

## **Agenda – Local Government and Housing Committee**

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Meeting Venue:

**Committee Room 2**

Meeting date: 31 January 2024

Meeting time: 09.30

For further information contact:

**Catherine Hunt**

Committee Clerk

0300 200 6565

[SeneddHousing@senedd.wales](mailto:SeneddHousing@senedd.wales)

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**(Pre-meeting 09.15 – 09.30)**

**1 Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest**

(09.30)

**2 Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill – Evidence session 5**

(09.30 – 10.15)

(Pages 1 – 22)

Rachel Bowen, Director of Policy, Older People's Commissioner for Wales

Steffan Rhys, Audience and Content Director for Wales, Reach plc

Gavin Thompson, Regional Editor, Newsquest (Wales)

Rob Taylor, Wrexham.com

**3 Papers to note**

(Page 23)

**3.1 Letter from the Minister for Finance and Local Government – Outcome of the Interministerial Group meeting for Housing, Communities & Local Government**

(Pages 24 – 25)

**4 Motion under Standing Order 17.42 (vi) to resolve to exclude the public from the remainder of this meeting**

(10.15)

**5 Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill – consideration of evidence**

(10.15 – 10.35)



**(Break 10.35 – 10.45)**

**6 Welsh Government Draft Budget 2024–25 – Consideration of draft report**

**(10.45 – 11.45)**

**(Pages 26 – 68)**

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**03442 640 670**

Rydym yn croesawu  
galwadau yn Gymraeg

Adeiladau Cambrian  
Sqwâr Mount Stuart  
Caerdydd CF10 5FL

Cambrian Buildings  
Mount Stuart Square  
Cardiff CF10 5FL

John Griffiths MS  
Chair  
Local Government and Housing Committee  
Welsh Parliament  
Cardiff Bay  
Cardiff  
CF99 1SN

8 January 2024

Dear John,

**Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee:  
Consultation on Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill**

I am pleased to see that the current consultation enables people to submit their comments by post as well as electronically. Digital exclusion is an increasing issue for older people across Wales.

In relation to this, I note that one of the proposals in the above Bill relating to the council tax system is to replace the current requirement to publish information in newspapers with a requirement to publish a notice of the council tax charges on the local authority's website and "put suitable alternative arrangements in place to ensure that such information is accessible to citizens who have difficulty accessing online facilities".

This is concerning as the latest National Survey for Wales shows that 31% of over 75s do not have access to the internet at home and 33% of over 75s do not use the internet (including Smart TV and handheld devices), compared to 13% of 65-74s and 0% of 25-44s. This means around 101,200 people over 75 do not use the internet.

This change is therefore likely to disproportionately impact older people. 'Suitable alternative arrangements' is also an ambiguous replacement to the more specific requirement to publish in newspapers, and risks being an inadequate alternative.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

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[www.olderpeoplewales.com](http://www.olderpeoplewales.com)

In November 2021, I used my legal powers to issue Section 12 guidance to local authorities and health boards regarding [access to information and services in a digital age](#) to help address the issue of the rights of older people not online.

I am currently undertaking further work on digital exclusion. Over 150 older people have shared their recent experiences of digital exclusion with me and I will shortly be publishing a report on this issue. Older people describe being made to feel left behind, 'past it', and isolated as a result of so much everyday business moving to online-only or digital first. The proposals in the current Bill risk adding to this even further and are unnecessary.

Citizens are potentially more likely to see useful information of which they were unaware (and so not intending to specifically seek out) when browsing published newspapers. It seems less likely that people will browse local authority websites.

For the above reasons, the requirement for notices of the council tax charges to be published in newspapers should be retained and the provision in the Bill for this to be via local authority websites, with unspecified alternative offline provision, should be removed. There is no reason why the Bill cannot specify that council tax charges be published both online and in newspapers.

I would be happy to discuss the issue of digital exclusion further. Please contact Ruth Thomas ([ruth.thomas@olderpeople.wales](mailto:ruth.thomas@olderpeople.wales)) if you would like to arrange a meeting.

Yours sincerely



Heléna Herklots CBE  
**Older People's Commissioner for Wales**

## Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill consultation submission

### About us:

Newsquest is the UK's leading local news publisher. Our local newspaper and website brands are spread across Wales, from the Leader in Wrexham to the Western Telegraph in Pembrokeshire, the Rhyl Journal to the South Wales Argus. Our registered business address is in Newport, where a number of our UK-wide operations are based, in addition to local journalists.

### What:

We write in response to the consultation over the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill to call for the removal of Section 20 from the Bill.

### Why:

Section 20 would remove the requirement for local authorities to publish council tax changes in their local newspaper. This will have the unintended consequence of causing harm to the local newspaper industry and in turn, how well informed the public are and ultimately damage democracy in Wales.

### How:

There are two strands to this harm. First, notices in local newspapers reach people who would otherwise be excluded. Second, notices provide an important revenue stream for the printed newspapers which helps enable journalism in our local communities and removing that revenue would be catastrophic for some communities.

