the comment was conditioned by the site’s commercial outlook and is not a criticism experienced elsewhere in the review.

Finding 18: (a) There is no reason why digital news platforms outside NPA membership could not host LDR reporters, so long as they meet other criteria including (importantly) reach and viability. However, the nature of the LDR brief is unsuited to nationally oriented platforms unless there is a move toward collaborative stories curated by the RNZ LDR editor. (b) There is more scope for one-off grants for investigative journalism, although there are currently other avenues within NZ On Air’s funding brief that could also potentially be explored to accommodate this need. (c) The use of the LDR scheme for mentoring outside its own reporters is interesting. Consideration could be given to allowing other participants in training sessions and making mentoring advisories more generally available.

KPIs

Throughout this review, reference has been made to the difficulty of applying meaningful measures to gauge the performance of the LDR scheme. Some form of measurement is necessary, however, if for no other reason than meeting NZ On Air’s needs. Because LDR output is technically content funding from NZ On Air, it needs to have some way of indicating the minimum amount of content expected from that funding. NZ On Air is open to reducing content expectations to a reasonable level in order to prioritise story quality but it cannot issue a ‘blank cheque’.

The average monthly output per LDR for the first nine months of the scheme is only 14.5 stories $[(1042 \div 8) \div 9]$ and does not provide a particularly good benchmark as there are significant gaps in continuity of service across the eight newsrooms (for a variety of reasons including staff turnover, leave, recruitment time lags etc). Twenty stories a month (one per day across a five day week) could be considered a baseline for NZ On Air purposes. An

¹⁵ The example provided was the use of council ‘workshops’ and ‘public excluded sessions’ to avoid scrutiny.

alternative could be a requirement (in the application for funding) to state the average monthly story count per reporter over the previous (say) three months. That average could then be used to benchmark the output of the LDR reporter for NZ On Air purposes and has the advantage of being set by local conditions (pagination, levels of local content, frequency and so on).

This does not, however, provide more than a crude measure of productivity and cannot gauge either quality or effectiveness.

Although this review contained only bottom line analysis of the work of individual LDRs in order to honour the undertaking that it would not assess individuals, the full dataset (which remains confidential) did provide a snapshot of the strengths and weaknesses of their work. The matrix (Appendix 3) could be used for a quarterly or half-yearly sample assessment by the LDR administrator and editor as both a quality audit and a guide to mentoring needs.

This does not, however address the issue of effectiveness. The BBC's measure is uptake of stories but New Zealand lacks the population and media density to make this a particularly useful tool. Trends over time will provide some indicators, as do online analytics. However, digital platforms' analytics currently do not provide a uniformly useful measure, given the wide variations in both resource and application. That is not to say these metrics are without merit. The increasing use of digital devices as the primary source of news means even small regional publishers must pay increasing attention to it. Traffic must be monitored, if for no other reason than to see trends. It is impeded, though, by participants failing to provide uniform data.

The democracy basis to the LDR scheme suggests that participation should be a measure of its effectiveness. The next local body elections will not, however, be held until October 2022. If the LDR scheme endures, voter turnout relative to the October 2019 elections may provide useful data. It has the real virtue of bracketing the LDR scheme: the last elections took place as the LDR scheme was being created. A word of caution: Voter behaviour is deeply nuanced and subject to a host of variables. At the very least it is influenced by social cleavages, values, identity, the candidates and issues.¹⁶ Any attempt to use voter turnout as a gauge will have to be sophisticated enough to identify and calibrate such influences.

Self-selecting online polls need to be treated with caution – they are not statistically sound – but they may be a useful way of assessing effectiveness. Periodic reader polls on significant local democracy issues could be organised by the LDR editor and run concurrently with each of the host publications/broadcasts. The resulting level of response by the audience could be a useful measure of engagement – as well as providing content.

¹⁶ Jack Vowles et al, *Voters' Veto*, AUP 2004.

British and Canadian administrators are continually seeking more accurate ways of measuring output and performance. The New Zealand LDR administrators should continue to liaise with them in the search for better tools.

A final note: Attempts to impose formal KPIs on newsrooms have met with limited success over the past two decades. While they may be able to determine how much is being produced and, increasingly, how much it tickles the public, benchmarking journalism is as difficult as defining 'the public interest'. And it has been resisted by many journalists for the same reasons. At the end of the day, the best measure is judgement by one's peers. An annual assessment by the newsroom executive to whom the LDR reports is arguably the best measure available.

