

Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Culture, Welsh Language & Communications Committee entitled Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Journalism and Local Media

The Welsh Government welcomes the findings of the report and offers the following response to the nine recommendations contained within.

Recommendation 1

The Welsh Government should urge Ofcom to ensure that broadcasters maintain accuracy and impartiality by reporting on all four UK nations equally, as a matter of course, but especially when it comes to their approach to public health.

Response: Accept

We recognise the vital importance of accurate and impartial reporting in Wales, in particular in light of the COVID-19 pandemic when it is essential that people are able to access up to date information on the measures introduced by government to protect public health and limit the spread of the virus. Our broadcasters play a crucial role in this, informing people across Wales and providing regular updates on how these measures are being applied within communities.

Whilst we do not have any regulatory control over what is broadcast by broadcasters, given the non-devolved nature of broadcasting with BBC independent of government, Welsh Ministers and officials have regular meetings with the public service broadcasters. This engagement has continued throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Reporting of information on the COVID-19 situation and the measures introduced to limit the spread of the virus is complex and at times confusing. Spokespeople for the UK Government do not always make it clear that their decisions apply only to England. We work closely with Ofcom in Wales on issues related to communication services in Wales and have raised the issue of the accuracy of reporting with both officers in Ofcom and the Ofcom Wales Board member. The matter has been discussed at Ofcom Advisory Committee for Wales meetings. We continue to remind Ofcom of its commitment to make provision for the UK's nations.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Ofcom has written to broadcasters reminding them of the need to comply with the Broadcasting Code. This letter included reference to public health advice on the Coronavirus and the need for broadcasters to ensure that viewers and listeners are made aware in an appropriate manner of the different approaches taken by public authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and/or Northern Ireland in areas such as social distancing requirements.

The Welsh Government will continue to engage with Ofcom to ensure accuracy and impartiality in broadcasting and to ensure information on the position and approach adopted by Wales is adequately reflected in broadcaster reporting.

Financial implications: No financial implications.

Recommendation 2

The Welsh Government should provide the Committee with an assessment of the quality of information dissemination about COVID-19 during the pandemic.

Response: Accept

The clear and timely dissemination of public health messaging to the people of Wales has been, and remains, critical during the coronavirus pandemic. From the outset, the Welsh Government has worked closely with partners across the public sector, the media, and others in order to maximise the impact and reach of these messages. This has been particularly important where policy in Wales has diverged from the rest of the UK, and to drive compliance with the restrictions designed to minimise the spread of the virus.

We have also used our own social media channels and website to communicate directly with the people of Wales. The GOV.WALES site has seen hundreds of thousands of views a day, and is a clear and comprehensive source of authoritative information. Ministers have undertaken several Facebook Live sessions to answer questions from the public, alongside high quality digital content to drive public behaviour. Our social media channels have seen significant increases in followers:

Facebook Page followers from 1 March to 10 October:

Llywodraeth Cymru: +2,415 (up from 1,383)

Welsh Government: +125,985 (up from 13,680)

Twitter followers from 1 March to 10 October:

Llywodraeth Cymru: +1,547 (up from 7,725)

Welsh Government: +44,692 (up from 89,746)

The Welsh media play a crucial role in disseminating public health information, and we have worked with them in an open, transparent and accessible way to ensure this is as effective as possible. Ministers, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Executive of NHS Wales have undertaken well over 100 live televised press conferences to answer questions from journalists. These have attracted significant audiences, and are also streamed live and in full on our social media channels. The First Minister's address to the nation last month drew more than 500,000 viewers on BBC1 Wales.

Through our Keep Wales Safe campaign, we have provided simple, concise messages on preventative behaviours, and encouraged compliance with a sense of common purpose. We have also worked alongside the UK Government on reinforcing common health messages and actions where policy in Wales is aligned with that in England. The campaign has had multiple strands, covering the shielded population, reassurance messages for pupils, parents and teachers, and the use of face coverings, for example.

We have also co-ordinated public health communications across the Welsh public sector throughout the pandemic to support our partners in communicating on a national, regional and local basis. This has helped to ensure consistency of messaging and maximised reach and impact through their channels.

The approach set out above will continue for the duration of the pandemic.

Financial implications: No financial implications.

Recommendation 3

The Welsh Government should urge the UK Government to fill the gap of up to £8.5 million in BBC Cymru Wales' funding.

Response: Reject

The Welsh Government recognises the independence of the BBC from government, with BBC Cymru Wales funded by the BBC through the TV licence fee. It is important that BBC Cymru Wales continues to be funded by the BBC centrally from its overall budget, to protect that independence.

The Welsh Government has consistently called for sufficient funding from the BBC centrally for BBC Cymru Wales for news and non-news programming in both Welsh and English. We are aware of the significant financial challenges being faced by the BBC and the impact of this on BBC Cymru Wales funding. We are naturally concerned about the effect of this on BBC Cymru Wales' services and operations in Wales.

It is essential that BBC Cymru Wales is adequately funded so that it can continue to serve audiences and play a key role in supporting the creative industries in Wales. The current BBC Charter gives the BBC a much stronger public purpose to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of Wales. We therefore expect more and better content and programming made for Wales, about Wales – and in Wales – across the BBC's services. To deliver this appropriate funding is required. We have consistently stressed that any new money promised for Wales has to be genuinely additional.

We will continue to press for sufficient funding for BBC Cymru Wales from the BBC centrally, in line with its independence of government, funded through the TV licence fee.

Financial implications: No financial implications.

Recommendation 4

The Welsh Government should urge the UK Government to continue the Job Retention Scheme beyond October 2020 on a sectoral basis in recognition of the fact that the majority of news journalism businesses will not be able to return to pre-pandemic levels of economic activity for some time to come.

