

Deserts, Oases and Drylands

Mapping the UK's local news outlets

Joe Mitchell, Max Roche and
Coral Milburn-Curtis



A pilot project by the Public Interest News Foundation
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Foreword



Jonathan Heawood,
Executive Director,
Public Interest
News Foundation

I have always loved maps. On the wall of my home office, I've got an eighteenth-century map of the road from Oxford to Cambridge and a modern map of fictional London, which shows the locations of 600 novels, poems and plays. I've also got a cupboard full of Ordnance Survey maps that I've used on walking holidays over the years. So, when Joe Mitchell, PINF's Deputy Director, suggested that we should create a Local News Map of the UK, I was of course very enthusiastic.

However, Joe and our brilliant researcher, Max Roche, haven't just made another pretty map for me to dream over. This is a living resource for anyone who cares about the future of news and local communities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

For the first time, we can show the location of every local news outlet in the UK. We can identify news 'deserts' – places with little or no local news provision – and news 'oases' – where there is richer provision. We can trace the many thousands of 'news miles' that journalism travels when it's produced by companies based outside the area they cover. We can explore correlations between the presence or absence of local news and other factors like economic deprivation. And we can use these findings to inform policymakers, philanthropists and publishers as they decide where to target their resources.

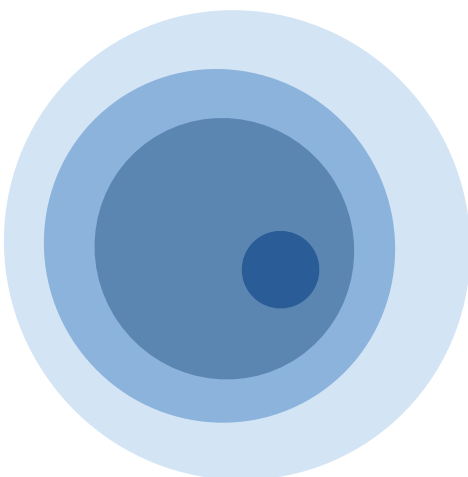
Many of us believe that local news is a crucial part of the social fabric. We assume that people need accurate, timely and accessible information in order for communities to thrive. But it's

always been hard to test this assumption. The Local News Map helps to build a standardised framework for further research.

This is just the first version of the Local News Map, and it's an invitation to others to add to, correct and use our data. There is no definitive list of local news outlets in the UK, so we have had to pull together information from a plethora of sources. There are bound to be mistakes and we look forward to correcting them. We also look forward to seeing how people use the Map to explore other possible correlations.

For example, what – if any – is the relationship between local news and environmental standards? What about public health, educational outcomes, democratic engagement, economic wellbeing...? The list of questions goes on, and we can't wait to hear the answers.

In this report, we have set out some of our own early findings. Over the years ahead, we hope to add further layers to the map, including more qualitative analysis of local news provision alongside the quantitative data about the number and location of outlets. That way, we can build an ever deeper understanding of the role of local news in our society, and support local news providers to serve the communities they cover.



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Summary

Over the last six months, the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF) has collected data on all incorporated local news outlets in the UK, according to the local authority areas that each outlet claims to cover.

The resulting database has been visualised as the Local News Map and can be explored, outlet by outlet, local area by local area, at map.publicinterestnews.org.uk.

In this report, we look at the macro-level data to establish an overall picture of the state of local news coverage in the UK. We find:

Outlets, nations and regions, media types

- There are approximately 1,600 local news outlets in the UK, an average of one outlet per 40,000 citizens.
- England is underserved according to its population, while all other nations have slightly greater numbers of outlets than the population would predict.
- London is poorly served, with 4.5% of the UK's local news outlets covering the 33 boroughs of London, which make up 13.1% of the UK's population.
- The greatest proportion of local news outlets operate in print and online (46%), while 26% are radio, 23% online-only, 3% TV and 2% print-only.

Deserts, oases and drylands

- There are 38 news deserts in the UK: local authorities that are not served by any dedicated local news outlet. A total of 4.1m citizens live in these news deserts, the vast majority in England and Wales. The East of England and South East of England appear to be the poorest served regions.

- The largest news deserts by population are Lewisham, North Tyneside, Gateshead, Telford and Wrekin, and Newport.
- There are also areas of the UK that are served by a wide array of local news outlets. Cornwall, Bristol and Dorset stand out as 'news oases' for the nominal number of outlets. Controlling for population, we see that areas with smaller populations are often well served versus the average. This includes several Scottish council areas as well as some rural districts in England, and no areas of the UK's largest cities.
- We also identify 'news drylands' where, though not a total desert, an area is poorly served given its population size. The list of the top 20 such drylands, controlling for population, is almost entirely populated by highly urban areas such as London boroughs and areas around Birmingham.

Deprivation and news

- There is a strong correlation between deprivation and local news coverage. The more deprived the area, using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, the fewer the number of news outlets, controlling for population size.

The Local News Map is a pilot project. It is a snapshot in time, and it relies upon outlet's claimed coverage, which was only briefly checked by researchers. The quality of the content was not investigated. There is thus much more that could be done, from regularly updating the map to measure trends over time, to expanding the map to include voluntary or community titles, to examining the quality and public interest nature of the content.

Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that this first pilot effort whets the appetite of policymakers, researchers and all those who have an interest in citizens' access to local news. We welcome conversations about building on and developing the map.

At PINF, our mission is to help ensure that everyone benefits from public interest news that speaks to, for and with them. The existence of news deserts and drylands in the UK should be of deep concern. A growing body of evidence points to the role that quality local news plays in delivering better governance, better public and private services, and ultimately better lives. We believe that a significant intervention is now required to boost local news provision in the UK and plan to outline our vision for that intervention later this year.

