LI COMMUNICATIONS SURVEY 2010

INTRODUCTION

All LI members were invited to complete an online survey on the Institute's print and digital communications, which ran for two weeks in May 2010. The survey was promoted through the fortnightly News and Events email and Talking Landscape, with optional entry into a prize draw provided as an incentive. The questionnaire covered the content, design and relevance of the Institute's main corporate communications, ie the journal *Landscape,* online news service, the main LI website and Talking Landscape, as well as LI communications generally. This paper summarises responses under those headings. A paper outlining the LI's proposed actions in response to the issues raised will follow.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

592 people clicked on the survey link, 491 started the survey and 406 people completed it, representing a response rate of 7% of current LI members in total. This relatively low figure reflects the small proportion of members who opened the survey in the first place; the completion rate of 83% shows that once opened, a high proportion went on to fill in the questionnaire. The survey was only available online which is likely to have prevented some members from completing it. This, taken together with the low response rate, mean that the views expressed may not necessarily be representative of those of the entire LI membership.

The questionnaire was a mix of multiple-choice quantitative questions and open-ended qualitative questions; the latter received a good level of response and useful suggestions for improvements. In the summaries of responses to the multiple choice questions, "agreed" indicates that "agree slightly" or "agree strongly" was selected.

SUMMARY

Journal

Questions on the journal *Landscape* received the highest volume of responses and comments. Just under three quarters of participants were satisfied with the design, content and format of the journal. However a large number of suggestions were made regarding possible improvements, particularly with regard to the journal's content. Questions were also raised about the journal's target audience and its purpose.

Online news

The online news services (the fortnightly LI News and Events email and website) were seen as the best way for the LI to communicate with its members. The services were rated highly on relevance and usefulness of content, but many members are unaware that much more content is published on the website besides the items in the fortnightly email.

Website

The main LI website is seen by many as a good information resource. However about a third of members do not find the site easy to navigate, and over half were unaware of recently-launched major new online services such as the Knowledge Base.

Talking Landscape

Talking Landscape has been well received and is seen as a useful resource for information and networking by many of its users. The discussion forums, particularly the Knowledge Forum, are seen as especially helpful. The site has not yet reached a critical mass however; only ten percent visit the site every week, and nearly half never post or comment.

LI communications generally

Generally speaking the LI's communications are perceived to be reasonably satisfactory and are on more or less the right track in terms of content, relevance, frequency etc. Members offered much useful constructive criticism and some viable suggestions for new features and improvements. These will be looked at in detail and discussed in the forthcoming proposed responses paper.

JOURNAL

Multiple choice questions

Responses to the quantitative multiple-choice questions on the journal *Landscape* were as follows:

Relevance
77% agreed that the journal is relevant to their working lives

Communication method
75% agreed that the journal is a good way for the Landscape Institute to communicate with members

Design
72% agreed that they like the design of the journal

Format
71% agreed that the print edition should be continued and it should be not become a digital-only publication.

Content
70% agreed that the journal regularly has content that they find intellectually stimulating

Usefulness
61% agreed that the journal regularly has content that is of practical use

Open-ended questions

The open-ended questions asked for more detail about the type of content members want to see in *Landscape*, and for comments on any other aspect of the journal.

Subjects to be covered in future editions of *Landscape*

The question 'What subjects would you like to see covered in future editions?' elicited a wide range of responses, summarised below grouped into subject categories, starting with the most frequently mentioned:

Technical information
Good practice and technical innovation in broad range of areas, especially relating to sustainability; construction detailing; specification; new materials; more technical illustrations accompanying articles on projects and landscapes; maintenance and management of sites; critiques of new projects including what went wrong/lessons learned; SUDS and water management; major infrastructure projects; integration of renewables and new technologies into landscape architecture; practical implications of climate change; how real problems were solved; recycled materials ; IT

Environmental issues
Biodiversity; climate change; ecological design and planning; site restoration; environmental management; ecosystem services; GI; landscape management; woodland and trees; planting; brownfield sites; greening cities

Business/practice management
Setting up and running a business; management in general; marketing; preparing designs and tendering for work; project management; fees; procurement; funding; implications of new government/public spending cuts; relationships with clients and developers; implications of new policy and legislation for practices and local authorities; contracts

