

DEMOS

DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS, DISINFORMATION AND CLIMATE POLICY

POLICY BRIEFING FOR EU PARTNERS

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CONTEXT

In recent years, the European Union has taken a leading role in developing policies to combat and mitigate climate change, such as the European Green Deal.¹ However, in the context of low levels of political trust and growing inequality, climate-related policies are increasingly becoming a source of political friction across the continent.² For example, one of the key factors which motivated the 2024 European farmers' protests was proposed increased environmental regulation of the agricultural sector.³ There are also concerns that climate measures will reinforce existing social and economic inequalities, with key decisions made by technocratic bodies far away from the people who will bear the cost of the climate transition.⁴

Populist political parties have seized on these divisions as a means of arguing against not only climate measures, but EU institutions more broadly.⁵ If policymakers cannot build public consent for climate action, public opposition could be a significant barrier to European nations meeting the commitments made in the global Paris Agreement.⁶ NGOs across the EU are therefore stressing the need for a more collaborative approach to achieving a fair climate transition, including addressing the needs of marginalised populations and local communities through a transparent and accessible process.^{7,8}

At Demos and PINF, we have investigated the dynamics of local government and public engagement around a UK climate policy - Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) - and the national public backlash that ensued. Our research highlights the economic and structural drivers of opposition to local climate policies, ranging from the exclusion of marginalised populations from digital consultation processes, to the information vacuums left behind by the decimation of trustworthy local news, and record low levels of trust in politics - a challenge similarly faced in the EU following the recent EU Parliament elections.

Our paper contains transferable, practical insights for our EU counterparts and highlights the deep work needed to strengthen local relationships and democratic infrastructure and enable future climate policies to succeed with and for our communities.

The Low Traffic Neighbourhood (LTN) Climate Policy Backlash

The LTN policy aimed to tackle air pollution and motivate active travel by restricting access to motorised through traffic within specific residential areas. Much like the European farmers protests, we saw significant backlash to the policy.⁹ Street planters were set on fire, local government officials received death threats and neo-Nazi groups joined anti-LTN rallies. Disinformation surrounding the policy also erupted online with a marked rise in conspiracy theories, some of which were sparked

1 European Commission, 2024. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/story-von-der-leyen-commission/european-green-deal_en

2 Laura Rayner, European Policy Centre, 2021. <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Renewing-the-social-contract-to-deliver-a-just-energy-transition~4469ac>.

3 <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/24146466/europe-farmer-protests-eu-climate-environmental-policy-subsidies-livestock>

4 Heather Grabbe & Stefan Lehne, Carnegie Europe, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/12/climate-politics-in-a-fragmented-europe?lang=en¢er=europe>.

5 Clingendael, 2024. <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/A%20Prologue%20for%20Europe.pdf>.

6 United Nations Climate Change, 2015 <https://unfccc.int/most-requested/key-aspects-of-the-paris-agreement>

7 European Climate Foundation, 2024. <https://europeanclimate.org/stories/a-growing-european-movement-for-a-community-driven-energy-transition/>; Climate Action Network Europe. <https://caneurope.org/socially-just-transition/>.

8 European Climate Action Service, 2024. <https://ecas.org/fostering-inclusive-citizen-engagement-in-the-green-transition/>.

9 We Are Possible, Car Free Megacities. <https://interactive.wearepossible.org/carfreestories/> University of Leeds, Traffic Calming: Evidence on Performance https://www.its.leeds.ac.uk/projects/konsult/private/level2/instruments/instrument013/12_013c.htm Bloomberg UK, October 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-10/how-paris-became-a-global-model-for-climate-adaptation>

by the European concept of the '15-minute city' - originally used in Paris to suggest that core human needs should be located within a travel distance of 15 minutes from home, with walking, cycling and public transit incentivised over car travel.^{10,11} In the UK, particularly during the Covid-19 lockdown this concept was transformed and co-opted into the Great Reset conspiracy theory that a global elite were planning world domination by means of mass surveillance and the erosion of civil liberties, including locking citizens into their homes and preventing them from travelling more than 15 minutes away.¹²

Such conspiracy theories online prompted policymakers to hypothesise that the backlash to the Low Traffic Neighbourhood policy had in fact been driven by online disinformation. However, our findings (Section 3) revealed that local divisions were in fact rooted in the confronting nature of the policies themselves and the approach taken to their introduction and implementation. We highlight a failure on the part of local government to understand and effectively engage with their communities reflecting a democratic chasm at the heart of local decision-making. Our research illuminates how the actions of the then national government did little to prevent local backlash and if anything may have made the situation worse. Disinformation actors online cherry-picked local policy failures to build a larger online narrative of government control and corruption, going far beyond residents' concerns and further inflaming divisions.

Based on these findings, we make recommendations (Section 4) for politicians, local, and national governments to improve public reception of climate policy not by focusing on countering disinformation and conspiracy theories, but through rebuilding trust in local democracy through improved public consultation, communication, and engagement with impacted and marginalised communities.

