

Written evidence submitted by National World plc

The Public Accounts Committee has launched an inquiry into the BBC's implementation of Across the UK. The Committee is accepting evidence until Monday February 5, 2024. This is the written evidence from National World plc, publisher of independent local and regional news and lifestyle websites across the UK - including the Yorkshire Post, The Scotsman, The Newsletter, and nationalworld.com.

1 Context

1.1 In October 2022, the BBC laid out plans to strengthen its local online news provision in communities across England as part of its 'Across the UK' strategy. The plans highlighted the creation of 130 additional posts across England, including more than 70 investigative journalists working across TV, radio and online.

1.2 "The plans will deliver a stronger and more distinctive local online news service for 43 different local areas in England – all available on the BBC News website and app. Our local journalism across TV, radio and online will also benefit from 11 new investigations teams based across England, delivering original journalism across our daily services. The 43 online areas include four new news services for Bradford, Wolverhampton, Sunderland and Peterborough." (Source BBC Media Centre, July 6, 2023).

1.3 Three of the four new services are in National World's circulation areas - Wolverhampton, Sunderland and Peterborough. Our digital and newspaper brands in these markets are the Wolverhampton Express and Star, the Sunderland Echo, and the Peterborough Telegraph.

2 Market impact

2.1 Senior editors of the main independent local news publishers across the UK consider the actions of the BBC to be the single biggest threat facing commercially-funded independent local journalism.

2.2 As local newspaper publishers continue the transformation to viable digital news publishers they face significant challenges from the global tech platforms and their opaque algorithms - which has driven down advertising yields and fractured the direct relationship between audience and news provider. The Digital Markets Bill and the Media Bill will assist in redressing this.

2.3 However, the BBC's 'Across the UK' strategy is a far more serious threat because it is seeking to cherry-pick local stories which drive the biggest audiences and publish them on their own advertisement-free and subscription-free sites which will, because of the consequent high user experience funded by the taxpayer, give them a wholly disproportionate ability to dominate the market. It is the digital

equivalent of the BBC publishing local newspapers which carried no cover price, no advertising, and limitless paging in direct competition to commercial operators. To compound matters, there is evidence that they are recruiting local independent journalists on higher salaries, taking news leads from commercial publishers and rewriting them, and maximising the promotional strengths of the BBC brand and infrastructure. All the while, the BBC has radically reduced its prized local radio services and underfunded its core TV offering, leading to endless repeats.

2.4 The BBC's actions will significantly remove audience and the advertising revenues attached to them from commercial publishers, will continue to undermine efforts to establish quality reader-pays subscription models for local news services, and lead to a significantly poorer local news ecosystem with more jobs lost than the BBC could ever create and the removal of independent voices and community campaigns.

2.5 On December 5, 2023, editorial directors from independent publishers across the UK jointly signed an editorial comment that ran across their daily and weekly newspapers and their local websites describing the BBC, in the context of its 'Across the UK' strategy as the 'neighbour from hell.' A version also appeared as the main comment in the Daily Express, which is attached (Appendix 1).

2.6 They said: "The BBC seems to be on a mission to be the only show in town - having taken an axe to its much-loved local radio stations so it can start writing news stories online which you can already get from local newspapers which are currently battling with tech platforms like Google, Meta and Apple. Unlike Google, Meta and co, the BBC's funding is guaranteed by the licence fee, meaning the British public is underwriting the biggest threat local journalism has ever faced. It is splashing your cash on local news websites and making it increasingly difficult for proud, independent news sites to survive in the long term. Most local reporters share their stories and videos with readers through the opaque algorithms of the giant global tech companies like Facebook and Google. As the BBC carries no advertising and is entirely free to read, its stories tend to be prioritised by the big search engines over our journalism. At the same time, the BBC uses its vast monopolistic strength to promote its content. So, it has a huge anti-competitive advantage. Editors are convinced that as they juggle the realities of the cost-of-living crisis, the BBC - immune from the same commercial pressures - is fixated on stealing their readers, their businesses, and the jobs of their journalists. It either knows what it is doing, and doesn't care, or is ignorant of the impact it will have."

