

Impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on journalism and local media

September 2020

1. Background

The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee is looking into the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on areas within its remit, including journalism and local media.

The Committee received written contributions and heard oral evidence from stakeholders between May and August 2020. A list of all contributors is provided in Annex A.

2. Reporting during the crisis

Local and regional media

1. The Committee heard that there has been an ‘enormous audience appetite’ for news during the pandemic¹ and a positive that can be taken from this period ‘is the resurgence in interest in local news’.² Emma Meese, Director of Community Journalism at Cardiff University, said:

‘...particularly in the early days of the pandemic, it shows there was a real appetite from people wanting to know, ‘How is this going to affect me?’ This is what we all want to know when it comes to local news, ‘Well, how does it affect me?’³

¹ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 12

² CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 30

³ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 30



2. However Paul Rowland, editor-in-chief of Media Wales, said that ‘trying to balance covering such an enormous story with such a difficult trading environment in the background has been very challenging’.⁴ According to the National Union of Journalists (‘the NUJ’) the crisis has ‘exposed the problem the Welsh media has in being able to sufficiently serve its population’.⁵

3. The Committee heard that for print media the outbreak has accelerated a problem that has been twenty years in the making – the move to digital from print and the decline in advertising revenue that comes with it. Dr Ifan Morgan Jones, lecturer in journalism at Bangor University and founder and editor of news website Nation.Cymru, said:

‘In terms of the impact of coronavirus on the sector, what needs to be emphasised is that this crisis has been coming for a long time. It's been 20 years, since the beginning of devolution, since online journalism started to displace more profitable types of journalism, such as print, and unfortunately, despite devolution, I don't think we as a nation have done much to tackle this problem.’⁶

4. According to Dr Jones, ‘the people of Wales are, generally speaking, quite ignorant about devolution in Wales, and that is a direct result of the weakness of Welsh media’ and that there is a need to ‘strengthen the media in Wales’.⁷ He explained that the problem in Wales is ‘that we haven’t been able to find a business model that can sustain online news to the same extent as traditional news output’⁸ and suggested a new model of news provision such as ‘digital journalism in Wales going behind some sort of pay wall’.⁹

5. Dr Jones told the Committee that the risk with such a model is that it could:

‘...create a situation where UK journalism supported by advertising will be free of charge and accessible, but Welsh journalism behind a pay wall won't be. And as a result of that, people will turn to UK-wide media

⁴ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 12

⁵ National Union of Journalists written evidence

⁶ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 43

⁷ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 44

⁸ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 46

⁹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 51

that pays little attention and doesn't understand the differences between Wales and the rest of the UK.¹⁰

6. He therefore called for independent, public support for journalism in Wales:

‘...what I would suggest is some kind of independent body, staffed ideally by independent people who have experience as journalists and running media services, so that they could decide where that funding should be distributed. That funding should be provided not to for-profit companies such as Reach and others who exist outside of Wales, but rather to independent not-for-profit companies, co-operatives that would be in the ownership of journalists or others within Wales.’¹¹

7. According to Dr Jones ‘the worst thing that we can do is to use public funds in order to maintain the current model’.¹² However, Professor Stephen Cushion from Cardiff University’s School of Journalism, Media and Culture said:

‘...I worry that, if we focus too much on just producing a kind of online newspaper, or online digital site, in Wales, it may well make people that are already informed even more informed, but the people that aren't particularly that attentive to the news, it's probably just going to pass them by, and they'll continue to tune in to the 10 o'clock news on BBC and ITV and Channel 4, and they could be talking past each other.’¹³

8. The Committee also heard that content for Welsh audiences could improve with investment at a hyperlocal level. Emma Meese told the Committee that ‘it’s really important that we recognise the value that independent news brings’ and that there is investment in ‘smaller, independent news publications’.¹⁴ She went on to say:

‘...by supporting independent news, what we are ensuring is that we are maintaining plurality of voice, because if we lose the independent sector, then pretty much overnight you lose all plurality of voice, and the impact on democracy doesn't even bear thinking about.’¹⁵

¹⁰ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 51

¹¹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 53

¹² CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 53

¹³ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 61

¹⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 33

¹⁵ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 34

9. Gavin Thompson, regional editor for Wales at Newsquest, said that one thing that they have found difficult during the pandemic is that scrutinising local decision making has become a lot harder in some areas because councils, local authorities, are either not meeting or not streaming their meetings. He said:

‘...in our east Wales newsroom, for example, we have two local democracy reporters...They do great work covering all five councils across Gwent, but during COVID that's become harder because, for example, I think Newport has held one cabinet meeting so far. And not only was it not live streamed, but it wasn't uploaded online anywhere for about two weeks. So, by the time we could report it, it was largely out of date...Obviously, these things were done because there was a crisis situation, but I think it's unhealthy for democracy if decisions are not being made in public where a reporter can watch live, even if it's not in person, and be able to report them.’¹⁶

Community radio

10. Steve Johnson, community radio tutor at the University of South Wales, told the Committee that community radio has proven itself to be ‘absolutely invaluable’¹⁷ during the pandemic and that it has ‘added another strand...to the layers of news provision...for the communities of Wales’.¹⁸

11. In written evidence to the Committee, Wales Community Radio Network said that community radio stations ‘have been preparing mission critical safety information in the form of radio bulletins and key messages to local populations across Wales’, helping to ‘save lives, educate and inform people, and pass on essential information from public services and the Welsh Government’.¹⁹ According to Môn FM:

‘...community radio became the main channel for up to date local and accurate information from Public Services and Welsh Government. It was useful to have a daily on-line ‘podium’ briefing from Welsh Government...however the content was very ‘journalistic’ and questions were naturally interviewer led. More specific information was required for North-West Wales...i.e. people need to know what is the advice

¹⁶ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 223

¹⁷ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 151

¹⁸ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 149

¹⁹ Wales Community Radio Network written evidence

locally as well as Nationally – this is where MônFM was well able to compliment the National picture to provide a fuller and richer picture of advice and information for its respective transmission service area.’²⁰

12. Wales Community Radio Network told the Committee that the work of community radio stations should not be underestimated, ‘particularly when the circulation of local and regional newspapers is in decline, and other communication channels limited’.²¹ In their written evidence, Conwy County Borough Council said:

‘Ofcom have made emergency short term COVID-19 restricted service licences available to enable local people to receive information pertinent to their communities on FM rather than relying a Wales wide or national perspective. The rate and spread of COVID-19 differed across Wales and so this provision has ensured that accurate local information tailored to our area has been delivered to those who perhaps may not have access to the internet or mobile devices.’²²

13. However, according to Conwy County Borough Council, Ofcom will no longer licence additional community radio licences on FM:

‘Locally there is a call for this policy to be re-considered so that temporary COVID-19 stations or stations that are looking to support communities as they re-build their futures are allowed to set up quickly, efficiently and at relatively low cost...We understand that the timescales of the licensing process can be longwinded which could cause delays (4 – 5 years), leaving a gap in provision when our communities need access to information and services most.’²³

14. Steve Johnson told the Committee ‘there are some positive moves towards more direction of PSB Government messages and advertising going through community radio.’ However he went on to say that there is ‘room for more’ and a partnership between community radio stations across Wales and the Welsh Government ‘would work well for both parties.’²⁴

²⁰ Môn FM written evidence

²¹ Wales Community Radio Network written evidence

²² Conwy County Borough Council written evidence

²³ Conwy County Borough Council written evidence

²⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 209

15. Conwy County Borough Council suggested that the Welsh Government should undertake a review of the community radio sector in Wales ‘to evaluate how local grassroots radio and media have supported communities to respond positively to the crisis’ and what role it can play going forward in terms of support for the sector.²⁵

Coverage of devolution issues by UK news providers

16. The Committee heard that most people in Wales rely on UK wide media or England-based media to receive their news. In its written evidence, the NUJ said that as a result of this ‘it soon became apparent that getting critical health announcements and messages were hampered’.²⁶ Gavin Thompson said that ‘there's no doubt, in terms of how well informed the Welsh public has been, that there has been confusion’.²⁷

17. In April the Committee wrote to the House of Commons’ Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (‘DCMS Committee’) outlining its concerns that UK news providers have frequently published information during the pandemic that inaccurately reports issues that are devolved to Wales.²⁸ The Committee’s letter was in response to the DCMS Committee’s call for examples of misinformation and disinformation around coronavirus, as part of its ongoing work on ‘fake news’. In its letter, the Committee stated that the DCMS Committee ‘does not need to look to social media to find examples of harmful false information about the coronavirus’.

18. This claim was backed-up by Professor Stephen Cushion. Professor Cushion and his colleagues completed a six-week diary study with 200 participants across the UK about their news consumption patterns, trust in different media and government and knowledge and understanding of news and policies. As part of the study, they also monitored the UK evening news bulletins on BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News to look at how they were reporting the pandemic. According to Professor Cushion:

²⁵ Conwy County Borough Council written evidence

²⁶ National Union of Journalists written evidence

²⁷ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 145

²⁸

<https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s100640/Letter%20from%20the%20Chair%20of%20the%20Culture%20Welsh%20Language%20and%20Communications%20Committee%20to%20the%20Chair%20of%20th.pdf>

'...we recognised quite soon that there was quite a lot of confusion around the devolved measures and the differences across the UK, and also the coverage could've been a lot clearer in its presentation across the evening bulletins.'²⁹

19. At the beginning of May, participants were asked whether the UK Government, or the UK Government and the devolved governments, were in charge of the lockdown measures. Professor Cushion told the Committee that half of all respondents incorrectly said UK Government. He went on to say:

'They could get things like—they knew that schools were going back in England, that people could exercise once a day and meet other people and exercise once a day, but they didn't know that there were differences across Scotland and Wales in terms of staying in your local environment...

Also in that period of time, we showed them the UK Government's new guidance to 'stay alert' rather than 'stay home', and we found nearly half of people, again, didn't realise that was England only; a third, actually, thought it was UK-wide Governments.'³⁰

20. The study of UK evening news bulletins and their coverage of major UK Government lockdown announcements included an analysis of 'whether there was any clarity around the geographical relevance of a particular policy' during the headlines, in the introduction to the item and in the item itself.³¹ According to Professor Cushion:

'The first date we looked at, on 23 March, was a big announcement. It was an announcement about only exercising once a day, about the closing of non-essential shops across the UK. Now, it was framed very much as a UK decision, but...it was an agreement across the four nations. But the devolved bodies weren't mentioned at all in any of the coverage that we looked at...And it's important to bear in mind, at that point in time, the BBC News at Six and BBC News at Ten were getting upwards of 20 million viewers a week and people were extremely attentive to news at that particular time.'³²

²⁹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 17

³⁰ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, paras 18-19

³¹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 20

³² CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 21

21. Professor Cushion explained to the Committee that ‘things changed a bit on 28 May, when it was announced that groups of six of people could meet in England’:

‘They changed the framing of it, so rather than being ‘in’ the UK, it was ‘across’ the UK. So, it was kind of alluding to the fact that there were differences going on. And within headlines as well, there was a prefix of ‘in England’ that was present much more in headlines. But, occasionally, the headlines miss out that ‘in England’ or in live two-ways. It’s not explicitly spelt out, those differences.’³³

22. The study found that there was a ‘shift from the UK to England’ in the four dates that were monitored between March and June, ‘but limited references to devolution’.³⁴ Professor Cushion said that this ‘opens up the question of how explicit should UK news media be’:

‘If they say ‘UK’, that can be inaccurate; if they don’t give a geographical reference, then that’s sloppy. It’s not necessarily inaccurate, but it doesn’t tell and educate the viewer. Implicit references are now much more common, where you say ‘in England’, but we’ve always recommended that if you really want to educate and inform a viewer, you really need to be quite clear-cut and explicitly spell out the differences by naming England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so a viewer can see if something’s relevant or is not relevant.’³⁵

23. In written evidence to the Committee, BBC Cymru Wales said that there has been a ‘clear commitment’ by BBC news ‘to explain differences across the UK and to highlight to audiences when policies and regulations only apply to a specific nation in the UK’:

‘When major changes to the regulations in Wales have been announced, the story has been reported across all output, including online articles and live reaction and packages on television and radio. In addition when major announcements have been made affecting England only, the BBC News at Six and Ten have included a live

³³ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 23

³⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 26

³⁵ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 26

element from each of the nations, to highlight the differences in policy.'³⁶

24. In addition, BBC Cymru Wales explained that 'the BBC has specific initiatives to combat disinformation' and has 'created a dedicated team covering and debunking misinformation daily' during the pandemic.³⁷

25. Similarly, Phil Henfrey, head of news and programmes at ITV Cymru Wales, said that:

'...there are things that have been built into the system now that make sure that what's coming up in Wales is on the agenda of the national team and then, when mistakes do happen, there's a very quick...referral system that points out that mistake and looks to seek to understand how that mistake was made, and then we look to correct it so it doesn't happen again.'³⁸

26. Andrew Dagnell, head of newsgathering at ITV News, told the Committee that there are two ways in which they have ensured coverage of devolution issues on the network news. Firstly, he explained that when a story was 'specific to England or indeed to Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland', a graphic sequence was used explaining the situation across the rest of the UK.³⁹ Secondly, he said that they ensured that 'important moments in the pandemic and in Wales's response to the pandemic have been covered as stand-alone pieces' by the network's Wales correspondent.⁴⁰ He went on to say:

'So, for example, when lockdown was easing, when the 'stay local' message was lifted at the beginning of this month, that was something that we did as a piece. In late June, when Welsh schools were returning, that was something that we did as a piece...

So, I like to think that we have done our part to enhance the UK-wide understanding of devolution. There's always more that can be done, I

³⁶ BBC Cymru Wales written evidence

³⁷ BBC Cymru Wales written evidence

³⁸ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 161

³⁹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 154

⁴⁰ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 155

would say, but I feel as though we've been quite clear about it with viewers.'⁴¹

27. According to Andrew Dagnell, 'standardised data would really help' ITV's reporting on Wales. He explained:

'I think there's a lot to be said about being able to compare the way in which different nations approach issues like tackling the pandemic, but we often come unstuck because the data that we're comparing between nations—. Because the nations rightly choose their own path in terms of how they're approaching data, we get a little bit unstuck because we can't directly compare like for like...

...it's quite hard, for example, to compare testing figures in Wales to testing figures in England because various different metrics are used. So, if there was a more standardised data set...that would enable us to kind of get into the nations a lot easier. Obviously, we should be covering stories from Wales that are just Welsh stories, but being able to have that comparator would also be very helpful.'⁴²

28. Professor Stephen Cushion told the Committee that there is more that can be done in terms of reminding broadcasters about their commitment to the four nations when it comes to UK network news. He said that:

'...it's constantly worth engaging with broadcasters, engaging with regulators, to ensure that that's constantly on the agenda. It's been brought into sharper focus because of the lockdown, but it needs to continue.'⁴³

29. Professor Cushion explained that Ofcom has an important role in 'maintaining standards of accuracy' as well as impartiality.⁴⁴

30. In their written evidence to the Committee, the NUJ said that its Welsh Executive Council has called on the Welsh Government to hold a national inquiry into the dissemination of public health messages during the crisis.⁴⁵

⁴¹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, paras 155-156

⁴² CWLC committee meeting 13 July, paras 231-232

⁴³ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 60

⁴⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 115

⁴⁵ National Union of Journalists written evidence

The value of public service broadcasting

31. The Committee heard that the pandemic has highlighted the important role public service broadcasters have played in providing news and information during the pandemic. Phil Henfrey said:

‘...the fact that we provide trusted mass-reach journalism about Wales for free and then we make it universally available to our audiences, then I think the past 17 weeks...have only served to underline the vital role that commercially funded broadcasting plays in Wales.’⁴⁶

32. According to BBC Cymru Wales, ‘audiences in Wales have turned to the BBC in significant numbers during this crisis for the latest information and analysis about the situation in Wales’:

‘At the end of March, BBC Wales Today attracted record audiences with the equivalent of 60% of the Wales adult population watching across the combined bulletins, around 1.47m across one week. This is up 40% on the same time last year. S4C news output – produced by BBC Wales – peaked slightly later at the start of May (during the week commencing May 4th) when over 80,000 tuned into any news coverage during the week (3-min reach). This was up +76% on the same week in 2019.

Audiences also turned to our online sites with record numbers accessing information across the UK. For BBC Wales’s English language online news site, the peak in traffic hit 5.7million unique weekly browsers in early April and BBC Cymru Fyw saw a peak in weekly traffic of almost 70,000 unique browsers. Engagement with BBC Wales News content on Facebook peaked at 1.2million weekly engaged users at the end of March, which is nearly 5 times higher compared to the 2020 weekly average before Covid-19.’⁴⁷

33. Similarly, Phil Henfrey told the Committee that in the first five weeks of lockdown, TV audiences for ITV Wales’ six o’clock news were up by 12 per cent, whilst its website had seen a 300 per cent increase in users.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 140

⁴⁷ BBC Cymru Wales written evidence

⁴⁸ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 143

34. Despite these increases in audiences, the Committee heard that public service broadcasters are facing financial challenges. Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director of BBC Cymru Wales, told the Committee on 25 June that ‘the overall impact on BBC Wales in this financial year is about £4.5 million’. He went on to say:

‘That’s about 5 per cent of our revenues, and it’s a similar order of challenge next year. So, this year, we make the savings by reducing cash costs and content production; next year, we obviously need to be more strategic about it, and so we are looking at headcount reductions of around 60 posts.’⁴⁹

35. The NUJ called on the UK Government to fill this funding gap caused by the pandemic, ‘rather than inflict further cuts on an already financially challenged BBC’.⁵⁰

36. Phil Henfrey told the Committee that the pandemic has also been an ‘extremely difficult time for ITV’ with advertising ‘down some 40 per cent in April’ and productions ‘virtually suspended right around the world’.⁵¹ He went on to say:

‘A commercially successful ITV sustains the public service content that plays such a vital role in Wales. So, I think we’ve all got an interest in finding ways to enable ITV to be commercially successful in the environment in which it finds itself.’⁵²

Welsh Government communications

37. The Committee heard how Welsh Government communications have ‘improved massively’⁵³ during the course of the pandemic. Dr Ifan Morgan Jones said that the Welsh Government has been ‘extremely open and extremely ready to engage with the press’:

‘I have actually seen them go out there and fix mistakes. They’ve done it on Twitter; I’ve noticed that when someone has put a story up saying one thing, they’ve actually commented as the Welsh Government in

⁴⁹ CWLC committee meeting 25 June, para 197

⁵⁰ National Union of Journalists written evidence

⁵¹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 190

⁵² CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 190

⁵³ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 96

the Twitter comments and said, 'This is wrong; you need to fix this', and brought attention to that.'⁵⁴

38. Dr Jones hopes that they will continue to do this beyond the pandemic.⁵⁵

39. Phil Henfrey said that the Welsh Government press office team has learnt 'what it can do to better engage with the UK news providers':

'It recognised that it too has got to provide that information, it's got to make it easily available, it's got to provide points of contact for UK media. And it's done that, and it's reorganised itself, and from what I've heard from the UK media telling stories about Wales, that's been hugely welcome.'⁵⁶

40. In terms of correcting inaccurate reporting by the UK media, Professor Stephen Cushion told the Committee that there is more that could be done by the Welsh Government. He said:

'...this pandemic, as everyone has already said, is an opportunity, really, to start to highlight this more, to bring it to the attention of media regulators, to make it a big accuracy question. I think it would be hard to police an accuracy question in terms of broadcasting across Chepstow and where do you draw the line and the difficulties within that, but I certainly think you could put more pressure on broadcasters and print regulators or news regulators as well to really try and address this in a way that they haven't really done over the last 20 years.'⁵⁷

41. The Committee also heard that the Welsh Government's daily media briefings have been very beneficial.⁵⁸ According to Gavin Thompson this is reflected in their audience figures, with a spike in audience when the latest news from the briefing is published.⁵⁹ However, Conwy County Borough Council felt that 'not enough focus has been placed on information tailored to regional differences'.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 96

⁵⁵ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 96

⁵⁶ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 173

⁵⁷ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 91

⁵⁸ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 145

⁵⁹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 145

⁶⁰ Conwy County Borough Council written evidence

Education

42. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of educating young people about devolution. Dr Ifan Morgan Jones said:

‘Especially with votes coming in at 16, now, I think there needs to be some kind of education in our schools, as part of the curriculum, about what the Senedd does, so people naturally, perhaps, turn to the news in Wales for information about health and education and so forth.’⁶¹

43. Similarly, Professor Stephen Cushion said that educating journalism students in universities about devolution should be part of the curriculum:

‘...when you're trained in journalism schools like in Cardiff University and other schools across the UK, even if you're English as well, you may not be as fussed, as interested in the some of the issues that we're discussing. It should be part of the curriculum to have a really good knowledge if you're going to start to report around education and health. But also that sensitivity, as well, between—there are reserved issues that are reported around the economy, the furlough scheme and so on, and then it can very quickly change back into something that's devolved.’⁶²

Our View

There has been an enormous appetite for news during the pandemic and it has been more important than ever to ensure that the people of Wales have access to news that is accurate and relevant to them.

Local and regional print media

We heard that the crisis has highlighted and accelerated some of the problems the Welsh media face in terms of sufficiently serving the people of Wales. Reporting during this period has not been easy for many print media outlets. They have had to balance an increased demand for local news with a very difficult trading environment, as a result of the continued decline in traditional newspaper sales and a severe drop in advertising income. Despite more people accessing news via online platforms, this has not translated into revenue from

⁶¹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 68

⁶² CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 113

advertising. Print media providers have therefore had to do their best to meet customer demand with very limited resources.

We heard that a new business model for news provision is urgently needed to help the situation, for example placing digital journalism behind a pay wall. Other witnesses argued for investment at a hyperlocal level to ensure a plurality of voices in the Welsh media.

At a time when journalism in Wales is struggling more than ever, what is certain is that a new and innovative model to support the sector and ensure that the people of Wales have access to relevant and accurate information is needed as a matter of urgency. Therefore, in the autumn term we will be undertaking further work on this issue and exploring potential models. In the meantime we are calling on the Welsh Government to also engage with this issue.

Community radio

We heard that community radio stations in Wales have played a key role in providing local information about the virus to the communities of Wales and added another strand to the layers of news provision at a time when people were unable to buy newspapers.

More people were also able to receive information relevant to their communities on FM radio after Ofcom made emergency short term COVID-19 restricted licences available. We welcome this decision and would encourage the Welsh Government to urge Ofcom to continue licencing additional community radio stations on FM.

Given the positive way the community radio sector has responded to the crisis and the valuable service they have provided, the Welsh Government should consider how it can support the sector going forward.

UK news providers

The differences in lockdown measures across the UK have contributed to an increase in awareness of devolution but UK news providers have frequently published information that inaccurately reports issues that are devolved to Wales. Misinformation is damaging to democracy in Wales at the best of times, but during the current crisis it undermines efforts to tackle the disease in Wales. We therefore wrote to our counterpart committee in the House of Commons highlighting our concerns in April.

Stakeholders told us that there has been a lot of confusion around the devolved lockdown measures and the differences across the UK among Welsh citizens. Research conducted by Cardiff University showed that half of the people surveyed incorrectly thought that the UK Government was responsible for lockdown measures. This is extremely worrying given that it is more crucial than ever that people in different parts of the UK know which rules apply to them.

We therefore welcome initiatives to ensure that the different policies and regulations in place across the UK are explained. However we feel that there is much more that could be done to help ensure public understanding of the virus and the efforts to tackle it in different parts of the UK. We cannot stress enough the importance of providing accurate information to help minimise infections and save lives.

We agree with Professor Stephen Cushion that broadcasters should be reminded of their commitment to the four nations when it comes to UK network news. We therefore call on the Welsh Government to urge Ofcom to ensure that broadcasters maintain impartiality by reporting on all four UK nations equally, as a matter of course, but especially when it comes to their approach to public health.

We also agree with the National Union of Journalists that the Welsh Government should assess the dissemination of public health messages during the pandemic. There are certainly valuable lessons to be learnt from the reporting of the crisis by UK news providers.

The value of public service broadcasting

The crisis has highlighted the crucial role that public service broadcasters played during the crisis in keeping the people of Wales informed about matters that affect their lives – evidenced by the increase in TV audiences for news programmes and in users of their websites. However, we heard that it has also been a very difficult time for time for the public service broadcasters, with BBC Cymru Wales needing to make substantial savings and ITV losing 40 per cent of its advertising revenue.