Finding 19: (a) Baseline measures of output are necessary to meet NZ on Air's funding requirements but should be set as minimums. (b) Minimum targets set on the basis of average output per reporter in the host newsroom would incorporate each publication's unique variables. (c) Periodic (quarterly or half-yearly) quality assessments of a small sample of each LDR's work would assist in monitoring performance and mentoring needs. The matrix in Appendix 3 is offered as a possible model. (d) The online analytics currently collected by RNZ provide useful trend indicators but the variables within the scheme mean they cannot be used for across the board KPIs. All participants must agree to supply standardised data. (e) If the scheme endures, the 2022 local body elections will provide some useful measures of trends in democratic participation. Variables across the country mean, however, that this should be analysed by experts in the field. (f) Consideration should be given to the use of periodic reader polls across all hosts as a measure of engagement. (g) Host newsrooms should commit to providing the LDR administrator with an annual performance review based on a formal interview with the LDR reporter (for the sake of consistency, the administrator might provide all host editors with a performance checklist).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

GOVERNANCE: The scope of the LDR was appropriate for a pilot but, in future, the scheme should allow for an expansion beyond NPA members to other print, broadcast and digital news organisations that accept the jurisdiction of the New Zealand Media Council or the Broadcasting Standards Authority; and provide scope for part-time and project employment. The host selection process has been appropriate for the early stages of the LDR service but should be revisited if the scheme is to continue and if it is expanded. Any such expansion, and a more permanent status, would recommend changes that reflect those developments – including a representative council for overview of the scheme and a sub-committee detailed to oversee operations and liaise with RNZ and NZ on Air. Neither the Canadian nor British governance systems are appropriate models although the imperatives that are

applied in identifying appropriate areas of need could inform decision-making. The Canadian system is unnecessarily complex in a country the size of New Zealand, even if the LDR scheme was significantly expanded. While RNZ and NZ On Air should continue to be involved in the selection processes as custodians of state funding, the knowledge and expertise of the media sectors mean they should play a full part in determining which applications should go forward. The tight focus in the pilot was the correct approach but there is no doubt that there are other gaps in media coverage that impact on a functioning democratic society. The Canadian scheme may be broader than the likely scope of support here, but some expansion is warranted where it will not adversely impact existing news operations. It is recommended that extension to reporting of courts should be the first extension investigated.

STRUCTURES: Organisation is more than sufficient for the present and immediate future but should be revisited if the scheme proceeds beyond year 2. The present LDR manager is efficient and well respected by all parties to the scheme. The impending appointment of an LDR editor is surprising in an enterprise of this size but that appointee can play a crucial role in addressing quality and uptake issues. However, no further expansion of the administration of the scheme should be contemplated unless there is a significant upscaling. As soon as the appointee takes up the position, the working party and all editors should be consulted on terms of engagement relating to the deployment of reporters on the LDR editor's initiatives. An examination of the LDR CMS hub indicates that it meets current needs but will struggle with increased demands, particularly in multimedia reporting.

CONTRACTS: The LDR contract process involved venturing into new territory and it is understandable that negotiations were more protracted than might otherwise have been the case. The limited scope of funding also focused negotiations on the present, without necessarily considering future changes to a more permanent scheme. As the Year 2 contract is being rewritten, it would be advantageous to do so with a view to the future and the desirability of flexibility to allow changes to the scheme without major renegotiation. There would be merit in seeking a better funding schedule alignment between NZ on Air and RNZ.

HOSTS: The initial host selection process was, not unnaturally, conditioned by the scheme's prime movers. Future selection processes should be robust, transparent, and inclusive in order to extend the reach to other media and to forestall complaints from rivals. More emphasis should be placed on the public funding/public service aspect of the LDRs in order to ameliorate perceived competitive advantages. Relationships between host newsrooms and LDRs are sound.

FUNDING: The scale of the Canadian and British operations are such that their administrative overheads are lower on a per capita basis but structural differences make direct comparisons difficult. That is not the case, however, in comparing the direct costs per journalist. The New Zealand direct costs are much higher than in Canada and still significantly higher than the

British cost per journalist. This suggests either (a) the absorption of costs by newsrooms in both cases as it is unlikely that journalists' pay rates are higher in New Zealand than in those jurisdictions, or (b) the New Zealand scheme is pitched higher up the pay scale than in the other schemes. The differences merit further investigation, particularly if the New Zealand LDR scheme is further expanded. Using the BBC scheme as a benchmark, the NZ LDR administration should not be advanced beyond two people for the foreseeable future.

