

Reform public notices: increase public access to local information and support local news providers



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Executive summary

In recent years, the local news ecosystem has seen a huge shift. Legacy printed newspapers that once sold in the tens of thousands may now only circulate a few hundred copies, while independent, regulated local online news sites can attract up to half a million unique visitors. Both printed and online news providers are essential to local communities, limiting the harm of misinformation and disinformation, boosting community cohesion and strengthening democracy itself.

For more than a century, local authorities have been required by law to place public notices in printed newspapers to inform local communities about planning applications, road closures, licensing changes and other issues. The public notice system serves two purposes: it ensures that people are aware of important information about their community and it provides a reliable source of revenue for local news providers.

However, the requirement to place public notices in printed newspapers is blocking both of these purposes. It is limiting the visibility of important local information and failing to support local news providers that are online only – even where these providers are widely read and trusted in their communities.

Therefore, we recommend a simple update to the statutory definition of local news provider, to ensure that public notices are seen by as many as possible and that local news providers receive the revenue they need and deserve to sustain cohesive and democratic local communities.

Background

The local news industry in the UK has undergone deep transformation with the rise of online news providers and the decline of printed newspapers. According to the most recent data, daily circulations of printed local papers fell by 16% between 2023 and 2024 alone,¹ meaning more than half had a circulation of less than 5,000 in 2024.² The contrast is stark when compared to 2014. To take four of the best-known regional brands in the UK, The Irish Times fell from 38,581 to 18,586; the Press and Journal from

¹ See: https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/media_metrics/regional-newspaper-abcs-no-daily-circulation-20000/

² See: <https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/regional-newspapers/regional-daily-newspaper-circulation-abc-h1-2024/>

60,292 to 18,358; the Manchester Evening News from 66,521 to 6,173; and the Liverpool Echo from 61,902 to 10,295.³ To take a local brand, the Glamorgan Gazette has fallen from 13,000 20 years ago to just 627 in 2024.⁴ This rate of decline shows that the vast majority of people in the UK are not getting their news from the printed press.

In comparison, there has been an explosion over the last ten years of digital-only or digital-first local news publications. Journalists seeking innovative new models of local news have been able to set up on new digital platforms including Substack and Ghost without having to shoulder the cost of print. All around the country, digital outlets established in the last decade or so are finding audiences who want trustworthy local information provided by journalists who are embedded in their communities, including The Bristol Cable, Waltham Forest Echo, Mill Media, Greater Govanhill, VIEWDigital and many others.

The average local, independent news provider attracted 489,268 unique users in 2024.⁵ This is an increase of 40% from 2023, showing that people are increasingly turning to trusted, independently owned local news publishers to provide relevant information about their communities. Printed and online news are both necessary to a healthy information ecosystem from which everyone can benefit equally. Local news is essential to providing UK communities with shared understandings, inoculating local people against misinformation and disinformation, creating pride in place and promoting civic participation across the country.

Local authorities are obliged by law to publish information about issues affecting local residents, from licensing applications and planning notices to tenders and highway closures. While there have been recent suggestions that councils could save money by putting this information on council websites, there is a real risk that no-one would see it, and information will be lost and forgotten. So, councils pay local newspapers to run public notices.

The primary purpose of public notices is to get relevant, timely information to local communities. People need to be able to have a say on issues that might have a big impact on them, to find out about proposed developments in good time and comment on a proposal before a decision is made.

For hundreds of years, local news has served audiences, creating a sense of place during Britain's industrialisation, connecting people when no other forms of media were available and creating community. We now live in an age of media abundance, where the role of local media is shifting to deliver relevant information that people can trust.

³ See: <https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/regional-newspapers/regional-daily-newspaper-abcs-second-half-2014-paid-titles-lose-average-10-cent-circulations-year/>

⁴ See: <https://www.abc.org.uk/product/38>

⁵ PINF (2025) *Index of Independent News Publishing in the UK*, p.13.

https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/_files/ugd/cde0e9_dea9347daea84ce8b57e441fae54c5ae.pdf

Communities turn to local news outlets to provide ‘connection and accountability’.⁶ Local news outlets therefore provide a perfect home to bring together local people with public notices, increasing citizens’ engagement with civic decision-making.

A secondary effect is that public notices create a reliable source of revenue for the local printed press. With the decline of print circulations and advertising revenues almost entirely co-opted by big tech platforms, local news providers are having to fight to survive. Both independent and corporate outlets alike benefit from notices, so long as they have printed newspapers. Newsquest Wales reported that “six out of our 10 local newspapers would have been loss making last year without public notice revenue” when giving evidence to the Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee in 2024.⁷

Why is reform needed?

Each type of public notice is covered by its own legal requirements, but all of them are underpinned by the same definition of ‘newspaper’. However, the definition of ‘newspaper’ that is used to determine the placing of public notices comes from the Newspaper and Libel Registration Act 1881, which states:

‘The word “newspaper” shall mean any paper containing public news, intelligence, or occurrences, or any remarks or observations therein printed for sale, and published in England or Ireland periodically, or in parts or numbers at intervals not exceeding twenty-six days between the publication of any two such papers, parts, or numbers.’