### Reach

Wales has a higher level of digital exclusion than the wider UK, [with 7% of people without the internet](#). Independent research shows that local newspapers are an essential platform for ensuring that the public, particularly the elderly and disenfranchised, have access to critical information that may have a profound impact upon their lives.

Local newspapers continue to be an effective way to reach these groups. In correspondence with the Finance Minister, she suggested councils may look at other methods such as posting notices in libraries and council offices. We believe this would be a poor alternative and as local authorities retreat to providing fewer services, many such facilities will not exist or be very remote to many communities.

While the requirement is publish in a printed newspaper, the power of the notice reaches beyond that. The local news industry understands the changing reader habits of many people and has [worked together to create the online public notice portal](#) and proactively promotes public notices in news articles and other ways to ensure this important information reaches both a wide audience and a hard-to-reach one.

## **Revenue**

Public notices provide an important revenue stream for local news publishers, helping print editions continue. This was highlighted in the recent report by the [Wales Public Interest Journalism Working Group](#). They are not a subsidy – as highlighted above they provide good value for a vital service – but this spend has the additional benefit of supporting a public good in local journalism.

While this Bill deals specifically with notices on council tax changes, we believe this change will set a direction of travel that will ultimately extend to other areas, such as planning and transport. The minister's own comments on her reasoning behind the clause lend weight to this concern.

Publishers continue to build a financially sustainable future for local news but in a very challenging environment. At Newsquest, our company's financial performance is stable, but while we are bucking the industry trend the challenges are real. The duopoly of tech giants Google and Facebook dominate the digital advertising space and can takeaway significant amounts of audience, and therefore advertising revenue, on the change of an algorithm. Taking away public notices further destabilises the platform we are working hard to build.

## **Why that matters**

This is about far more than the jobs we support or the businesses that we help. Communities without local news are less well-informed about local matters and local democracy. They suffer a damaging democratic deficit.

In Wales this carries even greater importance due to the lack of depth in Welsh national media. For many people, their local newspaper is not only where they read about what is happening in their local community but also likely to be the only place they read about their local Senedd member or relevant decisions from the Welsh Government. Yet this direction would leave local media in Wales worse off than in England, despite the additional need.

## **Conclusion:**

Section 20 is not a central element of this Bill. It does not impact its key aims and objectives. Removing it would have little impact on the Welsh Government's ambitions but keeping it will be damaging to our industry, to local communities and, ultimately, to the Welsh Government and Senedd.

## **Gavin Thompson**

Regional editor at Newsquest.

On behalf of Newsquest Media Group.

**Dear Sir/Madam**

Please consider this as a submission to the consultation on the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill.

Section 20 of the bill as drafted contains a clause which would remove the requirement on local authorities to publish a notice of changes to council tax in at least one newspaper circulating in its area<sup>1</sup>. It would allow local authorities to publish the notice on their own websites instead.

Statutory public notices are an important source of income for news publishers at a time when their revenue is under extreme pressure from falling newspaper circulation, declining print advertising and the challenges faced in monetising the enormous audiences being reached online. These pressures are exacerbated by the dominance and unpredictability of Facebook and Google as referrers of audience to news websites, the domination of the advertising market by Meta and Google, and the expansion of the BBC into online news at the expense of its local radio output. All of these together amount to a tangible threat to the future of news providers in Wales, who are also facing significant rises in their costs because of inflation.

If the Welsh Government's intention is to move away from requiring public bodies to place statutory public notices in newspapers, it risks causing a devastating impact on news reporting in Wales at a time when the industry needs support. For Reach, which publishes WalesOnline, North Wales Live, four daily print titles (the Western Mail, Daily Post, South Wales Echo, South Wales Evening Post) as well as Wales on Sunday and many weekly titles serving communities across Wales, any threat to such a vital source of income would have a direct, devastating impact on our editorial operations and our titles serving communities in Wales. It increases the risk of titles closing, news provision in Wales being further hollowed out and more journalists who have dedicated their working lives to reporting in Wales being put out of work.

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<sup>1</sup> [Section 20 of the Wales bill](#) removes [subsections 8, 9 and 10 of Section 12 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992](#)



There is a sentence in the new bill obliging councils to “make arrangements for the public who would otherwise not be able to access that notice to do so”, however there is nothing explicit in that statement that would oblige a local authority to advertise with a news organisation.

There are only a small number of public notices relating to council tax that this would affect every year. However the bill would set a precedent and if the Welsh Government’s intention is to introduce these changes in future legislation as it updates the myriad of laws that impose obligations on public bodies to advertise in newspapers, it will have a significant impact on news organisations in Wales that receive this advertising, as well as on their staff and titles.

The Working Group on Public Interest Journalism set up by the Welsh Government has been discussing the difficult issue of whether the requirement to publish in a printed newspaper should be reworked to also include online only providers. There is a difficult decision to be made here about balancing the impact on longstanding newspaper titles, the communities they serve and the professionally run and trained newsrooms they support, with the interests of supporting the online-only sector.