LDR RECRUITMENT: Bringing talent into the newsroom has been a perennial problem that extends beyond the LDR scheme. However, variation in experience/ability should be addressed by the host newsrooms in conjunction with RNZ. Greater certainty of funding is necessary if high quality candidates are to be attracted and retained. A three-year funding cycle – subject to annual performance reviews of both the LDR and host site – would greatly assist the process.

LDR OUTPUT: The scope of LDR coverage is encouragingly wide but would benefit from periodic audits in each host newsroom to ensure that a reasonable balance is maintained. For example, planning hearings can produce a large number of interesting stories but not at the expense of other coverage. Although shared coverage between LDRs and other reporters does not appear to have created insurmountable problems, it is an area that should be discussed by RNZ and host editors when LDRs are appointed to ensure that (a) best use is made of the appointment and (b) avoid confusion in the institutions being covered. The drop in coverage during lengthy LDR absences is concerning. Either host newsrooms need to commit to using other reporters to fill the gap or the scheme expanded to allow for the employment of locums. Some gaps can be avoided by ensuring that LDRs take leave during periods of low local authority activity i.e. late December and January. Of particular importance is the need to redress limited coverage of te ao Māori.

EFFECT: LDRs have established a solid pattern of coverage of elected representatives and public hearings. There is variation in output and, while quantity is a poor measure of performance, host editors should be encouraged to compare the work of their LDR against those in other regions to determine whether their reporter is providing 'real value for money'. While there are some examples of well researched coverage, there is a need for more journalism that helps people understand the decisions that are being made on their behalf and the needs of their communities that may, or may not, be being met. Some LDRs will require mentoring to undertake these more demanding stories and will require coordination by RNZ where more than one LDR is involved.

QUALITY: The content analysis suggests that while quality is acceptable, recruitment issues are a barrier to achieving the levels of journalistic excellence to which the job description aspires. It should be acknowledged, however, that overall quality varies among the eight publications and LDRs have produced work that suggests many are capable of achieving high

standards. While they may be at times let down by gaps in their journalistic skills (which is compounded in some cases by the level of oversight and support provided by their newsrooms), it is evident that all LDRs have a well-developed sense of why they have been placed in their roles and endeavour to fill local democracy gaps where they are identified. Journalistic attributes can be further developed over time. Formal mentoring programmes, either by host newsrooms (which have a responsibility to their staff and readers to maximise the quality of material that is produced) or by the LDR editor within RNZ, could markedly improve the overall quality of output. The matrix in Appendix 3 could form the basis of periodic quality reviews.

MULTIMEDIA: LDR story packages are generally well-served with still images although the quality of iPhone-based photographs varies from reporter to reporter and there are limits to this technology. The call for more multimedia content, while understandable, must be measured against the call on time that would otherwise be available for newsgathering. If the supply of video recordings is considered justified, more training should be given to LDRs and consideration given to providing better quality sound recording (with the necessary training). There is scope, then, to also provide audio clips to radio partners.

UPTAKE: Outside host organisations, the uptake of stories is difficult to accurately determine. However, given that the mandate of the LDRs has been a strongly local one, the absence of widespread use should not be unexpected. Hosts and user partners are already bound by the service agreement to provide monthly reports. Clearly, not all have done so to a degree that allows accurate monitoring and equally obviously some have supplied incompatible data. They should agree in future to the use of common metrics to allow accurate information to be gathered, and provide the data on a monthly basis. If the incoming LDR editor is able to coordinate reporting to provide stories with broader appeal, there should be a better uptake of stories by other users. A broadening of the LDR service beyond NPA members would also contribute to better uptake. It would be further broadened by a drive to bring more user partners aboard. The aim should be two-fold: Expand use of LDR output to the widest possible audience, and get to the point where uptake can be used as a measure of story quality.

