

Members Of The Senedd Must Save Welsh News By Keeping Council Tax Notices in Local Papers

Op Ed by News Media Association chief executive Owen Meredith

Tomorrow will be a defining moment for journalism in Wales.

Members of the Senedd are set to scrutinise the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill, including a provision which could have highly damaging consequences for local democratic engagement.

At the moment, local authorities are legally required to publish public notices – important announcements about things such as planning, traffic and council tax changes – in printed local newspapers.

This ensures that critical local matters are given a proper public airing and receive robust scrutiny.

Councils are of course free to publish public notices in other ways – on social platforms, on their own websites, mailouts to residents' homes, and in notices posted near the areas where the change is taking place.

But, critically, publishing in local papers ensures transparency through a trusted and independent medium.

It's no secret that newspapers' print circulations have been declining. But many millions of people across the UK still read local papers in print, with tens of millions more reading online, and rely on them for public notices.

In fact, public polling conducted in March this year shows that local news media in print and digital (41 per cent) is the number one platform used by the UK public to view public notices, ahead of local authority websites (29 per cent), social media (28 per cent) and printed mailouts (26 per cent).

And, out of the four UK nations, Wales (47 per cent) has the highest number of people using local news media to view public notices.

As it stands, the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill would remove the statutory requirement on local authorities to publish council tax notices – an important category of public notice which informs people about changes to their council taxes - in printed local newspapers.

The Welsh government has suggested that individual notices and tax bills sent directly to households will provide adequate transparency.

Yet research shows that only 13 per cent of people in Wales – by far the lowest out of the four UK nations and half the UK average - view notices in this way.

Wales is therefore at a much higher risk of democratic deficit than the other UK nations. Printed mailouts are no substitute for the trusted context and scrutiny which a newspaper provides.

Scrutiny of council tax is rightly a matter of importance for public debate and not solely a matter between individual councils and households.

We fear this could be the tip of the iceberg for other types of notices being removed from local papers.

The effects of this would be nothing short of catastrophic, both for local democratic engagement and journalism in Wales.

Many people who rely on printed local papers for public notices – including older and vulnerable people – would be left disenfranchised.

The Bill's own impact assessment raises this important point which is also a deep concern for groups such as the Older People's Commissioner for Wales.

Wales would become a postcode lottery for transparency with some councils choosing to continue to publish public notices in local newspapers, while others might decide to hide away controversial notices on little-viewed corners of their own websites.

Another unwanted side effect of the change would be the impact upon the sustainability of journalism in Wales.

Public notices are an important revenue stream for local news providers, in turn funding the provision of trusted news.

If this revenue were removed, then the industry would be dealt a serious blow just as it is seeking to stabilise and embrace a digital first future.

It is not too late for the Welsh government and Members of the Senedd to change course and save Welsh journalism.

An amendment to the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill by Peter Fox MS would remove the damaging Section 20 from the Bill, ensuring that public notices remain in printed local newspapers.

We urge both the Welsh government and Members of the Senedd from all parties to stand up for transparency and Welsh journalism by backing this amendment tomorrow.

Otherwise, journalism and democratic accountability could suffer irreparable harm.

And for all of us who believe in a robust and vibrant democracy, that would be an unacceptable outcome.