Mapping local news

1,641
active local
news outlets

We list 1,641 active local news outlets in the UK, defined as a registered or incorporated organisation, whose principal purpose is the provision of local news and, at the time of inclusion in the database, appeared to be regularly updated.

One outlet per
40,000
people

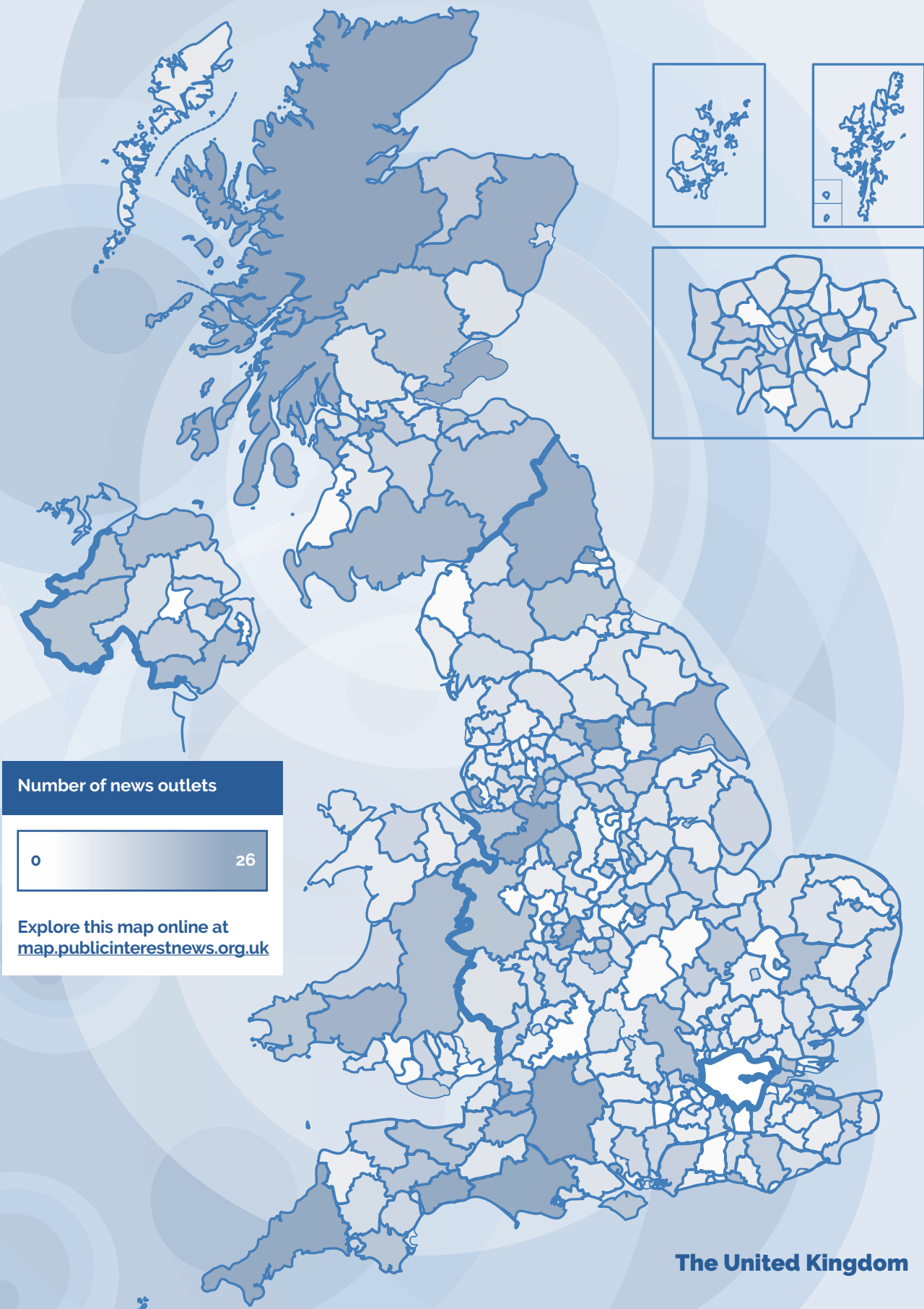
With a population of 67m, the UK has roughly one local news outlet per 40,000 people.

4.5 outlets
in each UK
district

There are 361 local authority districts in the UK, so the mean average number of outlets per district is 4.5.¹

More outlets in
Scotland
and Wales

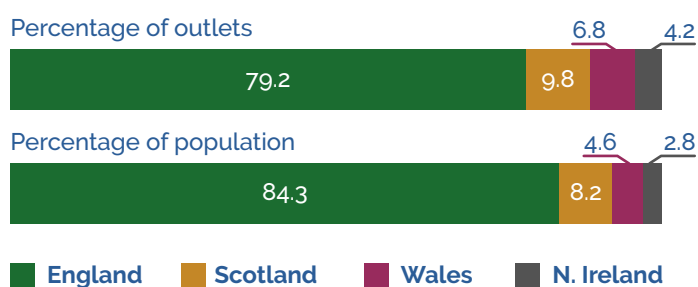
On average, local authority areas in Scotland and Northern Ireland have a greater number of outlets than those in England and Wales.



England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

The distribution of news outlets by nation largely, but not entirely, reflects population size. Compared with a situation where outlets are distributed evenly according to population, England is slightly underserved, while the rest of the UK does better.