REPORTER FEEDBACK: The LDRs have a positive attitude to their roles and feel they are making positive contributions to the community. Their view is reinforced by what they describe as very good public feedback. Variations in the areas of coverage and overlaps with other reporters points to the value of preliminary discussions to map the use of newsroom/LDR resources in local democracy coverage. If there are fundamental changes in health administration (including abolition of the DHBs and their replacement by Ministry of Health units), the LDR should be removed from that coverage unless the scope of the scheme is widened as suggested under Governance (above) . The drop in coverage during LDR absences has already been noted. It was confirmed by the LDRs themselves and adds weight

to the suggestion that funding should be provided for short-term replacements (outside the summer holiday period of low local authority activity). None of the feedback was sufficient to alter the view that the LDR CMS hub does not require major redevelopment in the short term. Routine communication was, however, raised by the LDRs and the sole area where hub development is desirable is in communication between LDRs, between LDRs and the RNZ editor, and between the RNZ editor (and administrator) and newsroom executives. Existing systems are sub-optimal. Ideally, communication should link through the host's own CMS system. That appears difficult to achieve at minimal cost, therefore some enhancement of the CMS messaging system – or email groups – would be desirable. The LDRs also confirm the desirability of producing multimedia content (with appropriate training) but it carries with it the costs in time noted above. A weekly subscriber newsletter linked to the Local Democracy Reporting section of the RNZ website is an idea worth pursuing.

HOST FEEDBACK: The organisations hosting LDRs are strong supporters for a continuation of the scheme. They are convinced that the service has repaired 'democratic deficits' in their regions and made material contributions to the content of their publications. Attracting talent is a problem not limited to the LDR scheme but it is clear that multi-year funding would assist. While the hosts are not opposed to the appointment of an LDR editor, it is apparent that they wish to negotiate rules of engagement that do not impinge on their editorial independence or the relationships they currently have with their LDR staff. There is also a desire that the administration of the scheme does not grow beyond that appointment. Copy sharing is a vexing issue that will be exacerbated if the scheme is extended beyond the NPA, particularly if community newspapers are allowed to host (perhaps part-time) LDRs. The public service principle adopted by the BBC for its LDR content – requiring as soon as practicable filing – is a worthy one that should apply to all current hosts (who have committed to observing it). It is worth signalling, however, that this is an issue that *will* present itself in the future. Neither Canada nor the UK allow for amendments to the timely filing principle but New Zealand is a small country where such issues may be magnified, particularly if there is expansion beyond the current scope of the scheme. There is a danger that making exceptions will create complexity. The answer may lay in overlapping organisations reaching their own agreements. The LDR scheme could facilitate such agreements between third parties by including questions in the funding application criteria that could point to potential conflict that should be addressed in advance of installing an LDR reporter.

LOCAL AUTHORITY FEEDBACK: Praise for the LDR scheme far outweighed criticism of it among local authority representatives and executives. There was a widespread view that it had contributed to an increase in coverage and public understanding. Not all of the publications, however, have good relationships with the local authorities in their area, which are critical of the coverage they receive. In those cases, caution is required in attributing

criticism directly to the LDR scheme. On balance, the scheme itself does not appear to be at fault and attitudes are more reflective of the editorial directions under which the LDR's work is undertaken and published. The local authorities' argument is with the editors. The overriding view is that the LDR scheme should continue in the areas where they are currently hosted and that this positive view can be applied more generally.

COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER FEEDBACK: The association correctly identifies the most significant inhibitor to its participation: fundamentally different publishing cycles. In addition, many do not operate on a scale that would warrant the appointment of a fulltime LDR reporter. There is merit, however, in the suggestion that the LDR scheme could fund freelancers to write about specific local issues requiring a level of investigation that is beyond the resources of small community newspapers but which have significant local democracy impact. The association's recognition of te ao Māori as an area requiring better coverage suggests there may be scope for part-time reporters tasked with meeting the needs of both daily and weekly publications.

DIGITAL START-UP FEEDBACK: There is no reason why digital news platforms outside NPA membership could not host LDR reporters, so long as they meet other criteria including (importantly) reach and viability. However, the nature of the LDR brief is unsuited to nationally oriented platforms unless there is a move toward collaborative stories curated by the RNZ LDR editor. There is greater scope for one-off grants for investigative journalism, although there are currently other avenues within NZ On Air's funding brief that could also potentially be explored to accommodate this need. The use of the LDR scheme for mentoring outside its own reporters is interesting. Consideration could be given to allowing other participants in training sessions and making mentoring advisories more generally available.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS: Baseline measures of output based on average output per reporter in the host newsroom would incorporate each publication's unique variables and still meet NZ on Air's funding requirements. The matrix in Appendix 3 is a possible model for periodic quality assessments of a small sample of each LDR's work that would assist in monitoring performance and mentoring needs. The online analytics currently collected by RNZ would be improved by participants agreeing to supply standardised data. Engagement is a difficult metric to monitor but, if the scheme endures, a comparison of the 2019 and 2022 local body elections would be useful for an expert evaluation democratic participation. In the meantime, consideration should be given to the use of periodic reader polls across all hosts as a measure of engagement. The best performance indicators are provided by newsroom peer review of the LDR reporters' work and should be done annually.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW MATRIX