2.7 The full editorial comment is attached (Appendix 2). The signatories were:

Ian Carter, Iliffe Media editorial director

Toby Granville, Newsquest editorial development director

Gary Shipton, National World editorial director

Jeremy Spooner, News Media Association Independent Publishers Forum chair

Paul Rowland, Reach Regionals editorial director

Martin Wright, Midland News Association editor in chief

3 Anti-competitive activity in the launch communities of Peterborough, Wolverhampton and Sunderland

3.1 Although Peterborough and Wolverhampton only saw BBC launches recently in December 2023, there is already evidence of the BBC following up our content leads.

3.2 Peterborough - from the editorial director:

This was our exclusive - January 2/3, 2024

<https://www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk/news/crime/murderer-who-killed-stepdaughter-bernadette-walker-dies-in-prison-without-revealing-where-he-left-peterborough-teenagers-body-4463516>

This was the BBC report later, January 3

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-67872569>

We covered the major pollution leak and were followed by most publishers - but our reporter had done a number of follow ups on this, chasing up the environment agency (not relying on press releases etc), including this one on January 4, 2024

<https://www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk/news/people/plans-to-re-stock-river-nene-with-fish-after-devastating-pollution-killed-more-than100000-animals-4466338>

A couple of days later, this appeared on the BBC website, January 6

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-67902286>

We ran a story about a councillor resigning, December 11, 2023

<https://www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk/news/politics/council/peterborough-councillor-leaves-conservative-party-on-moral-grounds-over-gaza-conflict-4441322>

This was published later that day

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-67684806>

On November 23, 2023, we ran a story about the world's most flexible person being from Peterborough

<https://www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk/news/people/meet-peterboroughs-liberty-barros-the-most-flexible-person-in-the-world-4419826>

Five days later, November 28:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-cambridgeshire-67557205>

A breaking news story we covered on December 18, 2023, that BBC covered after us

<https://www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk/news/police-officer-suffers-serious-injuries-after-crashing-into-tree-while-responding-to-hare-coursing-reports-near-peterborough-4449887>

This is what the BBC published,
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgl6xdk5ndko>

3.3 Wolverhampton - from the editorial director:

There has definitely been a substantial increase in Wolverhampton-focused content since the BBC service launched, with about six to eight articles per day not unusual.

As per the attached screenshot (Appendix 3), we have seen examples of Express & Star exclusives being published hours later by the local BBC operation (our version was behind a paywall). The BBC's version then appears above us on Google, meaning they generate a lot of search traffic on a story we did the leg work on, presumably due to the BBC's brand status, or its unique ability to provide stories for free on an ad-free platform.

Clearly the timing was hugely frustrating for us, given that it coincided with us launching our reader subscription service. While it is difficult to quantify the impact on subscriptions, there is no question that it makes our task much harder as the BBC is offering high quality editorial, in a premium, ad free environment, without any form of paywall (apart from the licence fee of course).

4 Conclusions

4.1 The BBC's Across the UK strategy as it relates to local news provision is anti-competitive and threatens the very survival of a plurality of local, professional journalistic voices.

4.2 Tax-payers' money through the licence fee is being inappropriately used to develop services which sit outside the BBC's remit. The BBC is abusing its market strength and brand positioning to undermine news services which are commercially funded through advertising and reader subscriptions while making use of the news leads provided by those commercial professionals.

4.3 The BBC should confine itself in respect of local news website to its original 12 broadcasting regions and support the commercial sector as it seeks to reinvent itself for a modern audience.

Appendix 1

12 Daily Express Tuesday, December 5, 2023



DAILY EXPRESS

One Canada Square, London E14 5AP
Tel: 020 8612 7000 (outside UK: +44 20 8612 7000)

Mr Cleverly's sensible and practical proposals

THERE'S every sign that Home Secretary James Cleverly will be a welcome change from the last two incumbents. Three weeks into the job, he's already come up with a sophisticated five-point plan he claims will cut migration by up to 300,000.

The plans include raising the minimum salary threshold for work visas to £38,700; banning care workers from bringing dependants, reforming the "shortage occupation" list which domestic labour cannot fill, and reviewing graduate visas.