UK news outlets by nation, compared to population²



News deserts

The largest of the worst-served local areas

News Oases

The best-served local areas

Full details on p14-15

North Tyneside: 0

Gateshead: 0

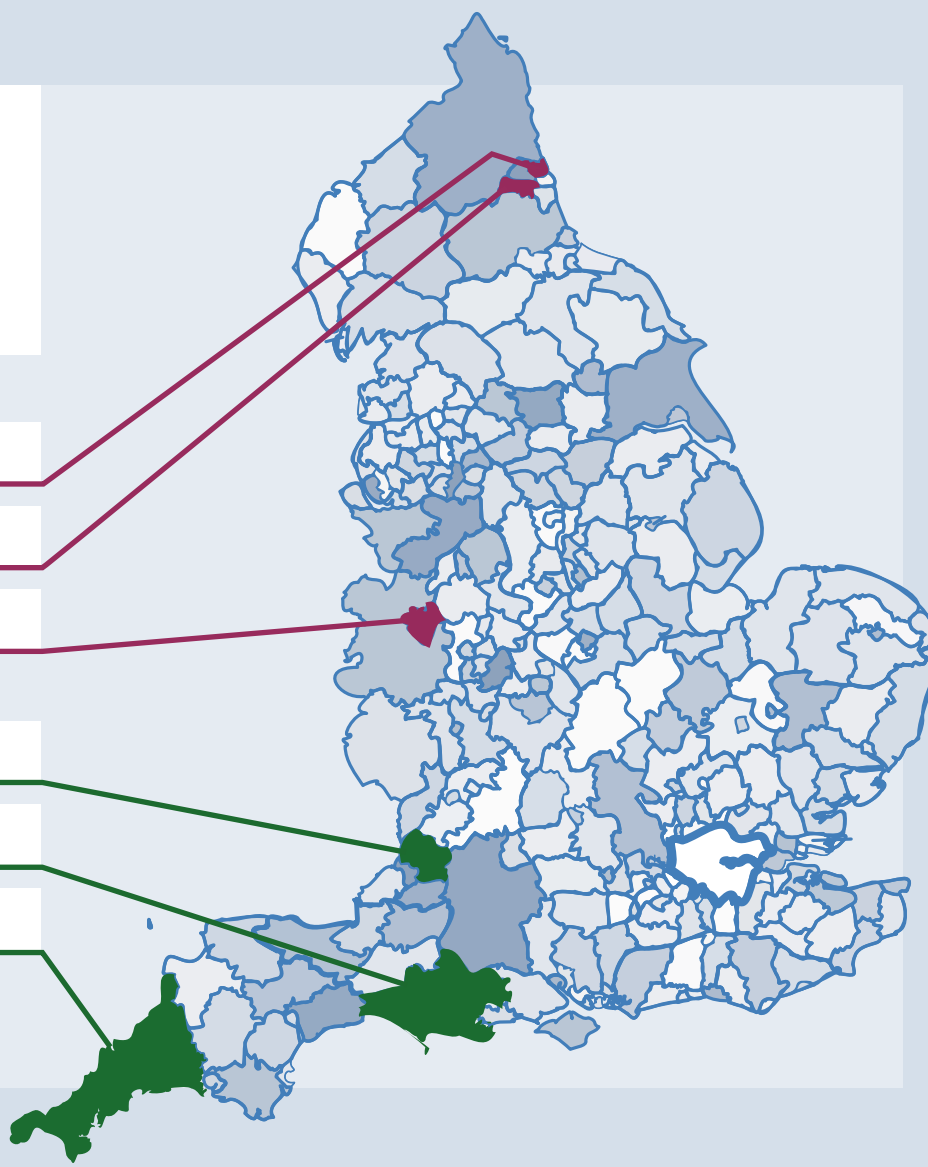
Telford & Wrekin: 0

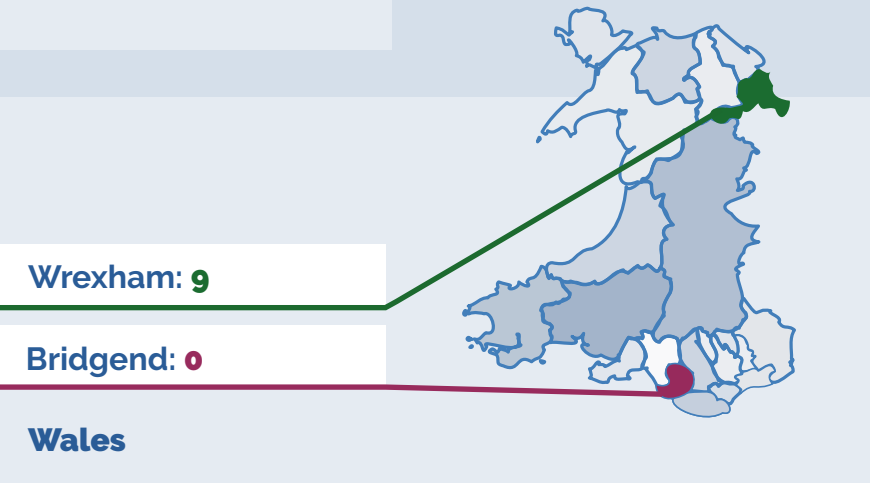
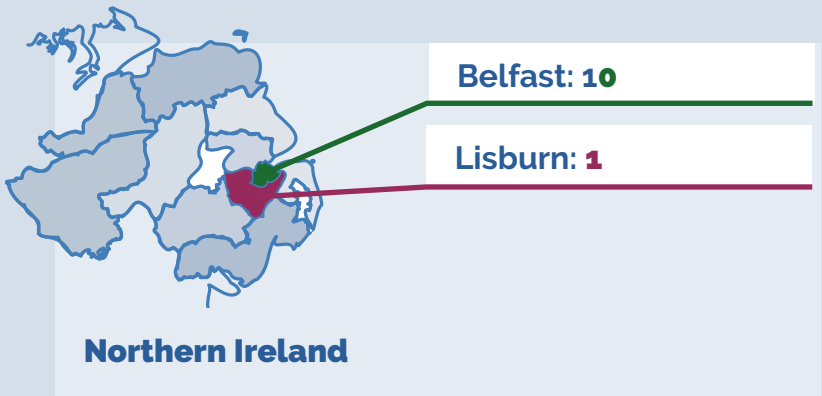
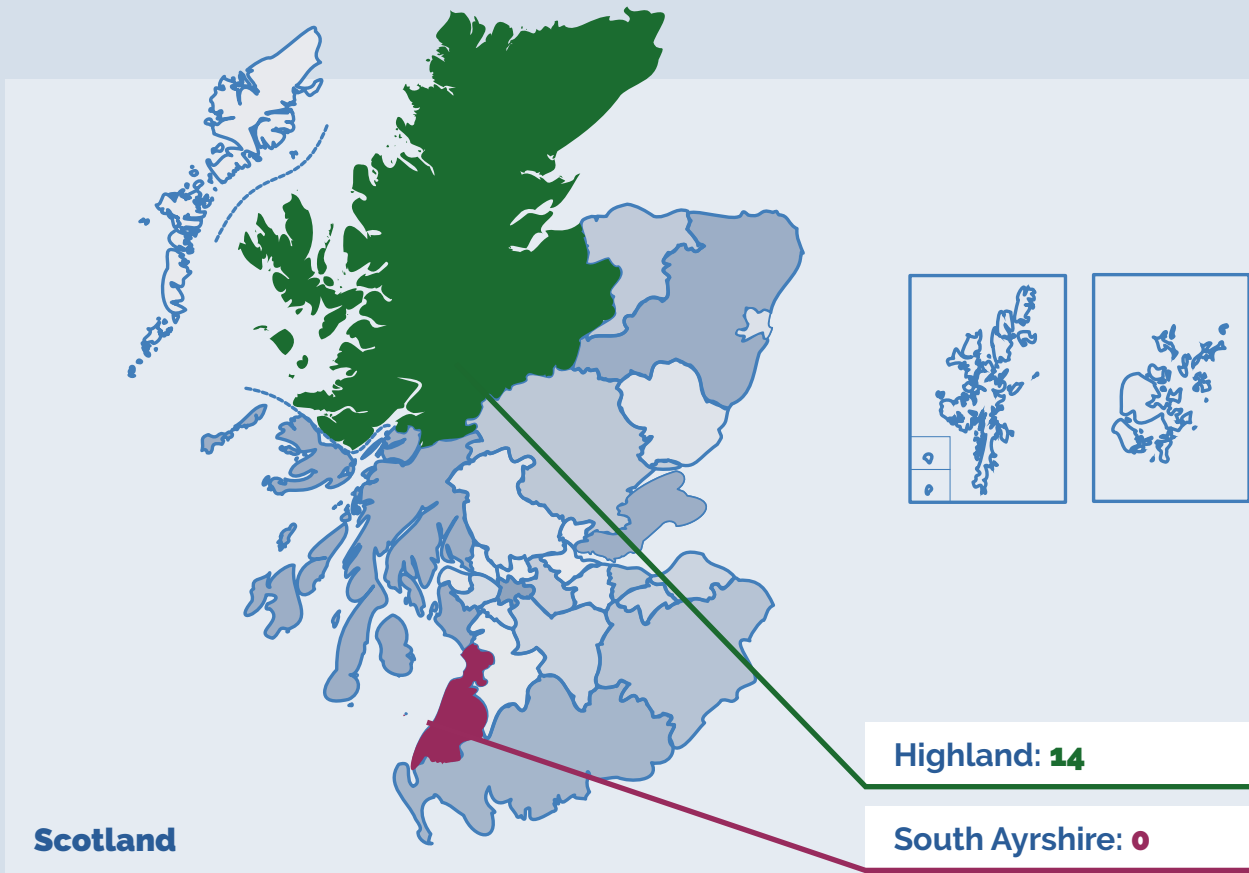
Bristol: 23

Dorset: 18

Cornwall: 26