We are concerned that BBC Cymru Wales is required to save £4.5million this financial year and a further £3.5–4 million in the next financial year as part of a UK wide series of cutbacks in response to the crisis. Given that it is more important than ever that audiences have access to news and information from Wales about Wales, we therefore agree with the NUJ's call that the Welsh Government should urge the UK Government to fill this funding gap rather than

inflict further cuts on an already financially challenged BBC. Our public service broadcasters need to be supported and protected, rather than placed under even greater threat.

Welsh Government communications

We heard how Welsh Government communications have improved over the course of the crisis including the daily media briefings and efforts to highlight and correct mistakes reported in the press. We sincerely welcome this and hope that it will continue beyond the pandemic.

However we heard that one thing which hampers the discussion of devolved issues on network news is the lack of standardised data between the nations. We would therefore encourage the Welsh Government to engage with broadcasters and journalists to ensure that they have the data they need.

Education

The need to educate young people about devolution and the Senedd was raised by stakeholders, especially as 16 and 17 year olds will be able to vote in the next Senedd elections. It was suggested that doing so would make people more likely to turn to Welsh news for information about devolved policy areas.

We will be writing to the Llywydd to inform her that the issues of educating young people about devolution arose during the inquiry and to ask what the Senedd Commission is doing to prepare 16 and 17 year olds to vote in the elections in May 2021.

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should urge Ofcom to ensure that broadcasters maintain accuracy and impartiality by reporting on all four UK nations equally, as a matter of course, but especially when it comes to their approach to public health.

Recommendation 2. The Welsh Government should provide the Committee with an assessment of the quality of information dissemination about COVID-19 during the pandemic.

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should urge the UK Government to fill the gap of up to £8.5 million in BBC Cymru Wales' funding.

3. Immediate impact of the crisis and support for the sector

44. The Committee heard that the pandemic has ‘hit an industry with underlying health conditions’.⁶³ Alan Edmunds, chief operating officer at Reach plc, said:

‘...the sector has been structurally challenged for a long time; so much change in the industry because of the impact of digital. And the impact of the pandemic has been something like we've never experienced before.’⁶⁴

45. Emma Meese told the Committee that print circulation figures fell significantly at the beginning of the pandemic ‘because people could not access printed newspapers, because all the usual news outlets were closed, all the shops were closed, people weren't travelling by bus or by train’.⁶⁵

Drop in advertising revenue

46. Paul Rowland explained that the impact of the crisis has been ‘significant from a trading perspective’ with local businesses not advertising and people not being able to buy printed titles because many shops were closed.⁶⁶ According to Alan Edmunds, at the height of the pandemic, around 80 per cent of local advertisers were not advertising.⁶⁷

47. Gavin Thompson also said that the drop in revenue from advertising ‘has been the greater financial impact’.⁶⁸ He explained that most of Newsquest’s advertising comes from local small and medium-sized enterprises that were unable to trade and advertise during the pandemic. Despite seeing a growth in online audiences, Gavin Thompson said that this has not translated into revenue from advertising and set out the steps taken to try and raise revenue:

‘We've promoted our home deliveries. There's been an increase year-on-year in our home deliveries, for example, of the South Wales Argus.

⁶³ National Union of Journalists written evidence

⁶⁴ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 8

⁶⁵ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 36

⁶⁶ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 11

⁶⁷ CWLC committee meeting 5 August para 16

⁶⁸ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 184

We've also introduced digital subscriptions for heavier users in our larger sites, like the Argus and the Western Telegraph. And those things all help, but they're small beer compared to the advertising revenue that's been lost.'⁶⁹

48. The Committee also heard how a 'collapse in revenue from advertising' has had a 'catastrophic impact' on community radio in Wales'.⁷⁰ For example, in their written evidence Môn FM said:

'In total, approximately 40 external outside broadcasts and public events had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. Those cancellations resulted in the station losing valuable income from e.g. local sponsorship of events, advertising and promotions – that income was mission critical to help keep the station going throughout the year. To compound things and to make things worse, large-scale advertising agencies pulled (cancelled) 100% of advertising campaigns, rendering the station in a no-win financial situation, with ZERO income to keep paying bills, and no option to generate any income from its usual multiple streams. It's hard enough in 'normal' times to keep a flow of income to pay the bills, but in the situation created by the pandemic – there is no alternative means to continue to pay normal running costs.'⁷¹

Acceleration of change

49. As a result of the 'massive impact'⁷² on trading and revenues, the Committee heard how the pandemic is accelerating change within the sector. According to Dr Ifan Morgan Jones:

'What coronavirus has done, if truth be told, in my view, is to hasten by two or three years processes that were already in train. But there may also be some benefits from the point of view of the fact that the situation is so critical today that it'll actually wake us up to the need to take action and the need to address this, because I think it's a very real threat to devolution itself.'⁷³

⁶⁹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 184

⁷⁰ Wales Community Radio Network written evidence

⁷¹ Môn FM written evidence

⁷² CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 9

⁷³ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 43

50. Gavin Thompson explained that some of the problems facing the sector were already there, for example a long-term decline in newspaper sales, and that changes to deal with some of these challenges have been accelerated as a result of the pandemic. He said:

‘So, newspaper buying is habit. People who haven't been going out have broken that habit. We hope they will return to it, but that's a challenge we face. But what it's also done, really, is taken the legs out from under a lot of publishers in terms of attempts to refocus on digital revenues, because the digital advertising revenues just haven't been there and that has made it much harder for—it's taken away that source that we've been migrating to.’⁷⁴

51. In a similar vein, Alan Edmunds said that ‘changes that might have been made perhaps over a longer period across many industries are now being made at this time’.⁷⁵ He explained that Reach plc is ‘transforming the business to make sure that we meet the market conditions and that we meet the demands of our audience in print and online’.⁷⁶

52. The Committee heard that Reach and Newsquest both plan to cut jobs in Wales. In written evidence to the Committee, the NUJ said that Newsquest had cut 25 jobs in Newport and North Wales and that in July ‘Reach told more than 90 of its journalists in Wales that they were at risk of losing their jobs because of lost revenues during the lockdown’.⁷⁷ Reach subsequently told the Committee that around 20 journalist roles are likely to go in Wales.⁷⁸

53. Martin Shipton, Reach NUJ group chapel chair and a member of the union’s Welsh executive council, told the Committee:

‘Our fear is that because they are reducing the number of Welsh writers based in Wales, they will be replacing some of that material, or the material that would otherwise be supplied from Wales, with generic material. You could have features, for example, about health matters

