

## English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

### News Media Association Evidence For Public Bill Committee

12 September 2025

#### Introduction

1. The News Media Association is the voice of UK national, regional, and local news media in all its print and digital forms – a £4 billion sector read by more than 46.2 million adults every month. Our members publish around 900 news media titles, ranging from well-known national and international brands to independent local papers of record, including The Guardian, Financial Times, The Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mirror, to the Manchester Evening News, Kent Messenger, and the Monmouthshire Beacon.

#### Summary

2. The NMA supports the government's stated aim for the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill to decentralise power and give regions and communities a greater say in deciding their own destinies. Handing local authorities more power requires greater scrutiny of decision-making at a local level – a role performed by local journalists right across the country.
3. As part of its function upholding local democracy, local news media acts as an independent platform for the dissemination of public notices. The statutory requirement to publish public notices in printed local papers ensures that information of local democratic import is consistently published in independent and highly trusted environments.
4. However, the Bill contains a provision (Schedule 25, Paragraph 6, Subparagraphs 2 and 3) which would amend the Local Government Act 2000 by removing the requirement for local authorities to publish, in a newspaper, any changes to local government structures. Instead, local authorities could publish notices "*in such manner as the local authority thinks appropriate.*"
5. **As government embarks on a major programme of local government reform, this provision would risk keeping communities in the dark as important decisions about local councils are made in secret. Therefore, we strongly believe that the Bill should be amended to remove provisions Schedule 25, Paragraph 6, Subparagraphs 2 and 3 in their entirety.**

#### Local news media

1. Across the country, local journalists hold power to account, shine a light on local issues, and campaign on causes that matter to their readers, underpinning local democracy. Local journalists have a very strong track record of holding local councils to account, scrutinising the use of public money on behalf of their readers. It is widely acknowledged that this is an important and valuable service which should be protected and strengthened.

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2. Today, there are huge audiences for local journalism. Local news media reaches 42 million people every month in print and digital. The sector is also highly trusted – public polling [published](#) in August 2025 found that trust in local media has grown significantly over the past year.
3. Furthermore, Ofcom’s most recent report on news consumption in the UK, [published](#) in July 2025, also found a notable improvement in the public perception of print newspapers, with ratings for trust, accuracy, and impartiality increasing from 60 per cent in 2018 to 70 per cent in 2025.
4. This strong rise in trust is unsurprising when you consider the wider context of tech platforms integrating AI technology into their core search products at breakneck speed – massively increasing the prominence of factually incorrect and misleading information online, in place of trusted sources such as news brands.
5. The work of local journalists reporting on the Southport riots last summer - providing trusted information to combat mis and dis information online - has been repeatedly acknowledged as a shining example of the vital service provided by local news media. Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy referenced this in June when she announced the launched the Local Media Strategy “*to ensure that people in every town, city and village can access trust in news that reflects their lives.*” Other leaders have also voiced their support for the sector in recent months.

*“It was local media on the ground who countered mis- and disinformation in real time. And they told the real story, the story of our communities, who came together to defend all of us in all of our diversity and led the community fightback.”*

**Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy MP** commenting on local media’s reporting of the Southport riots (June 2025)

*“It’s such a force for good, and I think respected by millions and I strongly feel people go to their local regional media as a trusted source in a way that they don’t quite believe they can get to a trusted source elsewhere.”*

**Prime Minister Sir Keir Stamer MP** at a 10 Downing Street reception for regional press (March 2025)

*“I have long believed that regional media, in all its forms, has a unique and vital role to play in society, perhaps even more so in these uncertain times.”*

**King Charles** at a Buckingham Palace reception for regional media (March 2025)

## **Public notices**

1. In addition to their journalism, local papers are the primary platform for citizens to access public notices – advertisements placed by councils and other local authorities to inform people of developments in their area such as planning applications, road closures, or proposals by pubs or nightclubs to change their opening hours. Independent [research](#) from OnePoll conducted in March 2024 found that local news media in print and digital (41 per cent) remains the number one platform used by the UK public to view public notices, well ahead of local authority websites (29 per cent), social media (28 per cent) and printed mailouts (26 per cent). In addition to appearing as advertisements, public notices are often useful leads for journalists to follow up and cover editorially, amplifying and deepening public engagement with key local issues still further. It is essential that the upcoming major programme of local government reform is subject to the highest levels of editorial scrutiny locally, with transparency right at the heart of the whole process of devolution.
2. The statutory requirement for public notices to appear in local papers also ensures that those who cannot, or prefer not to, use digital technology - often the older, isolated and more vulnerable members of society - can still access the notices. Around 10.2 million adults (20 per cent of UK adults) are unable to complete all eight of the foundation tasks needed to set someone up for using the online world, according to a House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee [report](#) on digital exclusion in June 2023. Furthermore, [research](#) from BVA BDRC showed that removing public notices from printed local newspapers would result in 10 million people, many of whom are in vulnerable or elderly groups, cut off from viewing the notices - a serious democratic deficit.
3. In addition to this, public notices are also an important source of revenue for local journalism, and removing this revenue would cause direct harm to the sector, which the government is supposed to be helping through the Local Media Strategy.