Response: Accept

The Welsh Government has been supportive of the Job Retention Scheme since its launch. The Scheme has had a key role in helping to protect jobs during the crisis. We made clear at the start of the pandemic that a major UK Government intervention of this nature was needed as only the UK Government has the fiscal firepower to deliver protection at this scale. The Minister for Economy, Transport & North Wales and officials have regularly pressed the issue of extending the Job Retention Scheme to those sectors still in need of assistance with HM Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Our Social Partnership approach in Wales enables us to hear the concerns of business and unions and both have consistently called for an extension to the Job Retention Scheme, especially for those sectors most impacted by the pandemic.

The enhancement of the Job Support Scheme announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 9 October will be welcome news to businesses and employees affected by local restrictions. We have been urging UK Government Ministers to review the Job Support Scheme to ensure it is operating effectively and as many workers as possible benefit. We look forward to contributing to the review of the scheme in January 2021.

We continue to raise the need for support for employees in meetings with UK Government recognising that the Welsh Government does not have the necessary resources to replicate the scale of this type of intervention.

Financial implications: No financial implications.

Recommendation 5

The Welsh Government should encourage businesses to make use of the UK Government's Job Retention Scheme while they explore longer term solutions instead of making employees redundant.

Response: Accept

The Welsh Government's Business Wales service actively promotes Covid-19 business support advice, information and schemes via the Business Wales website <https://businesswales.gov.wales/coronavirus-advice/> and associated social media channels, as well as via the Business Wales Helpline and Business Wales advisory staff. This has included signposting to UK Government schemes such as the Job Retention Scheme.

Dedicated advice is available for individuals and businesses, including business planning, reviews and remodelling and support to access financial support to support sustainability and developing new business models. In addition, a series of live webinars have been developed to address challenges around accessing finance, managing cash flow, digital capability and diversification, managing change to employment.

Financial implications: No financial implications.

Recommendation 6

The Welsh Government should lead conversations with representatives from the sector to gain a clearer understanding of the immediate support required and explore solutions other than redundancies.

Response: Accept

We note the challenges being faced by the media sector in Wales, many of which have been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Welsh Government is working with key stakeholders in Wales to explore options to provide further support the sector.

Financial implications: No financial implications.

Recommendation 7

The Welsh Government should urgently identify the changes necessary to enable statutory notices to be published by hyperlocal and online providers.

Response: Accept

As part of the Welsh Government's response to the Public Accounts Committee report on the Effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities in Wales, it has been accepted that significant change is required to the way in which engagement takes place in the planning system to reflect community aspirations and new communication methods.

Across both planning and transport we are concerned that the effectiveness of newspaper advertisements is decreasing as readership figures decline.

Planning Directorate is developing a programme of projects to look at engagement in planning system and one area that has already been identified for investigation is the advertising of

statutory notices. Local Planning Authorities have raised concern that this form of advertising is expensive and does not provide value.

While we wish to increase the use of digital platforms for hosting statutory notices we are aware we need to continue to engage with those who do not have online access. We are considering a joint review of statutory notices across both planning and transport to consider how best to reach the necessary audiences. Meanwhile, we will be looking at how a wider audience can be reached in respect through a variety of engagement methods. One of the options that will be considered is a broader range of publications that can be used to advertise statutory notices to include hyperlocal and online providers.

Financial implications: No additional financial implications.

Recommendation 8

The Welsh Government should provide financial support for community radio stations that are owned, licensed and operating in Wales.

Response: Accept

Community radio stations play an essential role in ensuring that people in Wales have access to vital local news and information. This has been crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic when it is essential that people are able to access up to date information on what is going on in their local communities.

We are providing support to community radio stations through a range of business support mechanisms. Business Wales and Social Business Wales provides access for individuals, SMEs and social enterprises from all sectors across Wales, to a wide range of business support, advice and information. This includes access to financial support, such as UK Government Start-up Loans or loan and equity funding from the Development Bank of Wales. The Business Wales website has a Business Finance Zone offering specialised advice and information to help people access finance as well as a Finance Locator <https://businesswales.gov.wales/businessfinance/>

Community radio stations have been supported during the pandemic through the Welsh Government Economic Resilience Fund and through the third sector the Community Facilities Programme.

In addition to Welsh Government support, we will work with Ofcom in Wales to ensure as many eligible community radio stations as possible benefit from their Community Radio Fund and to identify and address any barriers to Welsh community radio stations accessing this support.

Financial implications: No additional financial implications.

Recommendation 9

The Welsh Government should take affirmative action to encourage new entrants to the market and support innovative approaches to the provision of news journalism in Wales.

Response: Accept

Creative Wales will explore options to encourage new entrants to the market. This will include exploring opportunities to work with key stakeholders such as Clwstwr, Universities, relevant news organisations and stakeholders in Wales to encourage innovation and new entrants in the journalism, news and hyperlocal sector.

Innovation in news and journalism is a key component of the Clwstwr project being delivered in the Cardiff City Region between 2018 and 2023. The project, match funded by Creative Wales, seeks to identify and support new developments in the sector, and has funded a number of projects across Wales.

We will also consider how we can use skills interventions to support this work, such as the Creative Careers Programme Cymru programme, funded by Creative Wales which is designed to help inform young people and new entrants of the breadth of roles that exist in the Creative Industries.

General support is also available, and the Welsh Government proactively supports entrepreneurship through policies and programmes aimed at encouraging the creation, growth and sustainable development of micro businesses and SMEs. The Welsh Government continues to offer dedicated start-up advice and support through Business Wales and Social Business Wales, in addition to financial support that may be available such as Start-up Loans.

Financial implications: No additional financial implications.

Lord Elis-Thomas MS
Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism