

NMA Response to Local Government and Housing Committee Consultation on Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill

The News Media Association is the voice of UK national, regional and local news media in all their print and digital forms - a £4 billion sector read by more than 46.1 million adults every month. Our members publish around 900 news media titles including the South Wales Argus, South Wales Echo and the Cambrian News, as well as local and national titles across all the UK.

Introduction

Our interest in this consultation relates to Clause 20 of the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill which would remove the statutory requirement for councils to publish council tax changes in printed local newspapers. We believe that this proposal represents a serious threat to the public right to know and the ongoing viability of local news titles which deliver a critical service in providing communities with trusted local news and information.

We urge the Committee to recommend to the Welsh government in the strongest possible terms that the current statutory requirement on councils to publish this information in printed local newspapers is maintained within the Bill.

The threat of a democratic deficit

Independent research and the Welsh government's own impact assessment for the Bill show that printed local newspapers are an essential platform for ensuring the public - particularly the elderly, disenfranchised, those living in rural areas, and lower income households - have access to critical information that may have a profound impact upon their lives, such as information about council tax changes and public notices generally.

The level of digital exclusion in Wales is even higher than in the rest of the UK, with as many as seven per cent of the population, or 170,000 people, not using the internet. As the Bill's impact assessment acknowledges, removing the requirement for local authorities to publish council tax details in local newspapers could reduce accessibility for older age groups. According to Digital Communities Wales, only 41 per cent of people over 75 have basic digital skills. It may also create accessibility issues for lower income households, who may have less access to and affordability of devices and connectivity. Those who are economically inactive are less likely to use the internet (86 per cent) than those in employment (99 per cent).

It could also impact households in rural areas. Digital Communities Wales suggested that people living in rural areas can be excluded from digital services due to problems in broadband provision. People living in rural areas may therefore rely more on information about their council tax being provided as printed materials because they are less able to access information online. Relying on publishing the notices in at least one library in the local authority area is hardly a solution to the public right to know important information affecting them in their area.

Removing the statutory requirement on councils to publish council tax notices in local newspapers would therefore create a "postcode lottery" in which older age groups, those living in rural areas, and lower income households would find it harder to access information of democratic importance

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than the rest of the population - a highly undesirable outcome. It could also potentially allow councils to reduce the visibility of notices which they may find embarrassing or controversial by placing them on an obscure part of their website, hidden away from vital public scrutiny and debate. Indeed, this is why the statutory requirement to place public notices in independent local newspapers was originally established.

The recent report by the [Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group](#), which included representatives from a wide range of publishers big and small, recognised that the publication of statutory notices in newspapers provides vital information to the community on a wide range of subjects, such as licensing applications, road closures and planning.

At the same time, it noted that such notices provide a vital revenue stream for local news publishers - supporting coverage of news, politics and current affairs - and that some titles would no longer be viable if public notices were removed.

Local media extending the reach of public notices

The local news media industry takes its commitment to making audiences aware of public notices very seriously. Last year, the sector launched the Public Notice Portal to leverage its strong growth in digital audiences. In recognition of the UK government's desire to make statutory public notices more digitally accessible, the industry came together through the NMA to improve and digitise the public notice process by building a centralised online portal to upload all notices which appear in local papers, further increasing public engagement.

The portal has been developed with the aid of £1 million in grant funding from the Google News Initiative and it uses Google UX and technical expertise. It has been built following extensive consumer research, discussions with local authorities and central government and is now hosted on local newspaper websites across the UK, including across Wales. It allows readers to search for public notices online, to view them on a map, and to receive email alerts and notifications. It can be viewed at <https://publicnoticeportal.uk/>.

The portal meets the challenge of bringing public notices into the 21st century by harnessing local news media's huge digital audiences while ensuring everyone – including the digitally excluded and more vulnerable in society - can still access notices in their printed local newspaper.

This project has been realised alongside the adoption of the Public Notice Publishing Guidelines – a set of simple steps to help publishers better present public notices in their publications and make them more accessible to readers in print and online.

Conclusion

In addition to the immediate threat, we fear that removing the statutory requirement on councils to publish council tax changes in print newspapers as proposed in the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill could precipitate a more widespread removal of the notices in other categories, such as planning and transport. This would damage the ability of the public – particularly the elderly and those on lower incomes - to access important information which could affect their daily lives, disenfranchising these groups from robust democratic discourse.

The move would also have a serious impact on the sustainability of the local news media sector, with some titles likely to close as a direct result. We therefore urge the Committee to recommend to the

Welsh government in the strongest possible terms that the current statutory requirement on councils to publish council tax notices in print local newspapers is maintained within the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill.

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