1. QUESTIONS FOR PRIMARY CONTACTS IN LDR NEWSROOMS

- Overall impressions of the value of the scheme?
- Recruitment process?
 - Talent pool (people willing to go to regions?)
- Your perceptions of LDR's scope?
 - Are DHBs the province of LDRs or health reporters?
 - National politics in or out?
 - Sectoral elected bodies e.g. Māori Trusts
 - Area overlaps e.g. regional councils
 - Within local bodies are there divisions of responsibility?
- Effect on newsroom?
 - Staffing level prior to pilot, post-Covid?
 - Assignment
 - Did LDR displace an established roundsperson?
 - How do you decide who will do what? (local body stories still done by other staff)
 - Morale
 - Protected position (bulletproof?)
 - Competition for front page
- Contribution to coverage
 - Host publication
 - Quantity
 - Quality
 - Other publications in group
 - Other media (recognition?)
- The operation system?
 - CMS and distribution hub
 - Multimedia facilities
 - Content sharing
 - Scooping
 - Disadvantaging
 - Liaison with RNZ (including planned editorial liaison)
- LDR value relative to other possible forms of support?
 - Direct funding
 - Funding other roles
 - Funding other areas (such as...?)
- Any deficiencies?
- Plans for Year 2?
- Suggestions for improvement?

2. QUESTIONS FOR LDR REPORTERS

1. What is your overall impression of the value of the LDR scheme?
2. In relation to the range and number of elected bodies you cover, are you happy with scope of the scheme?
3. Have you encountered any issues with other newsroom staff (e.g. taking over areas of a round)?
4. Do you receive the support you need:

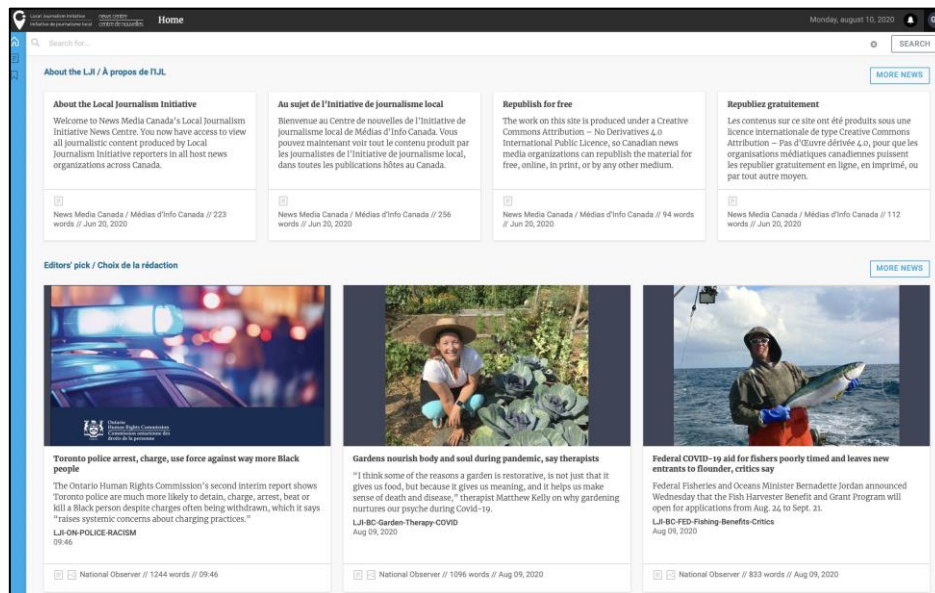
- a. From the editor?
 - b. From RNZ?
- 5. Are you concerned about coverage when you are absent (e.g. on holiday)?
- 6. Are you left to decide what you will cover and when, or do you work to direction?
- 7. How would you describe your workload?
- 8. Does the RNZ LDR hub meet your needs?
- 9. What is your attitude to multimedia production, particularly video?
- 10. Does the ban on briefs concern you? [Note: I know some produce them 'offline']
- 11. Do you have any suggestions for improvement to the scheme?
- 12. Any other matters you wish to raise?