These are sensible, practical proposals that will reduce the "pull factors" to the UK, while acknowledging our need for labour, and they're expected to almost halve migration, which last year stood at 745,000 arrivals.

Mr Cleverly also said his plans were possible because Brexit has enabled the UK to control its borders. Cynics might mutter that we've heard his phrase "enough is enough" before. But his approach is likely to be more effective than headline-grabbing theatrics. To be rolled out in 2024, it will also challenge Labour in the run-up to the election. Mr Cleverly's approach is considerate and long overdue. If there's one issue that the electorate wants to solve it is mass immigration, which at such high levels is unsustainable, expensive and damages civic life. We should support him.

Labour's credibility gap

IT'S painfully obvious that Sir Keir Starmer is wooing Tory voters. Following his acknowledgement of Margaret Thatcher's political importance – anathema to many in his party – he has now cited "wealth creation" as a top Labour priority and said that anyone expecting him to be a spendthrift was going to be "disappointed".

Labour's plans for what Sir Keir calls "securonomics" would, he says, boost productivity and provide stable growth.

When Labour's Treasury secretary Liam Byrne left Government in 2010 with the message "there is no money left", he helped Labour gain a reputation for financial imprudence.

That Sir Keir is aiming to change this perception is to his credit. But his party still has a credibility gap that will take more than a few words to fix.

The end of Endgame?

IT IS said the term "endgame" derives from the final few moves in chess when it becomes obvious who will win – and who will lose. In the notorious Omid Scobie book of the same name, it might well be endgame for the book itself.

Yesterday Endgame plummeted to 139th in the UK bestseller book charts, while retailers slashed its £22 cover price by 50 per cent. In the US, it was a worse story.

The scurrilous tome may well have self-destructed. We do hope so, and salute the wisdom of the public in ignoring it.

Why the BBC must stop suffocating local journalism

IF the BBC was a family that lived next door they'd be the neighbour from hell. With money no object, they'd be unworried about their impact on those around them. They'd ignore anyone who complained, look solely after their own interests – and promise worse was on the way. That's the verdict of some of the country's most experienced local newspaper editors who regard the BBC as little more than a state-funded juggernaut suffocating independent journalism.

And that's why we, a group of local editors and publishers, have today put aside rivalries to write to our millions of readers, warning them that the BBC has become a threat to the future of independent local news.

The BBC seems to be on a mission to become the only show in town.

It's taken an axe to much-loved local radio stations, and is instead writing online news stories that you can already find in local newspapers.

Meanwhile, our local newspapers are battling with tech companies like Google, Meta and Apple, who scoop up advertising money that should be sustaining our hard-working newsrooms. But, unlike us, the BBC's funding is guaranteed by the licence fee, which means the public is unwittingly underwriting the biggest threat local journalism has ever faced.

With the Corporation now splashing cash on local news websites, it's increasingly difficult for independent local newspapers – which have represented communities for generations – to survive.

MOST local reporters share stories and videos through the opaque algorithms of the tech giants. But as the BBC carries no advertising and is entirely free to read, its stories are prioritised by big search engines over our journalism. At the



READ OR DEAD: The BBC should help independent local news... not destroy it

Britain's local and regional newspapers remain a cornerstone of democracy... so why is the BBC helping wreck to them? Editors are today joining forces to raise the alarm

same time, the BBC uses its monopolistic strength to promote its content.

So it has a huge anti-competitive advantage and is immune from the commercial pressures that beset local news.

A crunch point came in October 2022, when the BBC laid out plans to strengthen local news online across England, including the creation of 130 additional posts. More journalism should be welcomed, but the BBC's plans promptly put at risk thousands of existing jobs on long-established titles. While the BBC promised "a stronger and more distinctive local online news service for 43 different local areas in England", it failed to address the dreadful impact this will have on the fragile local news sector.

The Government is taking welcome steps to tackle market abuses by Meta and Google through the Digital Markets

Bill, but the BBC remains an equally potent threat. Much could be lost.

It is our local reporters who hold decision-makers to account, campaign on your behalf, share essential local information and have no interests but telling the truth.

We're also the sources for the BBC when it wants to know what's going on locally.

But editors are becoming convinced the BBC is fixated on stealing readers, businesses, and our journalists' jobs.

We believe it either knows and doesn't care, or is ignorant to its impact.

Its plans are at odds with its commitment not to distort the markets – and make a mockery of the BBC's promise to help local news.

All this is a far cry from the BBC's foundation in 1922, when it scheduled news bulletins so as not to harm the evening newspapers which had been

informing local communities long before it came along. Fast forward 101 years, the BBC now seems determined to do all it can to see off competition from those same newspapers.

If the BBC wants to compete fairly and support local news ecosystems – as it claims – it must now act. It should abandon its rollout of local websites, which directly compete with local news publishers.

IT SHOULD link to local publishers, helping them to thrive, rather than trying to close them down, and show that rather than being a threat to local journalism, it is a global broadcaster focused on delivering excellent television and radio in line with its charter.

We call upon the BBC to be a far better neighbour.

Ian Carter, Iliffe Media editorial director
Toby Granville, Newsquest editorial development director
Gary Shipton, National World editor-in-chief
Jeremy Spooner, News Media Association; Independent Publishers Forum chair
Paul Rowland, Reach Regional's editorial director
Martin Wright, Midland News Association editor-in-chief

'It seems to be on a mission to be the only show in town'

OPINION

The BBC: A state-funded juggernaut suffocating independent journalism

If the BBC was a family and lived in the house next door to you it would be the neighbour from hell. That's the verdict of some of the most experienced local newspaper editors in the country who now regard the BBC as little more than a state-funded juggernaut on course to suffocate independent journalism in every city, town and village in the UK.

The BBC seems to be on a mission to be the only show in town, having taken an axe to its much-loved local radio stations so it can start writing news stories online which you can already get from local newspapers which are currently battling with tech platforms like Google, Meta and Apple.

Unlike Google, Meta and co, the BBC's funding is guaranteed by the licence fee, meaning the British public is underwriting the biggest threat local journalism has ever faced.

SIGNED BY

Ian Carter, *liffie Media* editorial director
 Toby Granville, *Newsquest* editorial development director
 Gary Shipton, *National World* editorial director
 Jeremy Spooner, *News Media Association* Independent Publishers Forum chair
 Paul Rowland, *Reach* Regionals editorial director
 Martin Wright, *Middle East News Association* editor in chief

It is splashing your cash on local news websites and making it increasingly difficult for proud, independent news sites to survive in the long term.

How is it doing this? Back in October 2022, the BBC laid out plans to strengthen local online news provision in communities across England.

The scheme includes the creation of 130 additional posts.

More journalism would normally be welcomed, but the BBC's plans put at risk thousands of existing jobs on titles known to their communities for generations.

The BBC says the plans will deliver "a stronger and more distinctive local online news service for 43 different local areas in England - all available on the BBC News website and app." What it fails to adequately resolve is the impact this will undoubtedly have on

the diverse but fragile independent news sector in each community.

It is our reporters who hold local decision-makers to account, campaign on your behalf, research and share essential information, hold up the mirror to local successes, and have no other interest than in telling the truth.

We're also the turn to source for the BBC when it wants to know what's going on.

Most local reporters share their stories and videos with readers through the opaque algorithms of the giant global tech companies like Facebook and Google.

As the BBC carries no advertising and is entirely free to read, its stories tend to be prioritised by the big search engines over our

journalism. At the same time, the BBC uses its vast mono-polistic strength to promote its content.

So, it has a huge anti-competitive advantage. While independent local journalism is regulated by the tough Independent Press Standards Organisation, the BBCs watched over by Ofcom which seems largely indifferent to the harm it is causing.

Editors are convinced that as they juggle the realities of the cost of living crisis, the BBC, immune from the same commercial pressures, is fixated on stealing their readers, their businesses, and the jobs of their journalists.

It either knows what is doing, and doesn't care, or is ignorant to the impact it will have.

What a shameful legacy that would be for Tim Davie, the 17th Director-General of the BBC.

