

Reach

Dear Sir/Madam

Please consider this as a submission to the consultation on the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill.

Section 20 of the bill as drafted contains a clause which would remove the requirement on local authorities to publish a notice of changes to council tax in at least one newspaper circulating in its area¹. It would allow local authorities to publish the notice on their own websites instead.

Statutory public notices are an important source of income for news publishers at a time when their revenue is under extreme pressure from falling newspaper circulation, declining print advertising and the challenges faced in monetising the enormous audiences being reached online. These pressures are exacerbated by the dominance and unpredictability of Facebook and Google as referrers of audience to news websites, the domination of the advertising market by Meta and Google, and the expansion of the BBC into online news at the expense of its local radio output. All of these together amount to a tangible threat to the future of news providers in Wales, who are also facing significant rises in their costs because of inflation.

If the Welsh Government's intention is to move away from requiring public bodies to place statutory public notices in newspapers, it risks causing a devastating impact on news reporting in Wales at a time when the industry needs support. For Reach, which publishes WalesOnline, North Wales Live, four daily print titles (the Western Mail, Daily Post, South Wales Echo, South Wales Evening Post) as well as Wales on Sunday and many weekly titles serving communities across Wales, any threat to such a vital source of income would have a direct, devastating impact on our editorial operations and our titles serving communities in Wales. It increases the risk of titles closing, news provision in Wales being further hollowed out and more journalists who have dedicated their working lives to reporting in Wales being put out of work.

¹ [Section 20 of the Wales bill](#) removes [subsections 8, 9 and 10 of Section 12 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992](#)

There is a sentence in the new bill obliging councils to “make arrangements for the public who would otherwise not be able to access that notice to do so”, however there is nothing explicit in that statement that would oblige a local authority to advertise with a news organisation.

There are only a small number of public notices relating to council tax that this would affect every year. However the bill would set a precedent and if the Welsh Government’s intention is to introduce these changes in future legislation as it updates the myriad of laws that impose obligations on public bodies to advertise in newspapers, it will have a significant impact on news organisations in Wales that receive this advertising, as well as on their staff and titles.

The Working Group on Public Interest Journalism set up by the Welsh Government has been discussing the difficult issue of whether the requirement to publish in a printed newspaper should be reworked to also include online only providers. There is a difficult decision to be made here about balancing the impact on longstanding newspaper titles, the communities they serve and the professionally run and trained newsrooms they support, with the interests of supporting the online-only sector.

However, the wording of the bill as it stands would not support any journalism in Wales and would only damage it. The damage the clause would do also seems to directly flout the 2021 co-operation agreement struck between Plaid and Labour and its pledge to “work to strengthen the media in Wales”. It would leave news organisations in Wales in a worse position than those across the border in England and further exacerbate the democratic deficit we face.

Yours faithfully,

Steffan Rhys — Editor, WalesOnline
David James — Deputy Editor, WalesOnline
Catrin Pascoe — Editor, Western Mail
Jonathan Roberts — Editor, South Wales Evening Post