⁷⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 196

⁷⁵ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 35

⁷⁶ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 35

⁷⁷ National Union of Journalists written evidence

⁷⁸ Reach plc written evidence

and education matters that would not acknowledge the devolution settlement in any way.’⁷⁹

54. He also told the Committee that Reach employees were confused and shocked when it was announced that 550 jobs were at risk because:

‘at the time when the whole issue about the impact of COVID on the economy was taking place initially, we had an e-mail from the chief executive of Reach, who was seeking to reassure us about the resilience of the company, and to tell us that we needn't worry unduly about what was going to happen.’⁸⁰

55. Pamela Morton, NUJ national freelance organiser, explained that Reach had £20 million in reserve and it was expected that this money would be used to ‘weather the storm’.⁸¹

56. The Committee also heard that Reach is planning to carry out a reorganisation of the company, including merging Media Wales with the English midlands division. The NUJ raised concerns about the impact this would have on the plurality and quality of journalism in Wales. Martin Shipton said:

‘We're concerned about the dilution of Welsh content and we think that that is counterproductive from a business point of view, because if people find that the titles are not giving them as much Welsh content as they expect, they're not going to be forking out £2.10 on a Saturday for something that includes material that is produced in England for an English audience.’⁸²

57. According to Martin Shipton, merging Media Wales with the English midlands division would mean that more common content is produced across Reach's platforms and Welsh content would be replaced by a ‘shared content unit’ based in England that produces generic stories and features.⁸³

58. However, Alan Edmunds said that Reach is ‘not merging Wales with the midlands’:

⁷⁹ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 159

⁸⁰ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 137

⁸¹ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 140

⁸² CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 160

⁸³ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 158

'All the editorial accountability stays in Wales. The midlands and Wales combination is for purely operational reasons and logistical and financial. It's got absolutely no impact at all on the way we work editorially. So, there is no change to the fact that all the Wales editorial decisions are made in Wales and run by Paul. Paul previously reported directly in to me; Paul still reports in centrally, so there's very little change in the way that we run anything from that perspective, and certainly there's no merger of Wales and the midlands from an editorial perspective. It is merely a behind the scenes, logistical change that we've made.'⁸⁴

59. The Committee heard concerns that 'these financial decisions and on-the-ground decisions are taken purely on a business level, not on an impact to community and democracy level.'⁸⁵ Martin Shipton said that:

'...Welsh democracy is served by having a thriving media sector and that this constant chipping away at journalists and the number of journalists employed is very debilitating and is not good for Welsh democracy.'⁸⁶

60. In written evidence to the Committee, the NUJ wrote:

'There is a real danger that financial pressures across newspapers, broadcasting and new media will damage efforts to increase diversity of background, geography, language and identity and the range of perspectives that it brings to public interest journalism. This increases relevance and engagement and shines a light on stories that could otherwise be overlooked but are important to different communities.'⁸⁷

61. On 15 July, the Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism told the Senedd that he was going to ask for a meeting with the management of Reach.⁸⁸ However, on 5 August, Alan Edmunds told the Committee that there has been no discussion with the Welsh Government about the proposals at Reach.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 31

⁸⁵ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 34

⁸⁶ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 190

⁸⁷ National Union of Journalists written evidence

⁸⁸ <https://record.assembly.wales/Plenary/6403#C303156>

⁸⁹ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 93

62. Paul Rowland said that they were ‘very keen’⁹⁰ to have that dialogue with the Welsh Government:

‘Our doors are open, literally and figuratively, to discussions with you at any time, and the Welsh Government at any time, about the role that they can play in the future of our business, and their input into how they think our business should run and our views on that as well, of course.’⁹¹

UK Government support for workers

63. The Committee heard that the UK Government’s Job Retention Scheme has been widely used in Wales. According to written evidence provided by the NUJ:

‘Reach plc, which owns the Western Mail, South Wales Echo, Daily Post and South Wales Evening Post, as well as Wales Online and a series of weekly local newspapers has roughly half its editorial staff on furlough at any one time. Newsquest, which owns the South Wales Argus and The Leader, as well as local weeklies, has taken similar measures...’⁹²

64. Alan Edmunds told the Committee that the scheme was key in ensuring that Reach plc was able to keep its employees on the payroll while trying to reorganise the business.⁹³ Gavin Thompson said that the scheme had ‘saved jobs’ and that the number of redundancies would be greater without it.⁹⁴

65. Stakeholders called for the scheme to be extended beyond the end of October, fearing that there could be ‘an avalanche of redundancies and newspaper closures’⁹⁵ as it comes to an end. Pamela Morton stated that ‘it needs to be extended’⁹⁶ and Alan Edmunds said that Reach would welcome its extension.⁹⁷ However, the Committee heard concerns that ‘companies are not using the furlough scheme until it ends’.⁹⁸

⁹⁰ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 99

⁹¹ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 98

⁹² National Union of Journalists written evidence

⁹³ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 26

⁹⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 185

⁹⁵ National Union of Journalists written evidence

⁹⁶ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 204

⁹⁷ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 26

⁹⁸ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 204

66. Pamela Morton called on business to use the scheme as long as possible, rather than make redundancies,⁹⁹ but Alan Edmunds, on the other hand, said:

‘Furlough ends soon and we need to plan for the future on that basis, because we have to provide a stable platform for the business over the long term.’¹⁰⁰

67. The NUJ also told the Committee that its members ‘have had pay cuts imposed on them’ and that ‘these have hit our members hard, especially after years and years of below-inflation pay rises’ and that freelance journalists ‘have been hit very hard with work diaries drying up overnight when sport was suspended and major events such as the Hay Festival, Royal Welsh Show, National Eisteddfod and party conferences cancelled.’¹⁰¹ Many freelancers have found that they are ineligible for the UK Government’s Self Employed Income Support Scheme.

