

# **Briefing to the Senedd Culture Committee**

Community Cohesion and Democratic Engagement in Wales: The Role of Public Interest News

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**Purpose:** To highlight the challenges facing community cohesion and democratic participation in Wales due to the decline in local and national public interest news provision, and to propose pathways for policy response and investment.

## **1. Context and Problem Statement**

Wales faces a critical shortfall in public interest journalism. Beyond the BBC, no dedicated Welsh national public interest news provider with reach exists. Legacy local news publishers, notably Reach plc and Newsquest, have significantly reduced editorial capacity across Wales. This has contributed to an emerging "news deserts" across the country, leaving many communities with little or no regular access to independently produced, fact-checked, relevant information.

This erosion of news provision directly undermines community cohesion and democratic engagement, weakening public trust and increasing susceptibility to misinformation, a pattern explored in detail in the 2025 Lessons from Southport report.

## **2. Key Challenges**

### **A. Erosion of Local Information Ecosystems**

The rapid decline of local titles and hollowing out of editorial teams means that key issues, from council decisions to community developments, go unreported.

In the vacuum, misinformation, rumour and divisive content on social media become dominant sources of information.

### **B. Public Misinformation and Institutional Fragility**

As documented in Southport, a single event triggered widespread unrest due to an absence of trusted local reporting, compounded by algorithmic amplification of misinformation online.

Similar vulnerabilities exist in Wales, particularly in communities affected by poverty and poor digital literacy.

### **C. Community Cohesion Under Threat**

Misinformation exacerbates tensions between communities, as witnessed in Southport. The News Futures Forum participants emphasised that a decline in public interest news reduces shared understanding and weakens social resilience.

The underrepresentation of Welsh voices and a lack of community-rooted editorial perspectives in Wales aggravate this.

#### **D. Democratic Disengagement**

Citizens in Wales are less likely to be informed about local democracy, devolved policy, or opportunities for civic participation if no trusted media is covering these issues in a relevant, accessible way.

A weakened information environment undermines electoral engagement and informed public debate, especially at local and Senedd levels.

### **3. Emerging Solutions and Opportunities**

#### **A. Support for Initiatives like Talking Wales**

Talking Wales (<https://talking.wales>) is pioneering a cooperative model of public interest news rooted in communities and supported by its readers and members.

It combines digital-first reporting with community engagement and aims to build a network of local newsrooms contributing to a national platform.

This model aligns with the recommendations from the Southport report, including:

Newsrooms as resilience hubs.

Debunking and fact-checking initiatives.

Greater collaboration with civic institutions.

#### **B. A Welsh Public Interest News Fund**

Drawing inspiration from Ireland and Scotland, a Senedd-backed Public Interest News Fund, independent from Creative Wales and managed by the Public Interest News Foundation, could help sustain independent news providers through matched funding, investment, innovation grants, and capacity-building support.

Criteria would include editorial independence, public service ethos, and community accountability.

#### **C. Integration of News Literacy in the Curriculum**

As noted in the Southport findings, embedding media literacy in education, especially around critical thinking and evaluating sources, is essential to future-proofing community resilience.

#### **D. Policy Support for Local News Infrastructure**

Measures might include:

Reforming public notice advertising to support local media.

Supporting cooperative and non-profit ownership models.

Exploring tax relief or commissioning contracts for verified public interest news outlets.

#### **4. Recommendations to the Committee**

Hold an inquiry into the state of local and national public interest news in Wales, including mapping news deserts and stakeholder consultation.

Support a pilot Public Interest News Fund for Wales, in partnership with the sector and key stakeholders such as the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF).

Champion policy reform to redirect public advertising and democratic information to community-focused and verified news providers.

Back the development of a Welsh news literacy strategy, jointly led by the education and culture departments.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The decline in public interest news in Wales is not just a media issue but a threat to democracy, cohesion, and informed citizenship. Community-led solutions like Talking Wales, and national coordination inspired by the Lessons from Southport report, offer a roadmap toward a more resilient, better informed and cohesive Wales.

References: [Lessons Learnt From Southport](#).