## **Public Notice Portal**

1. Although the combined print and digital reach of local media is very high, the local news sector has recognised that the circulation of printed local newspapers has declined. In response, the sector acted quickly and decisively to maximise the reach of public notices within local communities by leveraging its large online audiences. In May 2023, the industry launched the [Public Notice Portal](#) – a fully searchable digital one-stop-shop for all public notices published in local papers - developed with £1 million in funding from the Google News Initiative.
2. Since launch, the PNP has experienced strong traffic growth, attracting more than three million users to date, and up by nearly a quarter year-on-year to July 2025. In 2024, the PNP won Digital Initiative of the Year at the Regional Press Awards and was shortlisted for Best Digital Publishing Innovation at the Association of Online Publishers' Digital Publishing Awards.

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3. In December last year, the local news sector announced a second major phase of work to develop new archive and public consultation functions for the PNP, with further funding from the Google News Initiative. This work has been progressing throughout 2025.

*“Public notices are important for ensuring that the public is kept informed of decisions made by their council which may affect their quality of life, local services or amenities, or their property... The sector’s Public Notice Portal is a welcome innovation, intended to take advantage of print publishers’ growing digital audiences and provide a centralised resource for all types of public notice...”*

*“We also welcome the plans for expansion of the Portal, announced in December and funded by the Google News Initiative, including a fully searchable archive and new consultation functions to help public bodies and commercial entities engage with the public more effectively. We consider this type of industry innovation and collaboration to be integral to securing the sector’s future.”*

**Media Minister Stephanie Peacock MP** welcoming plans to expand the PNP (December 2024)

*“Google is proud to support the Public Notice Portal’s expansion – a vital tool that both strengthens community engagement and sustains essential revenue for local journalism.*

*“PNP is a fantastic example of how local news publishers are embracing digital tools to better serve their communities and continue their vital role in informing them. Building on Google’s 20 years of work partnering with the news industry, we will continue to play our part connecting readers to the news, enabling a sustainable future for local journalism.”*

**Hayley Cochrane, Director of News Partnerships for Google UK and Northern Europe,**  
(December 2024)

## **Conclusion**

1. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill contains a provision to remove the statutory requirement for local authorities to publish any changes to local government structures in a printed newspaper and instead publish them *“in such manner as the local authority thinks appropriate.”*
2. Allowing councils to pick and choose which notices they do, or do not, publish in place of a legal requirement to publish consistently on an independent platform would inevitably lead to a reduction in the visibility of the information. It is not hard to imagine a scenario in which a council could take a decision not to publish a notice, or hide it away on an obscure part of its own website, on the basis that the content could be

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embarrassing or uncomfortable for the local authority. The statutory requirement to publish in printed local papers safeguards against this undemocratic outcome which could, if left unchecked, allow the seeds of corruption to grow.

3. Changing the statutory requirement to include online-only local news publishers should also be resisted as this would create a risk of public notices being diverted to fake local news platforms set up by opportunists seeking to capture public notice revenue. The requirement to publish in printed local papers ensures that the notices flow through organisations which invest heavily in local journalism, and can appear on other leading platforms such as the PNP, as well as appearing in local papers.
4. Removal of the legal requirement could also result in a postcode lottery whereby citizens in some areas have much better access to information about their local authority than those in other regions. This appears to us to create a significant risk of discrimination on the basis of geography – a highly undesirable outcome.
5. It is also unclear how the PNP - which has been widely welcomed and viewed as a very successful industry innovation to bring public notices into the 21<sup>st</sup> century - could continue to provide a comprehensive service for its growing base of users if a category of public notices was to be removed from printed local papers.
6. The government has conducted no impact assessments on the potential effects of removing these types of public notices on citizens' ability to engage democratically with local government. Instead, Ministers have rushed to legislate with no consideration for the potentially significant effects of this provision.
7. **In the context of a major programme of local government reform, the provision in the Bill to remove from local papers public notices publicising changes to local authority governance arrangements represents a significant risk to the public right to know.**
8. **Government should support and strengthen transparency so citizens can engage fully with the programme of local government reform, and changes that may affect their lives, rather than weakening public access to information. The Public Bill Committee must defend local democracy by amending the Bill to remove provisions Schedule 25, Paragraph 6, Subparagraphs 2 and 3 in their entirety.**
9. Government has also indicated that it plans to imminently launch a consultation on removing alcohol licensing notices from local newspapers which we fear could have similar anti-democratic effects. We await publication of that consultation and will engage fully with it. We recognise that licensing reform is outwith the remit of the Committee but would ask Members to note that any move to remove alcohol licensing notices from local papers would compound and magnify the anti-democratic effects of the similar provisions within English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill.

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