England

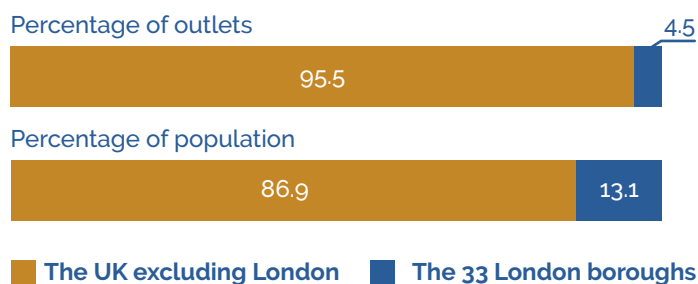




The 33 boroughs of Greater London

We find that 4.5% of local news outlets are in the 33 boroughs of London, whereas the same area is home to 13.1% of the UK's population³.

UK news outlets in London, compared to population



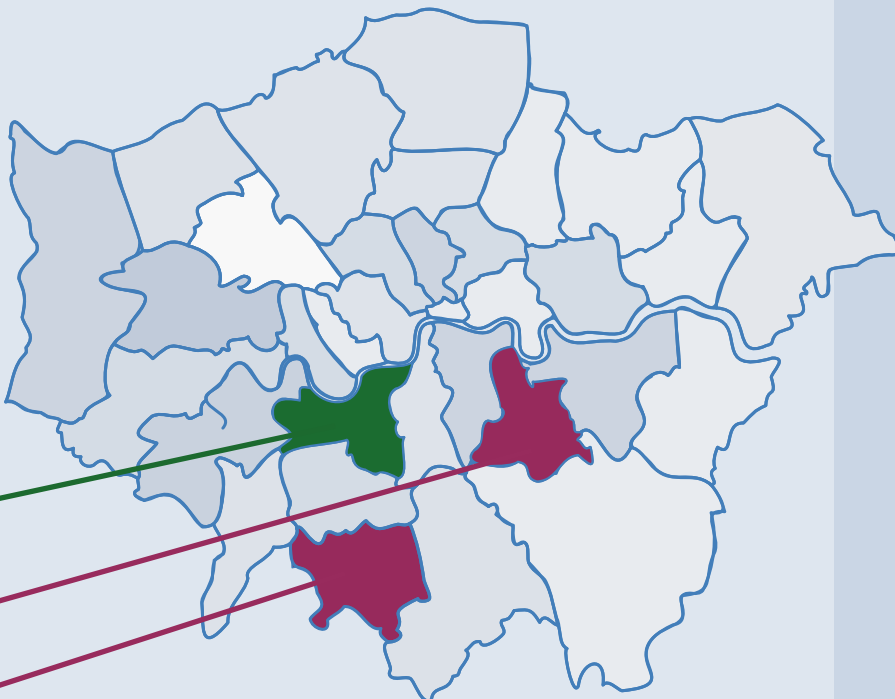
Of London boroughs, **Wandsworth** appears best served, while **Lewisham** and **Sutton** appear worst served.