Planning
Landscape planning; LVIA, EIA and SEA; environmental planning; landscape character assessment (including seascape, historic etc); being an expert witness

Design
Urban design; design guidance; theory; process; working with other design professionals; innovations in contemporary design; designing specific types of space – eg schools, parks, play facilities; design details not just concepts

Landscape profession
Careers; employment issues; current job market; where the landscape architecture profession is going; work with other professions and professional bodies; practice profiles especially smaller firms, sole practitioners and local authority teams; profession's response to current events and policy

Material for P2C candidates and CPD
P2C study material and guidance; guidance for students on employment prospects, year-out opportunities and competitions; regular CPD feature; material for mentors; news from universities; showcase of student work

Historic landscapes
Heritage landscapes and projects; landscape history; conservation; archaeology; significant figures and places in landscape history; how projects featured in previous editions have changed over time

International
Developing countries; emerging markets; comparisons between how the UK and other countries do things; innovative international design; working overseas ; sustainable practice in other countries;

Theory
Academic research; experimental/philosophical/theoretical articles

Opinion
Readers' letters; feedback on articles; book and film reviews; reviews of degree shows; conference reports

Social issues
Community engagement; consultation; mental health/wellbeing and the environment; diversity/inclusive design

LI
What the LI is doing; branch news; follow-up on position statements eg case studies

Further comments on *Landscape*

General

There were some favourable comments on the journal, but most members that expressed an opinion in the 'further comments' section were critical. Most comments were of the 'there should be more /less...' variety, but some gave a broader view of what members might want from the journal. Some sample comments:

> *Prefer it to be more like a professional journal than a glossy*

> *Landscape architecture is an applied science; it is about time the journal started reflecting this, not just catering for those with an eye for artistry.*

> *Needs to be more extreme, controversial. At present, generally it's what all landscape architects know with pretty pictures.*

> *It looks more and more like a throwaway magazine these days, not something to be kept and re-read and referred to in the future.*

> *Where is the connection with contractors, land managers, colleges, and other landscape 'ground' professionals and their good work? The journal is too design focused and 'poorly' at that. What is required is a magazine that connects all the related industries … That is what landscape is about - connecting!*

> *The journal should have a far more practical and technical emphasis. There is too much emphasis on design and not enough material for landscape managers and scientists*

Content

Content was the subject most frequently addressed in the 'Further comments' section, with about a quarter of all respondents offering feedback on this area. Items from recent issues that received favourable comment were articles on shared spaces and landscape architecture's response to climate change, and there were also positive general comments from members who find the content interesting and useful overall.

The majority of responses were critical of the content, however. Many members indicated a general lack of interest in the content, with comments such as:

> *Content is ok, but not exciting. No-one I know rushes to open 'Landscape', it sometimes remains unread for several weeks*

> *Content is poor and hasn't stimulated me in any way for years*

> *Usually left feeling a little disappointed. I'll flick through it but there is nothing that interests me enough to go back and revisit it.*

> *It gets flicked through and then put aside.*

Members who expressed a preference wanted more of the following in terms of content:

Substance
More articles in each issue (a number of complaints were made that the journal is too thin) and more substance to feature articles – a general feeling of dissatisfaction was evident in the numerous suggestions that the overall content is dumbed-down, superficial and lacking in critical analysis.

Practical/technical content
A greater sense of connection with members' areas of work and more practical real-world relevance; more information content to articles, eg technical data, research, facts and figures; updates on new legislation, standards, guidance and policy and their implications for practitioners; case studies from Europe and overseas where they are ahead of UK practice.

Features on practices and specialisms
In particular features on areas of landscape practice that are felt to not receive much coverage - local authority work, landscape planning, landscape management and landscape science; more coverage of work done by local authorities and small practices; content that reflects many members' primary areas of work, namely on small-scale projects, and with natural habitats and local communities.

Critique
A more critical angle in coverage of new schemes, and a deeper level of analysis; greater technical detail in case studies and more about what could have been better and what went wrong during the project; more detail on social context, costs, budgets and funding, and aftercare.