However, the wording of the bill as it stands would not support any journalism in Wales and would only damage it. The damage the clause would do also seems to directly flout the 2021 co-operation agreement struck between Plaid and Labour and its pledge to “work to strengthen the media in Wales”. It would leave news organisations in Wales in a worse position than those across the border in England and further exacerbate the democratic deficit we face.

Yours faithfully,

**Steffan Rhys — Editor, WalesOnline**  
**David James — Deputy Editor, WalesOnline**  
**Catrin Pascoe — Editor, Western Mail**  
**Jonathan Roberts — Editor, South Wales Evening Post**

January 2024

Dear Members,

On behalf of Wrexham.com, a small independent news outlet in north Wales, I would like to offer comments on a minor, but hugely important, part of the Local Government Finance (Wales) Bill. Namely welcoming Section 20 regarding publication of notices that sees the removal of the archaic requirement to '*publish a notice of the determination in at least one newspaper circulating in its area*'.

The wider statutory notice requirements such laws have is effectively a huge legally protected subsidy to print / legacy newsbrands. I believe this is anti competitive along with restricting startup, or growth, of entities such as ourselves. No other industry benefits from a legal requirement for spending with a specific entity in such a manner.

“Circulating” also creates practical, often surreal, situations. We have seen newspapers reduce in circulations, mirroring the situation across the world, as people move elsewhere for information. On similar legal notices Wrexham Council acknowledge there is a point where circulation would be so small it would not comply legally , but won't commit to a figure between 0-2500 copies as a line to draw... as there is no legal definition of words used.

Numerous FOI responses indicate that circulation data is not even known (or apparently not even of interest!) by Welsh Government nor councils, so the act of placing the notice is all that matters to comply with an obsolete law, not the actual communicating with the public bit - the important part!

There will no doubt be incredible push back from print publishers due to the huge revenues involved, but continuing a subsidy in all but name is not the good basis for law.

In 2017 I gave evidence to the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee ( <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s500003801/20%20July%202017.pdf> ) on this very topic. Six years later I believe the words hold true:

*“Statutory notices certainly are a tick box in the legal framework as opposed to actually genuinely wanting to communicate, ‘This is happening to you in your community—are you interested in it?’ To be blunt, I’m convinced that statutory notices aren’t even read by the people who publish them, because we’ve picked stories out of statutory notices out of the back of newspapers and run a story on it, and then we see that story being run in the newspaper several days later, because they’ve read it on us.”*

Back then I favoured a change in the law to keep things as broad as possible rather than look to define who should be eligible as technology and audiences move forward - this change does just that.

Wrexham.com welcomes the broad wording used in the current proposals. We would also welcome long overdue change in similar laws as promptly as possible!

Thanks  
Rob Taylor

# Agenda Item 3

Local Government and Housing Committee

31 January 2024 – papers to note cover sheet

<b>Paper no.</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>Action point</b>
Paper 5	Inter-institutional Relations Agreement	Minister for Finance and Local Government	To note



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref  
Ein cyf/Our ref

John Griffiths MS  
Chair  
Local Government and Housing Committee  
Senedd Cymru

SeneddHousing@senedd.wales

23 January 2024

Dear Chair

### **Outcome of the Interministerial Group meeting for Housing, Communities & Local Government**

In accordance with the inter-institutional relations agreement, the third meeting of the Interministerial Group (IMG) for Housing, Communities and Local Government was held on 13 December 2023. As lead Minister for this IMG, I asked the Minister for Climate Change to attend the meeting on behalf of the Welsh Government, as the agenda items fell within her portfolio.

The Minister for Housing, Paul McLennan MSP attended for the Scottish Government and chaired the meeting. Mark O'Donnell, Deputy Secretary of Housing, Urban Regeneration and Local Government; Paul Price, Director of Social Housing Policy and David Polley, Director of Housing Supply Policy represented the Northern Ireland Executive. From the UK Government, Jacob Young, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Levelling Up and Lee Rowley, Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Building Safety.

The group welcomed a presentation by Professor Ken Gibb of CaCHE on research on the impacts of regulation on the Private Rented Sector, issues and challenges.

Following the presentation, the group discussed the challenges each government faces around affordable homes and housing supply. The group also discussed progress made on building safety, cladding remediation, insurance, mortgage and lending markets and RAAC.

They acknowledged the positive working relationship between officials across the areas of housing and building safety and agreed for this official level engagement to continue.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:  
0300 0604400

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay  
Caerdydd • Cardiff  
CF99 1SN

[Correspondence.Rebecca.Evans@gov.wales](mailto:Correspondence.Rebecca.Evans@gov.wales)  
[Gohebiaeth.Rebecca.Evans@llyw.cymru](mailto:Gohebiaeth.Rebecca.Evans@llyw.cymru)

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

It was confirmed that the UK Government and officials from the Northern Ireland Executive will work together on preparations for the next meeting of the IMG, scheduled for March / April 2024.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Evans". The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

**Rebecca Evans AS/MS**

Y Gweinidog Cyllid a Llywodraeth Leol  
Minister for Finance and Local Government

# Agenda Item 6

By virtue of paragraph(s) ix of Standing Order 17.42

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