They are the only technical news deserts in London according to our definition (see p14), but many other boroughs are also only lightly served, especially when account is taken of their large populations.

Wandsworth: 5

Lewisham: 0

Sutton: 0



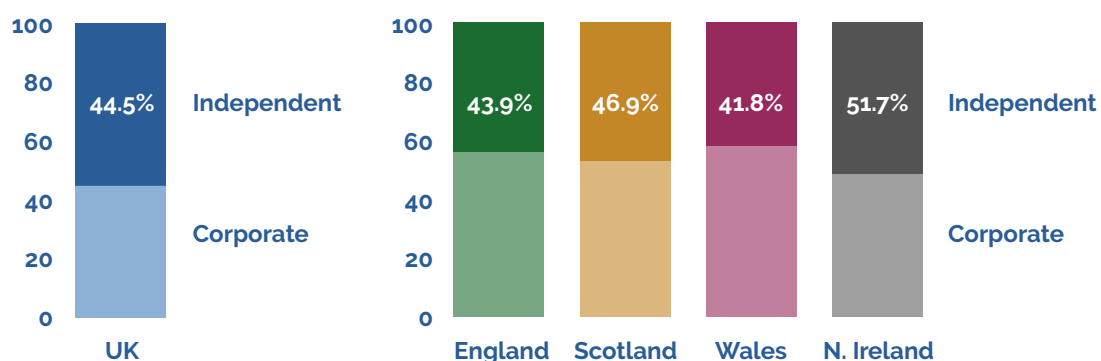
Greater London

Independent local news outlets

44.5%
of outlets are
independent

We find that 44.5% of outlets are independent, that is, are owned by an organisation with turnover of less than £2m.

Percentage of UK local news outlets by media type

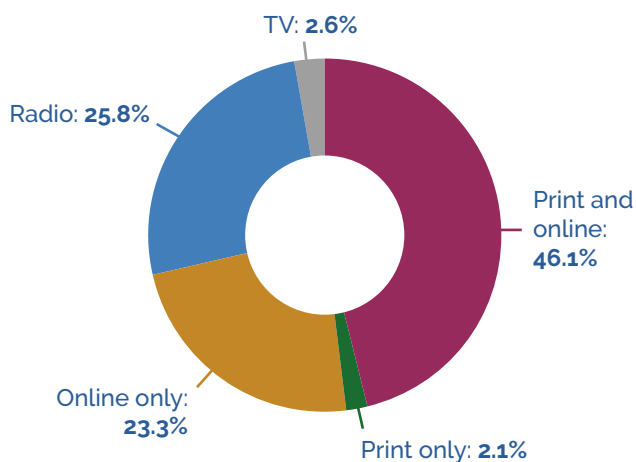


Media type

We collected data on the medium used by each local news outlet.

Print is notably small, though this may be due to the difficulty of collecting data on print-only outlets.

Percentage of UK local news outlets by media type



News deserts

The worst-served areas

For the purposes of this report, we take the view that a local authority that has no dedicated news outlet - i.e. a news outlet that only covers that local authority - can be described as a news desert.

This definition suggests that there are 38 news deserts in the UK. They are listed below, alongside their population. A total of 4.1m citizens in the UK live in a news desert (6% of the population), made up of 3.6m in England (7%), 0.5m in Wales (15%) and 0.05m in Scotland. The East and South East of England appear particularly poorly served. Northern Ireland has no news deserts, according to our definition. Lewisham, North Tyneside, Gateshead, Telford and Wrekin, and Newport are the five largest areas by population that lack a dedicated news outlet.

We use this definition because although these areas may be covered by a regional outlet that covers more than one local authority (which can be investigated via our [interactive map](#)), we believe that since the average local authority has a population of between 141,000 (in Wales) and 191,000 (in England) and average spending of between £340m (in England) and £370m (in Scotland) these are significant enough to warrant a dedicated local news outlet.

Evidence, often from the USA, suggests that local news boosts voting, reduces polarisation, reduces government borrowing costs, reduces private company malpractice, strengthens a sense of community and pride in place, reduces pollution, and makes for the first draft of local history.⁴

News deserts: regions with no outlets, by population

England	Local authority	Population			
North West ⁵	Knowsley*	154,974	South West	Rochford	41,787
	Hyndburn	41,772		Cotswold	91,125
North East	N. Tyneside*	209,151	South East	Elmbridge	139,369
	Gateshead*	196,154		Bracknell Forest*	125,174
	S. Tyneside*	147,915		Dartford	116,725
East Midlands ⁶	Hinckley and Bosworth	113,660		Fareham	114,993
	S. Derbyshire	108,063		Hart	100,293
	Chesterfield	103,672		Surrey Heath	90,645
	N.E. Derbyshire	102,315		Horsham	75,471
	Bolsover	80,476		Crawley	59,505
	Oadby and Wigston	57,753		Eastbourne	48,507
	Blaby	52,680		Tandridge	45,659
West Midlands	Telford & Wrekin*	185,842	London	Lewisham*	300,520
	S. Staffordshire	110,793		Sutton*	108,056
East	Broadland	132,247	Scotland		
	Castle Point	89,595		South Ayrshire*	53,760
	E. Cambridgeshire	88,145	Wales		
	Hertsmere	56,112		Newport*	159,560
	Three Rivers	48,257		Bridgend*	145,450
	Stevenage	45,231		Neath Port Talbot*	142,250

* Unitary or single authorities, where we might expect an even greater need for a dedicated local news outlet than with areas that are also part of a county council area.