If the BBC wants to fairly compete and support a diverse and trusted local news reporting ecosystem, as it claims to do, it must act now.



34
 local BBC websites will directly compete with publishers

It should focus its efforts on providing a snapshot of life in its 13 English regions, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and abandon its roll out of 34 local websites, which directly compete with publishers who have cared about local news online during the last decade when the Beeb repeatedly showed its intent.

It could do so much more to limit to local publishers, helping them to thrive, rather than trying to close them down.

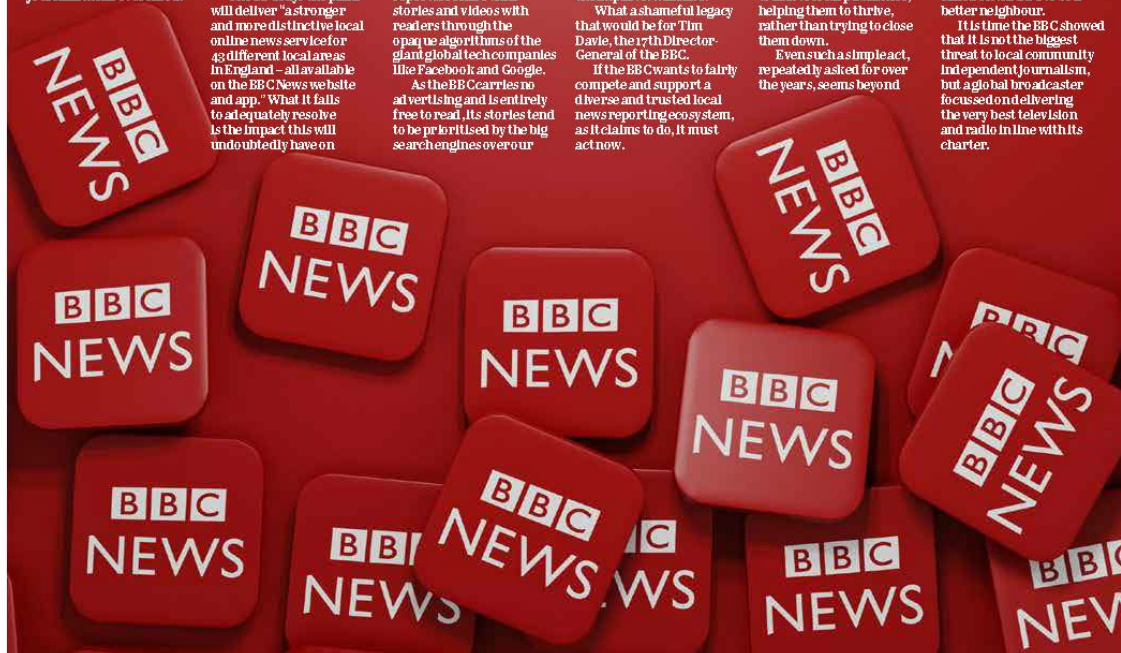
Even such a simple act, repeated by asked for over the years, seems beyond

the BBC. The Government is taking welcome steps to tackle the market abuses by Meta and Google through the Digital Markets Bill, which will create a level playing field between publishers and tech platforms.

Yet the BBC will remain as an equally potent threat, all but unchecked by Ofcom.

Earlier this year we called on the BBC to be a better neighbour.

It is time the BBC showed that it is not the biggest threat to local community independent journalism, but a global broadcaster focused on delivering the very best television and radio in line with its charter.



Appendix 3


■ ■ ■ BBC

[Crooked House Pub: Company director steps down](#)

A director of the company that owned the demolished Crooked House pub has stepped down. Companies House said director Carly Taylor resigned...

3 hours ago



 Express & Star

[Director of company that owned famous wonky pub The Crooked House resigns from post](#)

The sole director of the company which owned The Crooked House pub has resigned from her post.

11 hours ago



 Birmingham Live

[Crooked House latest as company director that owns demolished pub steps down](#)

A director of the company which owns the Crooked House pub site has stepped down. It comes after the historic building was destroyed in a...

3 hours ago



February 2024