10 Moreno, Carlos, et al., January 2021. <https://www.mdpi.com/2624-6511/4/1/6> The Guardian, February 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/07/paris-mayor-unveils-15-minute-city-plan-in-re-election-campaign>

11 Congress for the New Urbanism, February 2021. <https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2021/02/08/defining-15-minute-city>

12 Birchall and Knight, 2023. <https://www.routledge.com/Conspiracy-Theories-in-the-Time-of-Covid-19/Birchall-Knight/p/book/9781032324999>; See also, Antisemitism Policy Trust, May 2024. <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Conspiracy-Theory-Guide.pdf>

APPROACH

Our methodology was designed to achieve a rich and in-depth understanding of both the offline and online information ecosystems in specific locations in the UK and to identify the types, levels and use of disinformation within it. It included:

- A review of digital media and social media discussion of the LTN policy within the UK between January 2021 to January 2024, reflecting over **570,000 posts**. We sampled 10 of the posts that received the highest online engagement, on a month by month basis, for the entire dataset between 01/01/2021 and 17/01/2024. Using this ranking and selection from each month, we produced a sub-sample of 370 posts - all of which were from the platform X, formerly known as Twitter. These posts totalled 152,905 engagements over the three year period (111,757 reposts and 41,147 replies), as well as over 2.9 million views (2,919,370).
- Three case studies, in **Oxford, Enfield** and **Rochdale**, where we mapped local information ecosystems through:
 - **Desk research**, including, but not limited to: completing a detailed analysis of local government websites, social media presence and press releases as well as reviewing a sample of local news published during October 2023 to identify the prevalence of public interest news that could be deemed local as well as all stories that focused on LTNs specifically.
 - **Primary fieldwork** including: interviews with 24 journalists, local politicians, civil servants and community leaders and face-to-face focus groups with 47 members of the public who reflected attitudes on all sides of the 'LTN debate'.
- After completing our analysis in March and April 2024, our research was complemented by a detailed literature review of other relevant studies and a series of stakeholder engagements to discuss and refine our policy recommendations.
- Our detailed report can be found here - summarised in this briefing paper can be found [here](#).

Disinformation narrative classification

We identified the following narratives as 'disinformation'. For the purposes of this paper, we include conspiracy theory, namely the Great Reset theory, together with 'disinformation'.¹³

TITLE	WHAT THIS NARRATIVE WAS ABOUT
Pro-vigilante action towards LTNs	Expressing approval of or celebrating the vandalism of LTNs, or encouraging others to vandalise LTNs. I.e. 'Well done brave freedom fighters'.
LTNs are totalitarian	Posts which associate LTNs and the policymakers behind them with authoritarian/totalitarian political regimes, ranging from Nazi Germany to the Chinese Communist Party. i.e. 'LTNs are fascist tactics of state control'.

¹³ More broadly, we recognise conspiracy theory as a distinct phenomenon from disinformation. See our paper, Conspiracy Loops, Demos, 2024 for further detail.

Great Reset	Posts which feature one or more strands of the 'Great Reset' conspiracy theory, including 15-minute cities, the World Economic Forum, globalists/global elites, central bank digital currencies/digital identity and vaccine passports. ¹⁴
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Please see [the detailed report](#) for detail on the classification of all online narratives with examples (p28) and the full background on how we have chosen to define disinformation in this study (p50).

¹⁴ See Antisemitism Policy Trust et al, May 2024 for a full breakdown of how this category combines a variety of conspiracy theories which interconnect, including 'the Great Reset', 'Climate Lockdown', and 'the 15-Minute City'. <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Conspiracy-Theory-Guide.pdf>

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, this study challenged the assumptions that local rows over LTNs have been fuelled by wild conspiracy theories. Instead, it points to a failure of local governments to properly understand and engage their communities; to national politicians stoking divisions for political gain; and to an absence of high quality local journalism. Here, we find a democratic chasm at a local level between local governments and communities in which disinformation has flourished.

There is limited evidence that disinformation drove division over the policy

The impetus for our study was to explore if disinformation had exacerbated the division surrounding the LTN policy in local communities across the UK. However, while online anti-LTN policy posts clearly rose in tandem with disinformation in 2023 - after two years of being relatively balanced - we found limited evidence to suggest that this opposition was driven by disinformation.

Levels of LTN-related 'disinformation' online with significant engagement did increase markedly between 2022 and 2023. The proportion that we classified as disinformation (including conspiracy theories) rose from 5% in 2022 to 28% in 2023.¹⁵ Examples of disinformation, such as misleading statements that undermined trust in democratic institutions, included local governments being accused of being 'authoritarian' in their implementation of LTN schemes, comparing them to 'Nazi Germany' or 'Communist China'. Other examples included celebration of criminal behaviour, such as vandalising road barriers, calling vandals 'freedom fighters' or conspiratorial accusations that communities were the victim of a 'Great Reset' with the intention of locking residents in their homes or restricting their movement beyond a 15-minute radius.