68. A survey conducted by the NUJ revealed that a third of freelancers did not think their income would improve until 2021; 39 per cent said they did not expect work opportunities to improve for three to six months; while 16 per cent said they did not expect to make a living at all following the pandemic.¹⁰²

Welsh Government support

69. In May the Committee wrote to the Welsh Government asking how it was supporting local media during the crisis. The Welsh Government’s response noted:

- £2 billion of general support for businesses;
- the Third Sector COVID-19 Response Fund worth £24 million; and
- £76,500 distributed to nine community news organisations (£8,500 each) as a result of repurposing the remaining money from the £200,000 Independent Community News fund, launched by the Welsh Government in 2019 to support the hyperlocal sector. Funding through

⁹⁹ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 204

¹⁰⁰ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 26

¹⁰¹ National Union of Journalists written evidence

¹⁰² National Union of Journalists written evidence

this scheme has been repurposed to provide emergency grant funding for day-to-day costs during the crisis).¹⁰³

70. Emma Meese described the £8,500 emergency grant funding for day-to-day costs during the crisis as ‘an absolute lifeline that has saved the independent community news sector in Wales’ and said that the Welsh Government is the only government across the UK ‘to have been so forward-thinking in handing that support out’.¹⁰⁴ She went on to say:

‘...we have 113 members across the UK now, and we did a survey asking how much money and financial support they've had. So, from UK Government, 95 per cent of our members have not received one single penny to date at all whatsoever from any source. They fall through the cracks of what's relevant.’¹⁰⁵

71. The Committee heard that ‘one quick and easy way’ to support to sector would be to look at the issue of statutory notices.¹⁰⁶ In its 2018 report on News Journalism in Wales,¹⁰⁷ the Committee recommended that the Welsh Government should urgently identify the changes necessary within its competence to enable statutory notices to be published by hyperlocal and online providers.¹⁰⁸ Some legislation currently states that statutory notices must be placed in newspapers, and in doing so, disadvantages hyperlocal and online news providers.

72. According to Emma Meese allowing hyperlocal and online news providers to publish statutory notices would help level the playing field:

‘...at the moment there's a real unfair advantage for the big organisations, the big corporates, because they get access to furlough money, they've had access to the advertising money, and yet these job cuts are still being made. So I think it's important that we stress that, in Wales, all of our members are continuing to publish. They're publishing really high-quality regular content. All of them have seen web traffic double, and it's really important that we support this, moving forward.

¹⁰³

<https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s102879/Correspondence%20with%20Welsh%20Government%20regarding%20local%20media.pdf>

¹⁰⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 32

¹⁰⁵ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 34

¹⁰⁶ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 39

¹⁰⁷ <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11544/cr-ld11544-e.pdf>

¹⁰⁸ <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11544/cr-ld11544-e.pdf>

And I think one of the ways that we could look at that is looking at the issue of statutory notices. So it's not finding extra money, but again it's levelling the playing field. Because for Newsquest in April, 25 per cent of their income came from statutory notices. So that's a substantial unfair advantage that they have.'¹⁰⁹

73. In a letter to the Committee in April, Paul Rowland called on the Welsh Government to 'ask local authorities to continue to use local publishers to display public notices, 'which remain a crucial line of revenue for us and businesses like us'.¹¹⁰ In oral evidence to the Committee, he said that:

'...public notices have long been an incredibly important revenue stream that has supported local newspapers...I wasn't asking, in my letter there, for anything new to happen—just a continuation of something that has long been a very important pillar in supporting the production of local news.'¹¹¹

74. In response to a request from the Committee for information on how the Welsh Government prioritised its placement of public safety notices on the COVID-19 outbreak with local media, the Welsh Government said:

'The Welsh Government, working closely with its specialist media buyers, has ensured that local and community radio stations and local news media outlets across Wales are included in media buying for all COVID-19 work, including campaigns under the 'Keep Wales Safe' umbrella.'¹¹²

75. In his letter to the Committee in April, Paul Rowland also called on the Welsh Government to extend its business rates holiday introduced for retail, hospitality and leisure to include newspapers. He told the Committee in August that the business rate holiday had already been extended to businesses 'that wouldn't, probably, be seen as performing the same public duty as news publishers'.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 39

¹¹⁰ Media Wales written evidence

¹¹¹ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 107

¹¹²

<https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s102879/Correspondence%20with%20Welsh%20Government%20regarding%20local%20media.pdf>

¹¹³ CWLC committee meeting 5 August, para 106

76. In terms of other support from the Welsh Government, Gavin Thompson explained that Newsquest has been asking for further support and had been unsuccessful in its application for financial support from the Economic Resilience Fund. He told the Committee that ‘being able to access some of the emergency funding to get us through would be greatly appreciated’.¹¹⁴ He also said that they have sought support from the Welsh Government for a ‘new national Welsh media platform’ that could save jobs but that support has not yet been forthcoming.¹¹⁵

77. In terms of support for community radio in Wales, according to correspondence from the Welsh Government:

‘The UK Government announced that the £400,000 Community Radio Fund administered by Ofcom would be used to provide a lifeline for radio stations hit hardest by the coronavirus. Eligible stations were invited to bid for emergency grants to help meet their core costs. On 4 June, Ofcom announced the results of that process, with two community radio stations in Wales successful in receiving emergency cash funding to help them during the current COVID-19 crisis. This figure is reflective of the small number of radio stations in Wales that bid for funding.’¹¹⁶

78. In written evidence to the Committee, Môn FM said that the Ofcom fund is ‘not an acceptable solution’ for Welsh stations. They wrote:

‘Realistically, the chances of under 20 stations in Wales accessing this fund are very low given the total number of UK applications – stations have become hesitant to apply, possibly due to the grant ordinarily favouring developmental aspects rather than baseline revenue running costs.’¹¹⁷

79. Instead, Môn FM called on the Welsh Government for:

‘...the re-instatement of an annual fixed-sum of revenue (proportional to actual running costs) to each community radio station across Wales to

¹¹⁴ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 213

¹¹⁵ CWLC committee meeting 13 July, para 187

¹¹⁶

<https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s102879/Correspondence%20with%20Welsh%20Government%20regarding%20local%20media.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Môn FM written evidence

help make such stations more sustainable going forward. This could be in the form of a fixed-term payment or annual grant, or payment for a minimum number of Government advertising slots per station per year.¹¹⁸

80. Welsh Community Radio Network also called, in its written evidence, for ‘financial support from the Welsh Government for Welsh Community radio stations, owned, licensed, operating, and servicing communities in Wales’, adding that they would not be able to survive without financial assistance.¹¹⁹

Our View

The crisis has provided a further stress on an increasingly fragile business model. The structural weaknesses in news journalism in Wales that we observed in our 2018 report into News Journalism in Wales are being tested to breaking point.