It is important to note that our data is based on claimed coverage (see the Methodology section for more). It is possible that citizens of a technical news desert are in fact brilliantly served by a well-staffed regional outlet, and it is possible that citizens of an area that technically has several news outlets are in fact not served well at all. In future, we hope to look at the quality of news provision, see the section on 'What's next' below.

News oases

The best-served areas

Some areas of the UK have a wide range of local news outlets serving their populations: Cornwall, Bristol and Dorset seem particularly well served.

News oases: top 20 local areas for numbers of local news outlets

Local authority	Number of outlets		
Cornwall	26	Leeds	11
City of Bristol	23	East Riding of Yorkshire	11
Dorset	18	Glasgow City	11
Cheshire East	14	Bath & North Somerset	10
Wiltshire	14	Belfast	10
Manchester	14	Northumberland	9
Highland	14	Liverpool	9
East Devon	11	Sheffield	9
Newcastle upon Tyne	11	North Ayrshire	9
Birmingham	11	Aberdeenshire	9
		Fife	9

The population size of local authorities in the UK can differ significantly, from just 2,271 residents in the Isles of Scilly to over 1.1m residents in the City of Birmingham.

In the table on the right, we control for population, showing the areas with the most news outlets per 100k. This naturally highlights some of the areas with the smallest populations, but also shows that several Scottish council areas as well as some rural districts in England are better served. It seems notable that no large cities appear in this list.

Top 21 local authority districts for local news outlets per 100,000 population

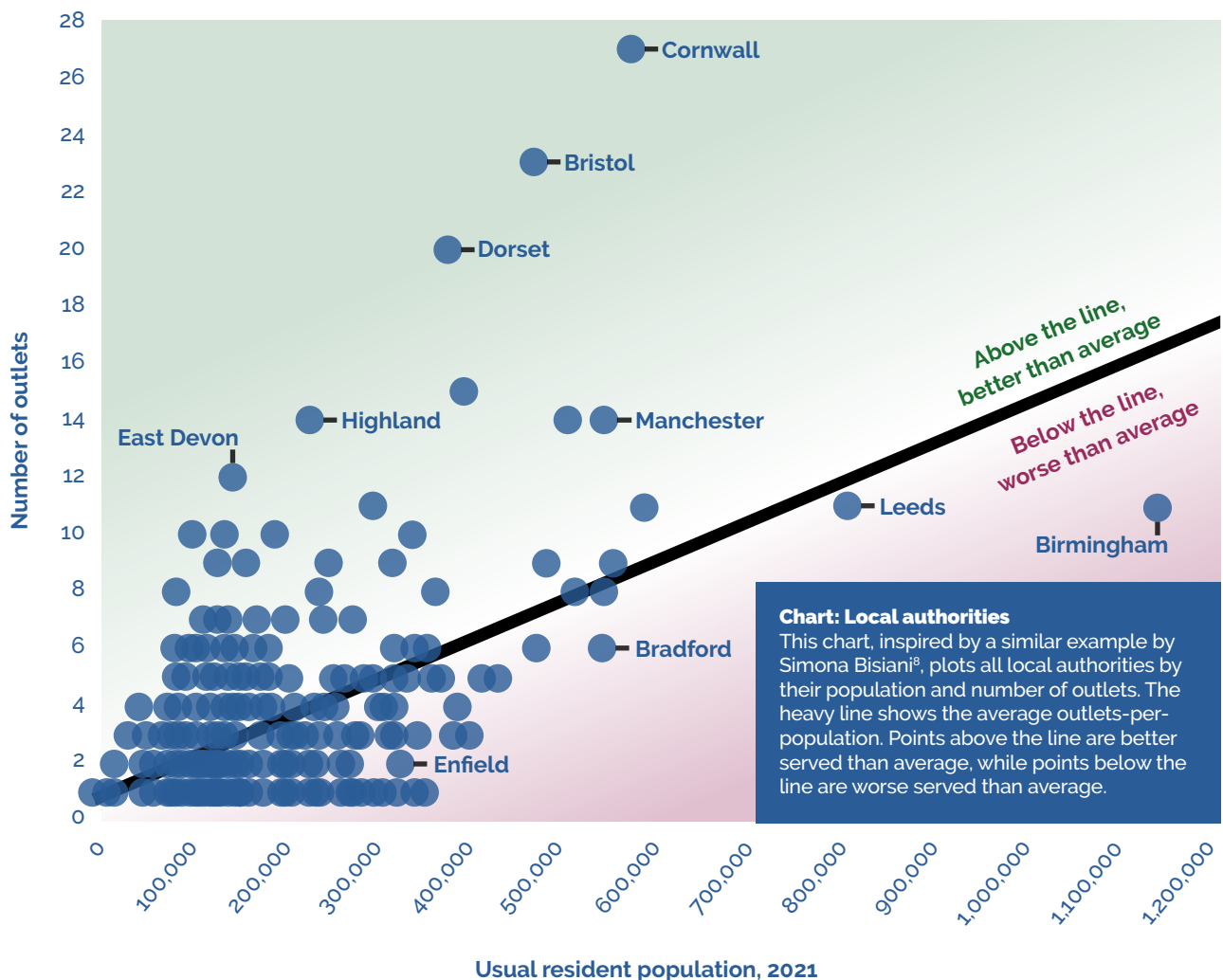
Local authority	Population	Number of outlets	Outlets per 100,000 people
Isles of Scilly	2,271	1	44.03
City of London	8,600	1	11.63
East Dunbartonshire	105,026	10	9.52
Orkney Islands	21,349	2	9.37
Argyll & Bute	88,166	8	9.07
Shetland Islands	23,167	2	8.63
East Devon	150,800	12	7.96
Rutland	41,000	3	7.32
Eden	54,700	4	7.31
North Ayrshire	138,146	10	7.24
South Hams	88,600	6	6.77
Wrexham	135,100	9	6.66
Staffordshire Moorlands	95,800	6	6.26
Mendip	116,100	7	6.03
Highland	232,132	14	6.03
Melton	51,800	3	5.79
Worcester	103,900	6	5.77
Somerset West and Taunton ⁷	157,400	9	5.72
Ceredigion	71,500	4	5.59
Moray	93,295	5	5.36
Scottish Borders	113,870	6	5.27
Dorset	379,600	20	5.27

