

Written evidence submitted by Midland News Association

Dear sirs,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Midland News Association, Britain's largest independent regional news organisation and publishers of daily titles the Express & Star and Shropshire Star, together with a series of weekly publications and periodicals, including the country's largest distribution free weekly title Chronicle Week. Across print and digital, more than 1.3 million people engage with our various news brands each week.

We are committed to producing high quality print publications while growing successful online platforms, and the Midland News Association remains the leading trusted source of news and information for the Black Country and Shropshire.

Local journalism is vital for society and democracy, sharing reliable and trusted news and information across the communities we serve. Our journalists are at the heart of their communities, reporting on the stories that matter to local residents, while holding those in authority to account and shining a light on issues that would otherwise go unscrutinised.

In recent weeks, Midland News Association journalists played a vital role in keeping our audience updated as devastating floods affected communities across Shropshire and the West Midlands, giving minute-by-minute updates on our websites. Beyond this, we run regular campaigns to support good causes locally – our annual Feed a Family at Christmas appeal brings in thousands of pounds of donations for those in need, while we also helped secure the future of Acorns Children's Hospice with a fundraising appeal. The Ladder apprenticeship campaign across the Black Country and Shropshire has seen thousands of opportunities created for young people across our readership area and continues to go from strength to strength. Throughout the pandemic, we have kept our audience fully up-to-date with the latest news and information, providing a trusted source of news in the face of so much misinformation.

We continue to act as the eyes and ears of our readers, delivering carefully verified, accurate news and information – a service that has never been so important.

The Midland News Association is a member of the News Media Association (NMA) we fully endorse the evidence that has been submitted to the Sustainability of Local Journalism Inquiry, including the following specific measures outlined that, if implemented, would support the long-term future of independent local journalism:

- Bringing forward legislation early in the next parliamentary session to provide the Digital Markets Unit with statutory powers; including a requirement for large tech platforms to negotiate with local, regional, and national news publishers over payment for content
- Providing a package of targeted short-term financial measures to support local publishers transition to digital-first business models, including extending local newspaper Business Rate Relief, and introducing new tax credits for journalism and advertising
- Limiting the scope and scale of the BBC's online news output, expanding the Local News Partnership, and encouraging negotiation and collaboration with commercial publishers
- Building on the success of the 'All Together' Covid-19 advertising campaign, with a long-term government advertising partnership with news publishers

- Maintaining the statutory obligation to place public notices in printed local newspapers to protect the public right to know and safeguard this important revenue stream for local journalism
- Ensuring a robust, watertight and workable exemption for news publishers' content in the Online Safety Bill, as supported by this Committee

As the NMA submission makes clear, with the right policy interventions, there is a strong future for independent commercial local journalism – and the increasing reach of our audience reinforces the demand for trusted sources of local and regional news. In the case of our own brands, we are continuing to innovate in the digital sphere while maintaining the quality of our print portfolio. However, the challenges facing our business are numerous. Generating reader subscription revenue for digital content continues to be difficult, a situation exacerbated by the free-to-use news service provided by the BBC. In this context, the BBC's 'Across the UK' plan to expand local coverage is a particular concern.

Similarly, large tech platforms continue to benefit from the content that our team of journalists produce, and legislation to implement a pro-competition regime that balances the relationship between such platforms and local publishers has yet to be brought forward. Urgent action is required to ensure that we can continue to provide the vital local news coverage that our audience currently enjoys.

Yours sincerely,

Martin Wright