3. QUESTIONS FOR LOCAL AUTHORITY REPRESENTATIVES AND OFFICIALS

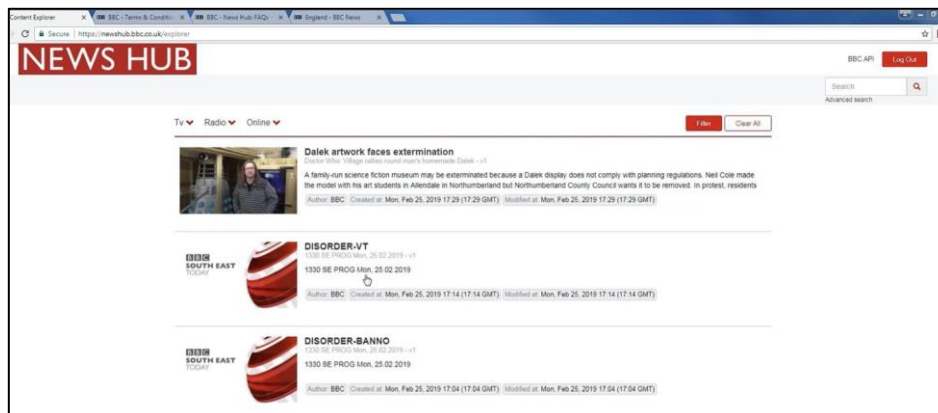
- 1. How aware of the scheme are you, your fellow representatives and officials?
- 2. Has it improved coverage of your authority? If so, in what way?
- 3. How accessible are the meetings of your authority and does the LDR take advantage of access?
- 4. Have you had personal contact with the LDR reporter in your area?
- 5. What is your reaction to the extra scrutiny that the scheme is designed to provide?
- 6. Have you encountered any difficulties as a result of the scheme?
- 7. Should it continue?
- 8. Would you suggest any changes or improvements?