Inspirational/controversial content
Articles that show the landscape profession as important and exciting, as well as controversial pieces or schemes that push boundaries in practice or thinking.

Opinions were divided on the following issues:

Landscape-specific content
There were arguments that articles should focus on landscape and nothing else, whereas others felt that the content should be broader and relevant to practitioners from other disciplines, in order to advertise the landscape profession to a wider audience.

Design content
There were some strongly-worded comments for and against design-focused content, again some arguing that the journal gives too much coverage to these kinds of schemes and others arguing that it does not give enough. Opinion was divided into two distinct camps on this issue: members who feel that more conceptual design and experimental projects are necessary to challenge practitioners, and those who want the journal to focus on real-world issues in everyday practice to give the journal a clear practical relevance.

New features

Some suggestions for regular features included:
- A page for letters and feedback, or some other means for members to contribute, comment and debate
- Student/universities section
- CPD/P2C section
- Technical pages/supplement
- Practice profiles

Journal design

A good number of positive comments were made about the look of the journal generally, referring to overall improvements in the design standard, layout and feel. Some specific criticisms were made on the following:
- Typography – the largest number of critical comments related to poor legibility due to small size/density of text
- Journal details and numbering no longer printed on spine
- Annual index to articles no longer printed
- Quantity and quality of advertisements cheapening the feel of the journal
- Flimsiness of binding
- Plastic postal wrapper
- No electronic version, or searchable archive or index of articles
- No means of opting out from receiving print journal
- No factsheets/supplements on specific topics or technical guidance for practical use
- Lack of clear identity – is it a professional journal or a glossy magazine? Who is it for?

Frequency

The expressed preference was for greater frequency – about a third of readers that gave an opinion were happy with quarterly issues, with the rest preferring more frequent issues. Comments about the change from a monthly to a quarterly publication indicated that members would have found the change more acceptable if the quarterly journal had more and/or higher quality content.

ONLINE NEWS SERVICE

Multiple choice questions

The responses to the multiple-choice questions on the online news service (ie the fortnightly LI News and Events email and news website) were as follows.

Communication method
91% agree that the online news service is a good way for the LI to communicate with members

Relevance
81% agree that the online news service is relevant to their working lives

Design
75% agree that they like the design

Usefulness
69% agree that the online news service regularly has content that is of practical use

Time spent reading
66% take less than 10 minutes to read email and articles

Awareness of relationship between news emails and news website
56% were aware that stories in email appear in full on the News and Events section of the LI website, along with other news items, articles on projects, people, events, and a searchable news archive. 44% were unaware or unsure whether more content appeared on the website.

Content
The sections rated as most interesting were, in order:
Projects, News, Events, People, Members Update, CEO's blog, other

Open-ended questions

Information to be included in online news services

The question 'Are there any other types of information you would like to see included in LI News and Events?' elicited suggestions relating to existing features and suggestions for new content. The volume of responses was less than those offered relating to the journal, but included some useful suggestions. The summary below groups responses into broad subject categories, starting with the most frequent:

Policy
Changes in law and regulations; new European and national policy; standards and guidance from bodies such as Natural England

Technical
Management; practical guidance in an e- nutshell; technical hints and tips; reviews of products and plants; new techniques; software user reviews

Projects
Examples of inspirational design and planting; more detailed information on new projects with more images and critique; post-completion evaluation

Events
More events generally; more events run by other organisations e.g. CIRIA, RIBA; as much advance notice as possible of events; more free/low-cost events; branch events and meetings; degree shows

Competitions
More competitions; competitions open to students; winners

News
More relevant news from other professions in built environment and environmental sectors generally

CPD
Details of free and low-cost CPD events; P2C events; more courses and seminars

Branches
News from branches

Jobs
Current recruitment ads

Practices
Interviews with cross section of landscape professionals; practice profiles; who is working on what/who has won what work

Other
Tender opportunities; book reviews; European and international news; funding sources; updates from LI trustees and council members; progress of LI activities against development plan targets; how LI has been promoting profession; planning decisions relating to landscape issues; conference reports and calls for papers

Other comments regarding the online news services

The question asking for any further comments on the LI News and Events website or email again elicited a lower level of response than the same question relating to the journal, but included some positive comments on the format and content, and some constructive suggestions summarised below.

