**NUJ submission to sustainability of local journalism evidence call**

March 2022

**Introduction**

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) is the voice for journalism and journalists in the UK and Ireland. It was founded in 1907 and has more than 30,000 members working in broadcasting, newspapers, news agencies, magazines, book publishing, public relations, photography, videography and digital media. The NUJ is not affiliated to any political party.

The NUJ’s News Recovery Plan,[[1]](#footnote-1) launched in 2020, outlines practical short and medium-term measures required to allow for thriving, sustainable journalism. Many of the solutions presented would directly improve the sustainability of local journalism and include tax perks for online or print news subscriptions and local advertising; media literacy initiatives; community asset status for local papers, so companies can’t shut them down without meaningful scrutiny and the chance for local communities to step in and take them over; funding support for new start-ups; better diversity and plurality; calling time on the platforms’ free ride with sustainable funding through a digital levy.

The News Recovery Plan also calls for a Journalism Foundation as recommended in the Cairncross review but not adopted by government. Government should fund and establish a foundation that champions public service journalism, brokers new funding channels and new models – including cooperatives and not-for-profits – of journalism.

**How are public service broadcasters, particularly the BBC, supporting or disrupting local journalism?**

Public service broadcasters in the UK and Ireland are a vital part of the broader journalistic landscape, and quality, comprehensive local news and content is an important part of their work. Local journalism is improved and features greater diversity when it has a wider plurality. In an industry where a small number of newspaper publishers dominate, costs have been slashed and content pared down, public service broadcasters become an even more valuable counter-weight. Their operation is not a disruptor of local journalism, it is complementary.

Earlier this month, Newsquest announced its acquisition of publisher Archant. Media Reform Coalition (MRC)[[2]](#footnote-2) reported this change now means three UK companies jointly control the majority (70%) of all newspaper circulation. MRC state “Newsquest, Reach and National World each holds a greater share of local titles than the smallest 52 local publishers combined”. The NUJ has raised concerns over the lack of media plurality and the detrimental impact this has on public interest journalism.

The value of public service broadcasters was no more apparent than in 2020 as news of the pandemic broke and the public turned in huge numbers to access quality trustworthy news. Alongside quality local journalism reporting on public health, viewers relied on broadcasters for facts on the coronavirus and information about their local communities. Services provided by the BBC and Channel 4 were accessed by millions keen to uncover information about staying safe. The Prime Minister’s multiple addresses to the public on the BBC, supported arguments of the BBC being a trusted, accessible news source for many.

The NUJ has voiced its concern at proposals to privatise channel 4[[3]](#footnote-3). The broadcaster works closely with smaller local production companies to produce content that is engaging and reflects the communities watching. Channel 4 empowers the creators of its content, owning no rights to products created as these are held instead, by local creating teams nurturing home-grown talent and innovative programming. Within the media landscape, there is space for public service broadcasters to co-exist with local journalism. Claims they disrupt local journalism are misplaced, with audiences recognising the differences in content produced. A further example of the BBC’s contribution to local journalism is in its liaison and facilitation of the Local Democracy Reporting (LDR) scheme. Funded by the BBC as part of its latest Charter commitment, they are employed by regional news organisations, with a total of 165 reporters allocated to news organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The benefiting organisations are diverse, ranging from television and radio stations to online media companies and established regional newspaper groups. The LDRs work covering top-tier local authorities, second-tier local authorities and other public service organisations – core reporting work that had been neglected and even missing altogether in some of the communities now benefitting from this reporting. The NUJ believes the scheme has filled a gap, and has proven its value, but that it should be funded out-with of the BBC licence fee.

**What has been the impact of the 2019 Cairncross review on local journalism, and what more needs to be done?**

The NUJ’s 2018 submission to the Cairncross review[[4]](#footnote-4) referenced a series of job cuts that had taken place across local newsrooms, including the loss of over 400 jobs. Many of the issues outlined in our submission remain applicable today across the UK.

The closure of newspaper offices and reorganisations has a direct impact on the sustainability of local journalism, particularly where investment is not provided to replace roles. In the last year, some newspaper titles have increased their recruitment of journalists. In its 2021 annual report, Reach plc reported recruitment of over 200 local journalists in that year. The NUJ has urged the company to ensure it fairly rewards all staff, following announcement of £4m for its chief executive’s pay package. Staff at Newsquest are expected to achieve high page view numbers, 500,000 a month in order to qualify for bonuses. How this can be sustainable when we consider the impact of intense scrutiny this brings from managers is unclear.

The Cairncross review acknowledged the important role of LDRs within journalism, but government’s response did not go far enough in ensuring best use of the scheme. Extending the local democracy reporter scheme to include court reporting and public services would help boost coverage of cases in local areas, and on wider local issues. Whilst management of the scheme should be by the BBC or a not-for-profit organisation, funding should be provided from a ringfenced government pot.

**How can the Government support local news outlets to develop sustainable business models?**

Local papers provide a wealth of information and are a valuable source to communities, particularly for niche information not always easily available elsewhere. Funding support for local news outlets would encourage sustainable business models that allows local journalism to thrive. The NUJ’s News Recovery Plan explores granting “asset of community value” status on local newspapers which would ensure some protection from them being closed overnight without proper scrutiny. This would enable individual journalists or collectives, to come together to provide an alternative future for local titles, which bigger groups have decided they do not wish to continue operating.

