

We would like to make a case to the Future of Media Commission for local community newspapers to be at the heart of its thinking and to the forefront in its recommended strategy for how public service aims can be delivered and sustainably funded ongoing through media. As vitally important Public Service Content Providers, we make our points on behalf of a group of independent publishers in the north, and very much welcome any further input that we can provide.

The economic impact of Covid-19 will lead to the collapse of local community newspapers in the province. This has been well documented by many commentators since the start of the outbreak.

We feel without doubt that the Commission will appreciate equally both the gravity of the situation and also the importance of the weekly press to the local communities that they serve.

We do not feel that it is necessary to repeat to you their unique value and the irreplaceable nature of their service, nor the endemic damage that has been and is being done by global digital giants and other media aggregating and monetizing grass-roots news gathering. We do however feel it is necessary to highlight that the prospect of there being no community papers published, nor adequate local news gathering in Ireland from mid 2021 onwards is altogether real without further assistance to ride-out the economic impact of Covid-19, and then support mechanisms to sustain ongoing. The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges facing news publishers in what was already a changing landscape.

Ironically at such a challenging time for local papers, the misinformation circulating about the virus underlines that the reliability of trustworthy information at community level is now more important than ever and it must remain an absolute priority to ensure we do all we can to support local news outlets during this crisis, and thereafter. Because the Covid-19 crisis will exacerbate the trends and have a significant impact on the future market structure, news provision and consumption – particularly at the hyper-local level.

Eschewing the economic impact, the social value of our proud local papers is unquantifiable. Moreover, at the onset of lockdown reporters were deemed essential workers, ensuring continuity of local news gathering and messaging, and this is even more the case now.

UK Government -backed research has found that for every percentage point growth in a local newspaper's circulation, electoral turnout on its patch goes up by 0.37 percentage points. As well as the 0.37 percentage point growth in turnout per 1 percentage point increase in daily newspaper circulation, an additional daily or weekly local title in an area leads to a further 1.27 percentage point increase in voters.\*

Northern Ireland also has the highest proportion of internet non-users in the UK - 13.2 percent of the population or 194,000 people.\*\*

Other countries have recognised the importance with a range of measures:

Canada has introduced a Journalism Labour Tax cut, France has extensive grant aid for small local titles, and Austria provides subsidies. France, Australia and Germany have all imposed measures in an attempt to force Facebook to share revenues. These are not necessarily the answer, but demonstrate a clear recognition of the importance of local media and help inform the discussion.

We hope we can assist Commission recommendations to be well designed for local journalism and newspapers to provide a key input to civic society and democracy.

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, CEO Belfast Media Group (Andersonstown News, North Belfast News, South Belfast News)

Lowry Hodgett, Newry Reporter and Banbridge Chronicle

Malcolm Crichton, Down Recorder

Jean Long, Alpha Group (Coleraine Chronicle, Ballymena Guardian, Ballymoney Chronicle, Tyrone Courier, Ulster Gazette, Newry Democrat)

Dominic McClements, North-West News Group (Fermanagh Herald, Tyrone Herald, Ulster Herald, Strabane Chronicle, Donegal News)

Neil Evans, Spectator Newspapers ( County Down Spectator, Newtownards Chronicle, Mourne Observer)

\*Plum Consulting for the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport,

\*\*Rouge Media January 2021 in response to UK Government's 2014 "Digital Inclusion Strategy