Email - design/format
- Improve poor readability of email text
- Ensure images always display
- Ensure links always work
- Address problem of emails going to junk mail even though sender is on safe list
- Make articles available as pdfs or printable version
- Include date on emails
- Make it more obvious that there are more articles on website

Website – content

- Add links to or content from other relevant news sources eg Landscape Character Network newsletter
- Too many building projects have little landscape relevance or no details of landscape work
- Include more European news
- Add links to external documents etc referred to in news stories
- Give better advance notice of events
- Update more frequently

Website – design/functionality

- Include more links to LI documents
- Include buttons to share articles on facebook and twitter, and to email to others
- Include date on articles
- Add RSS feed for each section
- Improve search function
- Allow chronological display of articles

LI WEBSITE

Multiple choice questions

The responses to the multiple-choice questions on the main LI website (landscapeinstitute.org) were as follows.

Information source
82% agree that the main LI website is a good source of information

Navigation
67% agree that it is easy to locate information on the LI website

Awareness of new online services
47% were aware of the existence of the Knowledge Base; 43% were aware of the Recruitment site and 8% were aware of the Invitation to Tender section.

Frequency of visits
23% visit the LI website once a week or more, 35% visit every couple of weeks and 41% less often or never

Useful sections
The sections visited most are, in order:
News, Jobs, Publications, Pathway, Awards, Case studies, Membership info, Policy, About the LI, CPD, Library, Directory of Registered Practices

Open-ended questions

In response to the question asking for any further comments on the website, there was some positive feedback regarding the most recent changes to the design, and the usability and usefulness of the site in general. Most suggestions and criticisms related to the navigation, design and content, summarised below.

Navigation

Comments in this section shed further light on the relatively low score for ease of navigation in the multiple choice section. This aspect of the website drew the most criticism, mainly on the following issues:
- Information is difficult to access
- Content not always in intuitive or obvious places and therefore difficult to locate
- Annoyance of different logins within the site
- Not knowing what content is available on the site because it's not obvious/signposted
- Related content not linked between pages and sites
- Awkwardness of moving between LI sites, particularly due to need for different logins

Content

The following new features were suggested:
- Download area for large drawings and technical files
- Map showing location of case studies, schemes featured in the online news and journal and award-winners

Some comments on the content more generally:
- Lack of clarity as to who the site is aimed at – members, public, other professionals,
- Content could be included for a wider range of users, including students at different levels
- Lack of distinction between content for members and public
- Better links/signposting to relevant content on other LI sites needed
- Refresh images on the front page – creates the impression no new content has been added
- Limited range of publications for download
- Image sizes could be bigger, especially for detailed technical drawings and plans

Design

Relatively few comments were received on this aspect of the website. Feedback on the appearance of the website related mainly to negative aspects of the home page layout, in particular:
- Cluttered, unappealing appearance
- Clashing colours
- Limited usefulness

Specific areas of the website

Comments made on specific sections of the site were as follows:

Members' area
- Information in this area is muddled
- The distinction between content for members and non-members is not clear
- The need to login to access material that could be public is frustrating.

News and events
- Events could be added more than once a fortnight so that members have better advance notice
- News should be updated more often so that it's always current
- More information should be included on courses, seminars and events relevant to the profession and P2C studies, including those run by organisations other than the LI
- Get practices to contribute more content

Library
- Library section difficult to find and use

P2C
- Frustration at multiple logins required - more straightforward process wanted
- No need for P2C resources to be so difficult to access

TALKING LANDSCAPE

The responses in this section relate to the social networking site for LI members, Talking Landscape (talkinglandscape.org). Just over half the members completing this survey had joined Talking Landscape. The small sample size means that the results may not be representative of the wider membership, but they should provide some general indicators about how the site is used.

Multiple choice questions

Access
61% of respondents usually access the site at work; 36% usually use it at home

Reason for joining
45% joined in order to access the Knowledge Forum or for professional networking/keeping in touch with people

Reasons for staying
42% use the Knowledge Forum and other discussion forums most now

Frequency of visits
11% access the site once a week or more, 24% visit every couple of weeks, 65% visit less frequently or never

Frequency of use
6% post or comment every couple of weeks or more, 50% post or comment less often than this, and 44% never do.