APPENDIX 2

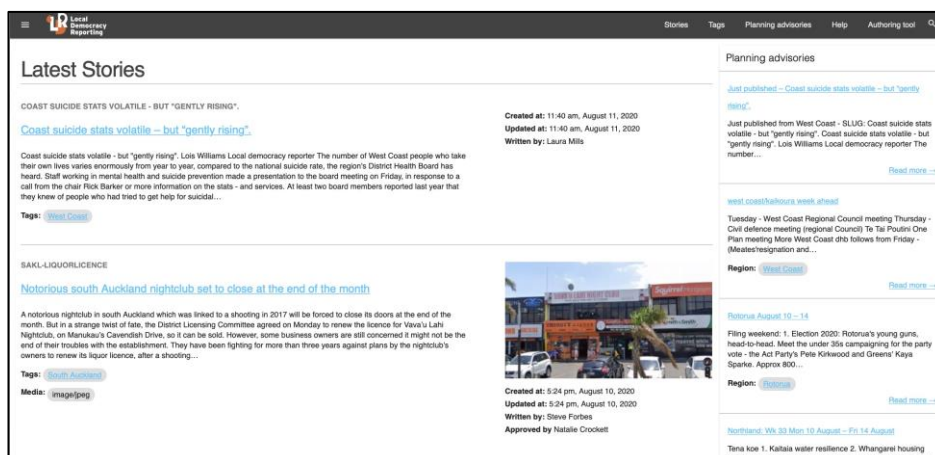
Canadian LJI news hub homepage



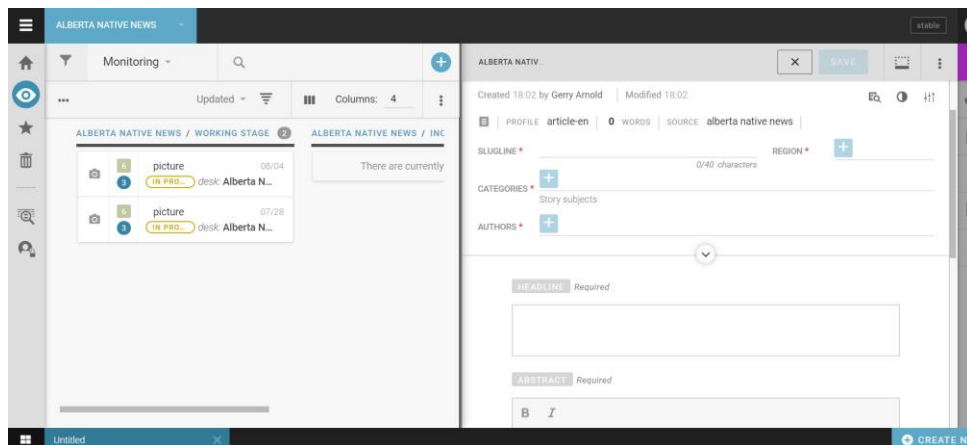
BBC news hub homepage



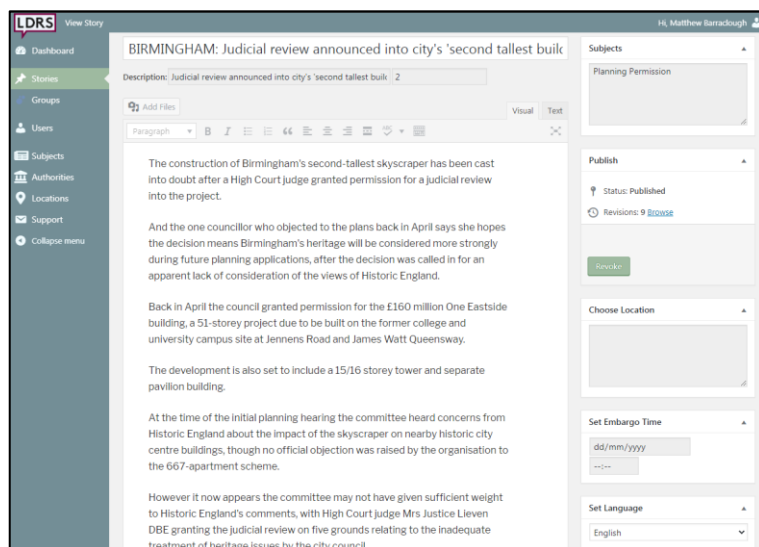
NZ LDR homepage



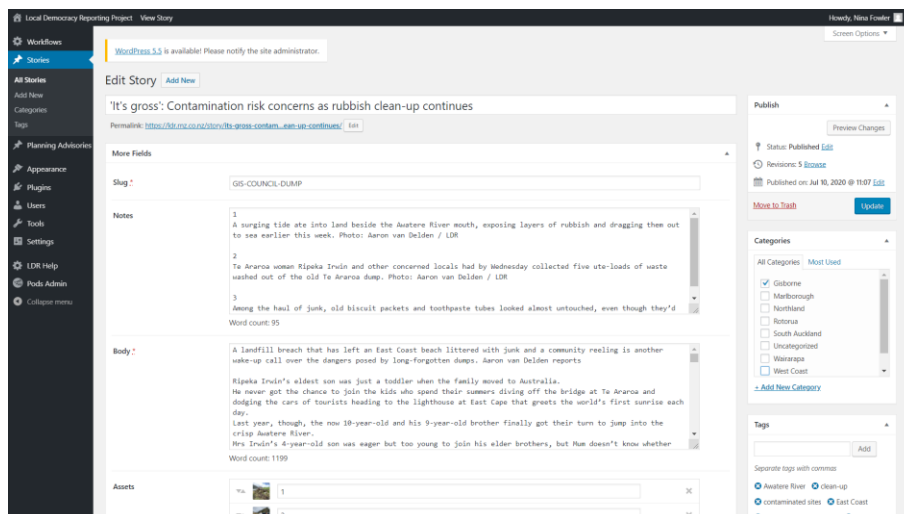
Canadian LJ1 editing tool



BBC LDR editing tool



NZ LDR editing tool



APPENDIX 3

M11/	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
	LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTING: SAMPLE CONTENT ANALYSIS												
1													
2	Content evaluated on scale of 1-5 [1=very poor 2=poor 3=average 4=good 5=very good] Not applicable =0												
3	Reporter code	Story identifier	Subject area	LDR pix/video	Wordcount	News Value	Democratic impact	Community engagement	Journalistic attributes	Content depth	General interest	Item average	Reporter Average
4													
5													
6													
7													
8	Note: Reporters names and headlines omitted.												
9	Subject areas: Politics, Finance, Environment, Covid-19, Health, Development, Transport, Regulation, Business, Legal, te ao Māori, Culture, Technology, Leisure.												
10													
11													