News drylands

Not deserts, but with weak news provision

We can also use population data to look at the weakest local areas outside of news deserts. These are areas with large populations that are only served by one local news outlet. In the table on the right, we show the weakest such 20 local authority districts. And in the chart below, we plot all local authorities by their population and number of outlets.

News drylands



Weakest 20 local authority districts (aside from news deserts) for local news outlets per 100k population

Local authority	Usual resident population, 2021	Number of outlets	Outlets per 100,000 people
Wakefield	353,300	1	0.28
Sandwell	341,900	1	0.29
Brent	339,800	1	0.29
Bromley	330,000	1	0.30
Wirral	320,200	1	0.31
Redbridge	310,300	1	0.32
Tower Hamlets	310,300	1	0.32
Bolton	296,000	1	0.34
Central Bedfordshire	294,200	1	0.34
Walsall	284,100	1	0.35
Sefton	279,300	1	0.36
Waltham Forest	278,400	1	0.36
Sunderland	274,200	1	0.36
Havering	262,000	1	0.38
Bexley	246,500	1	0.41
Barking and Dagenham	218,900	1	0.46
Solihull	216,200	1	0.46
Sutton	209,600	1	0.48
North Tyneside	209,000	1	0.48
Stockton-on-Tees	196,600	1	0.51

Deprived areas and local news

Having established the number of local news outlets per local authority area, we can analyse correlations between local news coverage and different social issues, where those social issues have a quantitative measure.

To take one example for this report, we investigated the link between deprivation, as quantified or ranked by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, and local news provision. We asked the following research question:

"Is the number of local news outlets per local authority related to the deprivation deciles recorded for that authority, controlling for population?"

We find that the more deprived the area, the fewer the number of outlets, controlling for population size.

This is a strong correlation and we can be highly confident that the probability of obtaining this result by chance is very low ($F(2,306) = 57.173$; $p < .001$).

We are keen to see similar analysis conducted around the links between news provision and other social issues and are happy to make the dataset available to researchers on request.

What next?

The Local News Map is so far only a pilot project – and it only represents a snapshot in time. There is much more data that the map could show, and the data could be updated over time to show longitudinal change.

First, a wider range of outlets could be collected. Removing the requirement for incorporation would render it necessary to collect data on local Facebook groups, community magazines, WhatsApp groups, volunteer-led blogs – any outlet that has as its primary purpose the production of local news. These outlets matter because it seems likely that a significant number of citizens receive news from unincorporated outlets, especially via social media platforms, but this would present a significant challenge to collect, both in terms of person-hours and access to closed platforms.

Second, in terms of the additional information that could be collected about news outlets, the most important would be to understand the quality and quantity of public interest news that each outlet produces – and whether that news covers the entire area that the outlet claims to cover. Other measures could include the number of journalists employed (perhaps a relatively good proxy for the questions of quality and quantity of news), the cadence of publication, the audience size, the revenue, and so on. We welcome suggestions for data collection via our contact details below. Again, these additional fields of data present a significant challenge, but methods involving machine learning or sampling may offer a way forward.

The Australian News Sampling Project

The Australian News Sampling Project is produced by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, an Australian non-profit.

The project “assesses news output by specific geographic locations to understand the local character and quantity of public interest journalism production... This project analyses samples of news coverage in a given month against two benchmarks: the amount of public interest journalism produced, and the relative localism of the stories to the audience.”

PIJI receives funding from, among others, the Australian Government to support its news research.⁹

Third, the data only presents a snapshot of local news outlets in time, accurate at July 2023. Over time, existing outlets will change or close, and new outlets will open. The more time that passes the less this analysis will remain accurate. As an estimate, our local news outlets database includes nearly 2,000 titles, of which around 300 were discovered to be closed and so were not mapped. Those closures will have occurred in the time since the multiple lists we gathered were originally created – so perhaps around 7-8 years. Thus we can estimate that around 40 titles close per year. Updating this data on an ongoing basis, or at least performing an annual review, would help us understand the changing shape of the field over time, to track improvements or downturns, and continue to make accurate, effective interventions to support public interest news.

The above elements would provide a richer picture of the state of local news provision, and PINF aims to now facilitate a conversation on routes forward with partners and interested parties across local news media, academia, government and civil society. We welcome conversations with everybody wishing, and willing to act, to improve the state of local news in the UK.

Methodology

Definition of local news outlet

There is no statutory definition of a local news outlet. In developing a definition for the local news map, PINF was guided by an advisory group that included media mapping experts from both Australia's Public Interest Journalism Initiative and the US State of Local News project, among others. To be included in the local news map, outlets must:

- Be legally incorporated (i.e. a registered company, charity or society)
- Have a principal purpose of the provision of local news; and,
- Be recently updated.