More support should be provided to enable these alternative and start-up entities to get off the ground and flourish – a package of tax perks could assist with this; low-cost loans and business advice and support would also offer such fledgling operations the necessary back-up as they establish a new local news service.

Protecting local news sources is important, especially when we consider the limited access to funding many have. The NUJ has also called for a windfall tax on tech giants whose platforms host editorial content but make no contribution to those who produce it. These companies profiting extensively off content produced by journalists without passing on the financial reward.

The sustainability of local journalism can only be ensured if journalists view it as an attractive field to work in. Increasing retention issues within local journalism are a result of combined workload pressures, inadequate staffing levels and poor rates of pay. A 2022 snapshot survey of members at Newsquest found over half (55%) were considering leaving their job. Whilst low pay has been a long-standing issue, the gender and ethnicity pay gaps must also be improved.

In Scotland, journalists recruited into jobs on newspaper sites often find they are met with a lack of community. Whilst new jobs may be created, a lack of funding means teams are often small, sharing freelance photographers and limited resources. This contributes to a high turnover rate as journalists see no long-term appeal.

Scotland's News - towards a sustainable future for public interest journalism*[[5]](#footnote-5)* report, written by a working group from the industry in Scotland is awaiting response from government. Its recommendations draw heavily from the NUJ’s News Recovery Plan and include a Scottish Public Interest Journalism Institute to promote public interest journalism, media literacy, and administer funding to support a diverse, pluralistic, and sustainable Scottish press.

The working group’s recommendations include local papers taken over by local communities if they are closed, tax incentives for businesses to advertise with public interest news providers, and for the Scottish government to encourage big tech companies to support the news industry.

**What role does social media play in local journalism?**

Social media can provide an important means of promoting local news content and engaging with the public. The rise of social media has also contributed, however, to a weakening of the business model of local news, with a shift in advertising from local news sites and printed publications to technology platforms. This resulted in a significant drop in income within local journalism across the UK. Facebook and Twitter are among social media platforms who host journalists’ content without paying for it. The additional income they receive from advertising acts almost as a double whammy in how journalists lose out, and platforms benefit.

Social media terms and conditions often allow for the re-use of published images by others. This has resulted in weakened rights of photographers who have their images shared, and their status as copyright owner disregarded. In many instances, images are lifted from Twitter by publishers with little effort made to compensate photographers.

Australia’s News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code requires digital platforms to pay to feature news content from publishers. There has been some speculation that a similar model may be used in the UK and be enforced by the Digital Markets Unit. Any model should ensure engagement with journalists and smaller local publishers takes place, with transparency at its core. There is a danger that large platforms with financial and legal resources will engage in agreements shrouded in secrecy, that do not benefit journalists or local journalism, and that these agreements are only reached with major players in the industry. Any mechanism needs to reflect the broadest community of journalism, and achieve something for freelances as well as journalism in all sizes of publishing groups.

The NUJ would welcome engagement with the unit on ways in which those producing content can influence discussion and what models may be most effective in ensuring journalists are paid for the content they produce. Meaningful changes may lead to a much-needed increase in income for journalists, some of whom have experienced a decline in earnings in recent years.

The safety of journalists remains a priority issue for the NUJ. Many journalists face online threats and physical abuse simply for carrying out their roles, and unsurprisingly, this can act as a deterrent to those considering a career in journalism. This is a problem experienced across the industry, and local news reporters are also routinely facing harassment and abuse in the course of their work.

The anonymity of social media means it is often used by trolls to bombard journalists with abusive messages. In particular, women and those from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently report rape and death rates. Many journalists use social media accounts to share their work and engage with audiences through requests. With the expectation to meet high page view targets, it is no surprise many wish to do so on platforms. For some however, the cost of doing so is great.

The NUJ’s 2019 submission to the Online Harms White Paper[[6]](#footnote-6) referenced the experiences of technology writer Kathy Sierra, who went offline for six years and into hiding, following the release of her address and personal details by trolls online.

NUJ survey findings found 93% of respondents said social media platforms do not robustly implement their own policies intended to deter and stop abuse and over half (51%) said they had experienced online abuse in the last year.

To date, the response from tech companies where online abuse takes place has been a weak one, with many slow to react to remove abusive content and block trolls.

The new online safety bill takes some action in recognising the impact online abuse has on journalists, with tech companies facing fines for failing to remove harmful content. There remain concerns about how this will happen in practice, and the NUJ continues to engage to seek amendments and improvements to this bill.

The NUJ is supporting the DCMS UK journalist safety survey, capturing experiences of online abuse and physical threats. Our work on the National Committee for the safety of Journalists is part of our ongoing commitment, calling for an end to the violence journalists face.

ENDS

1. <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource-report/from-health-crisis-to-good-news.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/blog/newsquests-acquisition-of-archant-more-bad-news-for-local-journalism> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/channel-4-briefing.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-submission-to-the-cairncross-review.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-news-towards-sustainable-future-public-interest-journalism/pages/5/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-submission-to-the-online-harms-white-paper.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)