Drop in advertising revenue

We heard that the impact of the crisis has been catastrophic from a trading perspective with local businesses not advertising and people not being able to buy newspapers. Despite seeing soaring online audiences during the pandemic, this has not translated into revenue from advertising. At the height of the pandemic, around 80 percent of local advertisers were not advertising.

We also heard concerns about the financial risk to the community radio sector in Wales as a result of a collapse in advertising income. It is very worrying that some community radio stations, which provide a highly valued delivery of local news and information to listeners, might not survive the pandemic.

Acceleration of change

We appreciate that the pandemic has brought enormous challenges to a sector that was already struggling. However we are concerned that changes that might have been made over a longer period of time to deal with some of the challenges facing the sector are being accelerated in response to the pandemic.

Long-term business decisions which could have devastating consequences for journalism in Wales should not be made in the midst of a crisis. Media providers should not be using this pandemic to accelerate their restructuring plans to

¹¹⁸ Môn FM written evidence

¹¹⁹ Wales Community Radio Network written evidence

deal with long term problems. There is a risk that making permanent and major decisions now could have a more severe impact than would be the case if such decisions were made later down the line when we have a clearer understanding of the impact of the pandemic. We feel that more could be done to weather the storm by companies making full use of the furlough scheme and using their cash reserves.

We are concerned that the proposals being put forward by Reach are not in the interests of Wales and Welsh democracy. As we heard from stakeholders, Welsh democracy is served by having a thriving media sector. Cutting jobs and merging functions with English divisions could have a serious impact on the plurality and quality of journalism in Wales.

UK Government support

The UK Government's Job Retention Scheme has been widely used within the sector. However, we are concerned that the scheme appears to have turned into a 'waiting room for redundancy' and that there could be an avalanche of redundancies and newspapers closures when it ends in October.

We are therefore calling on the Welsh Government to lobby the UK Government to extend the scheme beyond October to allow businesses more time to plan for the future and to avoid major and permanent decisions with potentially severe consequences being made during this crisis.

We are also calling on the Welsh Government to lead conversations with representatives from the sector to gain a clearer understanding of the immediate support required and explore solutions other than redundancies. We are concerned about the lack of engagement between the Welsh Government and Reach to date, despite the Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism committing to meet with the management of Reach. The decline of commercial news journalism in Wales is a profound public policy issue which needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

Welsh Government support

We welcome the Welsh Government's decision to repurpose the remainder of the Independent Community News fund, launched in 2019, to support the hyperlocal news sector in order to provide emergency grant funding for day-to-day costs during the crisis. However we heard that more could be done to help the sector.

Stakeholders suggested that a quick and easy way of supporting the sector would be to create a more level playing field in terms of statutory notices. During the pandemic, large organisations have had income from statutory notices in addition to furlough money, while hyperlocal and online news providers are also struggling but not able to publish statutory notices. We have seen during this crisis the value and interest in receiving local news. We are therefore reiterating the recommendation made in our 2018 report on News Journalism in Wales, that the Welsh Government should urgently identify the changes necessary to enable statutory notices to be published by hyperlocal and online news providers.

We are pleased that two community radio stations in Wales were successful in receiving emergency cash funding to help them during the current COVID-19 crisis. However, we heard that more could be done to support the sector and that the Welsh Government should provide financial support over and above that distributed by Ofcom on behalf of the UK Government.

Community radio stations have played a vital role in providing local news and information during the crisis and it would be a great shame if they were unable to survive this period. We therefore agree that the Welsh Government should provide financial support for radio stations that are owned, licensed and operating in Wales.

We heard that media companies, such as Newsquest, have been unable to access the Welsh Government's emergency funding such as the Economic Resilience Fund. We consider it vital that the sector, which is already severely challenged, is provided with direct investment from the Welsh Government to get through the immediate crisis. Wales cannot afford to lose more media outlets. A reduction in the number of journalists operating in Wales will result in the dilution of Welsh content, making it even more difficult for the people of Wales to access accurate and relevant news and information.

We were pleased to see the First Minister describing the proposed redundancies in Wales as 'damaging to Welsh democracy'.¹²⁰ However, other than welcome support for hyperlocal publications, it is unclear how the Welsh Government has converted this concern into action. Democracy requires a healthy press to inform the public and scrutinise the public realm. It is an unacceptable paradox that as the Senedd has gained further powers, public interest journalism has retreated from Wales. We therefore urgently call on the Welsh Government to

¹²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-53336035>

take affirmative action to support news journalism in Wales, and hope to explore this issue in further detail in the autumn term.

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should urge the UK Government to continue the Job Retention Scheme beyond October 2020 on a sectoral basis in recognition of the fact that the majority of news journalism businesses will not be able to return to pre-pandemic levels of economic activity for some time to come.

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government should encourage businesses to make use of the UK Government's Job Retention Scheme while they explore longer term solutions instead of making employees redundant.

Recommendation 6. The Welsh Government should lead conversations with representatives from the sector to gain a clearer understanding of the immediate support required and explore solutions other than redundancies.

Recommendation 7. The Welsh Government should urgently identify the changes necessary to enable statutory notices to be published by hyperlocal and online providers.

Recommendation 8. The Welsh Government should provide financial support for community radio stations that are owned, licensed and operating in Wales.

Recommendation 9. The Welsh Government should take affirmative action to encourage new entrants to the market and support innovative approaches to the provision of news journalism in Wales.

Annex A – List of oral and written evidence

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the Committee on the dates listed below. [Transcripts of oral evidence sessions](#) can be viewed on our website.

Date	Name and organisation
13 July 2020	Andrew Dagnell, ITV News Emma Meese, Cardiff University Gavin Thompson, Newsquest Ifan Morgan Jones, Bangor University Phil Henfrey, ITV Cymru Wales Stephen Cushion, Cardiff University Steve Johnson, University of South Wales
5 August 2020	Alan Edmunds, Reach plc Martin Shipton, National Union of Journalists Pamela Norton, National Union of Journalists Paul Rowland, Media Wales

The Committee also received written evidence. All [consultation responses](#) can be viewed on our website. The following written contributions have been used in this report:

Reference	Organisation
COV01	Media Wales
COV04	Wales Community Radio Network
COV31	Conwy County Borough Council
COV57	National Union of Journalists
COV71	BBC Cymru Wales
COV78	Môn FM
COV82	Reach plc