Open-ended questions

Reasons for not joining

By far the most frequently cited reason for not joining Talking Landscape was lack of time. Reasons given after that were, in decreasing order:
- Lack of interest, either in the content or in online social networking generally
- Not knowing about the site
- Perceived lack of usefulness or relevance
- Not being able to access the site at work
- Finding the dominant personalities and their tone offputting

Further comments

There was a relatively high level of satisfaction with Talking Landscape, with a good number of positive comments on the look and feel, usefulness, and purpose of the site. The site is seen by many as a good idea, a good way to keep in touch with people, and a useful source of information. Criticisms tended to be on issues that are beyond the LI's control and more to do with members' use of the site – for example:

- It has not yet reached a critical mass and often has little activity
- Expert members need to be encouraged to share their knowledge
- Non-text formats such as video and podcasts could be used more
- Questions over relevance – how reliable is information on the Knowledge Forum; the extent to which the site appears dominated by a small number of individuals; infighting and politics; lack of relevant content for some sectors (eg landscape planning, assessment)

LI COMMUNICATIONS GENERALLY

The final survey question asked for further comments or suggestions regarding the LI's communications. This space was used by most people to reiterate or re-emphasise earlier answers or refer to specific aspects, which are covered by previous sections.

About half of all comments in this section were broadly positive about the Institute's communications in general. Most comments showed that communications generally are perceived to have improved, and are on the right track in terms of content, frequency etc. for example:

> *I think the LI try quite hard to communicate well. Happy with their endeavours.*

> *Currently a good balance between frequency of hard copies of journal and email news - I personally would not like to see all communication by email.*

> *I think the LI is doing a great job of improving communications - they are far better and more aligned than a couple of years ago. All going in the right direction.*

Critical comments in this section referred to the Institute not doing enough to make sure that members receive all communications, and a perception that the LI does not treat its members as professionals or individuals. Some comments suggested that communications are felt to be too impersonal, for example:

> *Members are human beings and are interested in their work ... Be warm and including.*

> *I feel like a number rather than a member of an Institute.*

An interest was expressed here and throughout various sections of the survey in receiving more information about the LI's activities at Secretariat, trustee and board level. Other comments referred to aspects of the LI's communications already covered previously, particularly criticisms of the journal content, website navigation, and the need for more technical information.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographic breakdown of members completing the survey was as follows:

Age
33% were aged 26-34; 23% were 35-44; 22% were 45-54; 12% were 55-64; 9% were 25 or under and 1% were 65 or over

Gender
53% female, 47% male.

Job title
66% of respondents classified themselves as landscape architects; 6% were landscape managers; 6% students; 6% other; 5% landscape planners; 5% urban designers; 4% landscape designers; 1% garden designers; less than 1% were landscape scientists.

Popular media

Members were asked which national newspapers and industry-related print periodicals they read, which websites they used most and which email bulletins they found most useful.

Periodicals
The most popular daily newspaper read by participants was The Guardian (12%), followed by The Times (7%) and the Independent (4%). The most popular industry periodicals were Horticulture Week (9%), Building Design (8%), Topos (7%) and AJ (7%).

Websites
By far the most visited work-related/industry websites were CABE/CABESpace and Natural England. Other specific sites that are used frequently were BDOnline and Planning Portal.

Many participants referred to types of sites visited in response to this question rather than specific ones; the types most frequently mentioned were product information/suppliers' and manufacturers' sites, mapping and local authorities' sites. A few mentioned blogs, twitter, flickr and social networking sites, but the vast majority referred to more formal/institutional information sources.

Email bulletins
CABE's was also the most popular email bulletin, and Horticulture Week, BDOnline and Green Spaces scored highly. Additional comments in this section referred to a general preference for bulletins where the content is current, entertaining, with a balance of opinion/debate and news/factual content, and where the format allows it to be scanned quickly to identify relevant content.

Lesley Malone
Policy and Communications, Landscape Institute
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