

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