The project would have required significantly greater resources to include unincorporated outlets.

The 'principal purpose' test was a subjective one – it is impossible to know for certain the purpose of a publisher – we erred on the side of inclusiveness.

PINF's definition of an independent outlet is whether that outlet has a revenue below £2m, a benchmark we have used for the last three years of our Index of Independent News Publishing.

Definition of news desert

For the purposes of this report, we have defined a news desert as a local authority area that has no dedicated local news outlet, for the reasons stated in the News Deserts section above.

Data collection

Our initial list of outlets was produced by collating and de-duplicating existing lists of local news outlets. These included PINF's own list of independent publishers developed for our Index report, and lists of outlets provided by corporate publishers, academics and editors of Wikipedia. The registers

of community radio stations and community television stations provided by Ofcom were added to this list.

Every outlet's website was checked to determine which local authority districts the outlet claimed to cover. In Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, local government is a single tier system: a resident only ever has one council, so outlets were recorded against this level. In England, there are many areas under a two-tier system: a resident has a district council and a county council. We have only mapped outlets against the first-tier or lower-level (smaller) council: county council areas do not appear on the map.

Where an outlet covered a subset of a local authority district, regularly the case with community radio stations, it was included, linked to the lower-level district.

Categorisation by media-type was usually straightforward, but there were a number of outlets for which it was difficult to determine whether they still existed in a print form – or only existed in print form, their online version having been subsumed into larger corporate websites. Without being able to travel to all local areas, online e-readers such as PressReader were used to try to get the most accurate picture.

Office or newsroom locations were identified by information given on the outlet's website, or the map uses the registered address via Companies House if an office address could not be found.

Identifying claimed coverage area

We identified claimed coverage area by the title of the outlet and by any information as to the claimed coverage area on the outlet's website.

We have included 'regional' outlets where their purpose is to cover several local districts, such as BBC local radio stations. We did not include national outlets, such as those covering the whole of Scotland, because it is the supply of public interest news about local issues – council decisions and community affairs around a town, city or rural area – that we are attempting to demonstrate.

On the correlation between news outlets and deprivation

The three variables in the analysis of correlation between outlets and deprivation in this paper were continuous, with normal distributions. Therefore, multiple regression was used to explore the relationship between deprivation and number of outlets. The dependent variable was 'number of outlets per local authority'. The independent variable was 'deprivation deciles'. The covariate was 'population of the local authority'. The result found was that deprivation does predict the number of outlets, controlling for population size.

Regression produces an F statistic, which in this case is $F(2, 306) = 57.173$; $p < .001$. The p value suggests that there is less than a 1 in a 1000 probability that this result could have been achieved by chance.

The effect size is $R^2 = .27$. This means that 27% of the variance in the number of titles can be accounted for by the deprivation decile of the local area, controlling for population size. There were $N = 309$ cases for which we had all three variables. This is a reasonable sample size, and because the significance ($p < .001$) is so good, we can be very confident that the probability of obtaining this result by chance is very low.

Corrections

The research was conducted between December 2022 and April 2023. The map was first made public in June 2023 and comments and corrections were invited until 17 July 2023. Analysis of the data was performed in early July. The map has seen around 35 outlets corrected or added, roughly 2% of 1,980 outlets in the database. This may lead to slight differences between the interactive map and the analysis in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The Public Interest News Foundation, and its deputy director Joe Mitchell, would like to acknowledge the efforts of several people involved in this project. Max Roche completed the first full draft of the database. Dr Coral Milburn-Curtis, associate fellow at Green Templeton College, University of Oxford, established the correlation between deprivation and news outlets, and also performed much of the tabular analysis. The agency CommonKnowledge were responsible for the interactive website.

Additional thanks are due to Gordon Ramsay, associate professor at the University of Akureyri for sharing his most recent lists of local news outlets, and to Simona Bisiani, a PhD candidate at University of Surrey, for an early round of corrections and clarifications.

We also thank members of the advisory group for guiding us as to our definition and approach, and to all those who pointed out mistakes or missing outlets in the first version of the map released a month before this report.

This work was only made possible by a grant from the JRSST Charitable Trust, for which we are extremely grateful.

About us

The Public Interest News Foundation is the first charity in the UK that exists to promote public interest news.

We define public interest news as news which is produced and disseminated according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism, and which enables members of the public to engage in their communities and their democracy.

We believe that everyone should be able to benefit from public interest news that speaks to, for and with them, wherever and wherever they are. We provide grants and leadership development opportunities for public interest news leaders and future leaders across the UK.

Our trustees are Jo Adetunji, Polly Curtis, Lord Inglewood, Isabelle Roughol, Patrick Swaffer and Julius Weinberg.

Endnotes

- 1 This number does not include the 21 county councils in England.
- 2 ONS, 2021. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2021>
- 3 ONS, *ibid.*
- 4 <https://democracyfund.org/idea/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy/>
- 5 Allerdale District Council is marked on our interactive map as a news desert, but the council was merged into Cumberland Council in April 2023.
- 6 Our list of news deserts for the East Midlands does not include North Northants or West Northants, despite the interactive map suggesting this area is made up of news deserts. The map visualisation uses political boundaries that predate political boundary changes in what was the county of Northamptonshire: these areas were merged in May 2021 to become North Northamptonshire Council (covered by at least NN Journal) and West Northamptonshire Council (covered by at least Daventry Express). Relatedly, several local authority areas shown on our map, though not as news deserts, were merged in May 2023 to become Somerset Council.
- 7 Somerset West and Taunton was merged with others to make up what is now Somerset Council in May 2023.
- 8 https://simonabisiani.github.io/projects/local_news/local_news/
- 9 For more on PIJI, see <https://piji.com.au>

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