While public notices should remain in printed papers to ensure that citizens without access to the internet can engage with them, a much wider audience would be reached by also placing notices online. With the online, independent local news sector reaching the vast majority of the UK population, public notices would be seen by far more people should the law be changed to allow them to be published online.

This would be of huge benefit to councils, who can therefore get important information to much wider audiences. As printed paper circulations continue to fall, notices are not currently achieving their primary objective of informing the public.

As for their secondary objective, local councils spend tens of millions of pounds to publish notices in newspapers up and down the UK. As there are many different types of public notice, it’s hard to say exactly how much is spent on them. There is no publicly

⁶ PINF (2025) *Regenerating Local News*, p31.

https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/files/ugd/cde0e9_2c1dcda04b144203bc7f3c00b60a4ffd.pdf

⁷ See: <https://record.senedd.wales/Committee/14009> paragraph 11.

available figure for the total value. In 2012, according to the Local Government Information Unit, it was £67.85m.⁸ In 2022, we calculated that it was £46.29m.⁹

Almost none of this money goes to local independent news publishers, which could be a lifeline for outlets that are essential to fill gaps in local information, but are having to do so on incredibly tight budgets. According to an FOI in 2020, Waltham Forest Council's spend with Newsquest (which is primarily on public notices) was over £86,000. The average independent publisher's annual revenue is only £62,877, so a fair share of this income would make a huge impact.

A change in the law would mean that the source of revenue provided by public notice contracts would be shared more equally with the whole news ecosystem, as it would include outlets that are digital-only, rather than benefitting only print publications. A formalised tendering process for contracts may also result in savings for councils, as outlets can competitively price their bids, resulting in a cheaper and fairer system for local news publishers.

There have been countless calls in recent years to regenerate local news in the UK. Recognising the importance of the sector, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has announced plans to publish a Local Media Strategy in 2025, to ensure that local news providers can continue to play their vital democratic role. Various reports examining the crisis in local news have specifically recommended that the government review the public notices system:

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport's *Sustainability of Local Journalism* report recommends 'that the Government review existing rules and practices for placing statutory notices in local newspapers and whether local councils need guidance on how to measure the reach and audience levels of news publications in a digital age.'¹⁰

The House of Lords' *Future of News* report recommends that the 'Government should consult on changing the definition of a "newspaper" to allow local authorities greater flexibility in determining the most effective use of public notice advertising spend. We suggest local authorities should be permitted to use both online providers and a wider variety of print outlets.'¹¹

⁸ See: <https://www.lgiu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Public-notices-The-case-for-radical-reform-part-1.pdf>

⁹ See p7: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107669/pdf/>

¹⁰ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2023) *Sustainability of Local Journalism*, p20. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33635/documents/183838/default/>

¹¹ House of Lords (2024) *Future of News report* p.21 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldcomm/39/39.pdf>

Clearly, change is needed for public notices to reach their intended audience and fulfil their function in the local news ecosystem.

Recommendation

Given the huge amount of change in news habits and ecosystems in the 144 years since the Newspaper Act of 1881, the outdated definition of newspaper underpinning the placement of public notices must be updated to account for the ways that publics interact with information in the modern age.

A change to the law would see a far greater percentage of the UK population engaging with council public notices and provide much-needed support for a sector that is fighting to survive despite huge engagement.

Councils should set requirements that outlets must meet in order to successfully bid for notices, awarding contracts to outlets that are owned and operated within their communities, widely read by local people and highly valued by their readers.

Conclusion

Updating the public notice system is both a democratic necessity and an economic opportunity. As print circulations continue to fall and online readership of local news sites grows, continuing to confine notices to traditional print severely limits their reach and undermines their primary purpose: to ensure communities are informed and able to participate in local decision-making.

Reforming the law to include trusted, accountable and widely-read online local news outlets would mean that far more people see vital information and are able to engage with changes in their community. Revenues would be distributed more fairly, helping sustain a diverse, independent local news sector that is essential to a healthy democracy.

By embracing both print and digital distribution, councils can maximise transparency, strengthen their relationship with local media and fulfil their statutory obligations more effectively. A modernised system would serve residents better, support journalism where it is most needed and ensure that public notices achieve their purpose in today's media ecosystem.

About PINF

The Public Interest News Foundation (PINF) is working to regenerate local news across the UK. By 2035, we want every local community to be served by news that is Accountable, Sustainable, in the Public interest, Innovative, Representative and Engaging (ASPIRE). We believe that everyone should benefit from local news that speaks to them, for them and with them.

Local journalism plays an essential role in informing local communities, holding power to account, boosting local economies, creating a forum for debate and debunking the myths and rumours that lead to polarisation. PINF's advocacy and research is shaped by our network of over 100 local public interest news providers from all corners of the UK: from Devon to Shetland, Newry to Caerphilly.

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