The legitimate and wide-ranging grievances surrounding the policy (discussed below) provided rich material for online campaigners. Those campaigning against the policy online, such as the Together Declaration, clearly amplified local case studies to support a national overarching narrative of conspiracy in relation to LTNs. However, the engagement of national politicians in 2023 on specific sides of the LTN debate – including individual politicians' attacks on local governments, accusations of LTNs being 'anti-motorist', and references to the 15-minute city conspiracy - may also have contributed to engagement with disinformation narratives.¹⁶

Anti-LTN rhetoric hardened online over the period of their rapid introduction

The division surrounding the LTN policy hardened in online spaces. Between 2021 and 2022 as a greater number of LTNs were being introduced across the UK, engagement with LTN posts online was initially stable and relatively balanced between the pro and anti-LTN position. Yet, opposition to the policy strengthened online over time. In 2023, the proportion of posts with high engagement that were anti-LTN policy rose from 48% to 79%.

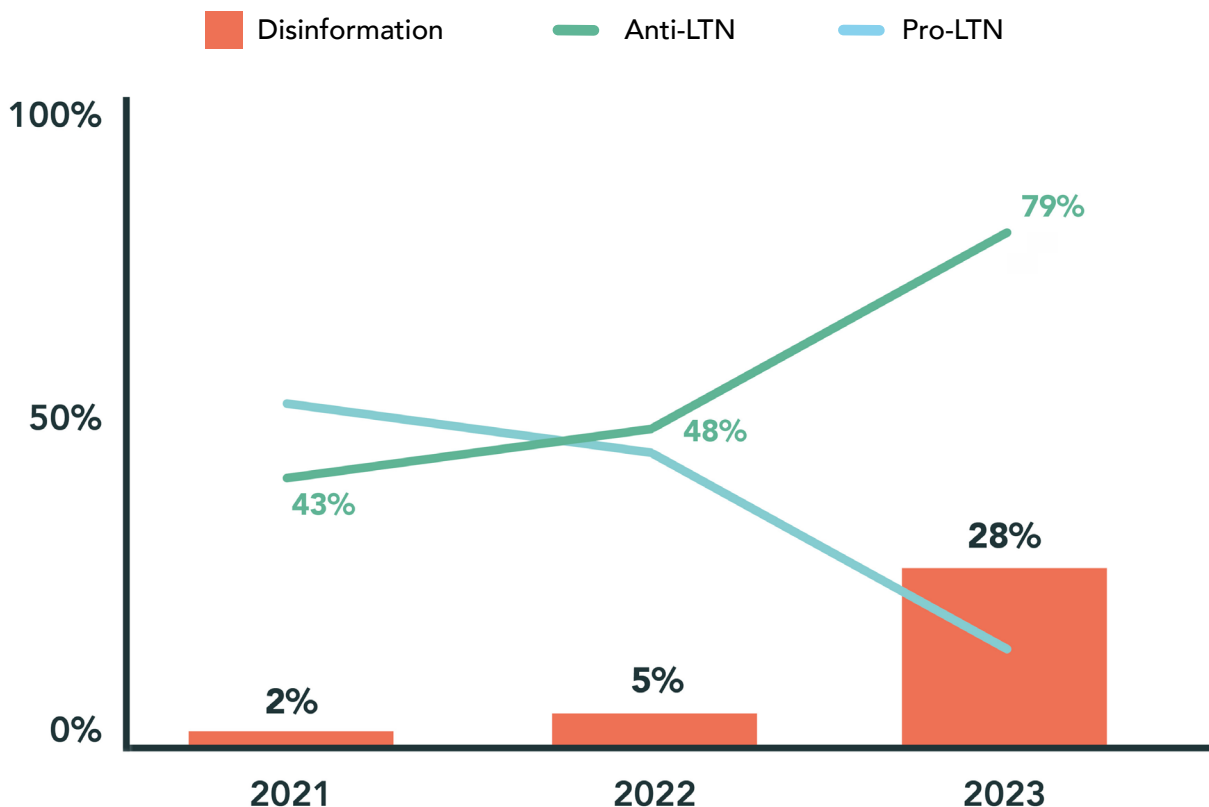
The following chart highlights how the balance of online narratives between pro and anti-LTNs shifted from being relatively even between pro and anti-LTN in proportion in 2021 and 2022, to much more anti-LTN in 2023. This rise also correlates with a rise in disinformation in 2023 discussed above.

¹⁵ See Chapter 5 in the detailed findings report for how we define this term in relation to narratives surrounding LTNs.

¹⁶ Andrew Bridgen on Twitter, May 2023. <https://twitter.com/ABridgen/status/1682751753979146240>; Andrew Bridgen on Twitter, July 2023. <https://twitter.com/ABridgen/status/1686117795719700480>; The Sun, September 2023. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/motors/24208749/rishi-sunak-car-drivers-ltn-speed-scheme/>; Mark Harper, October 2023. <https://www.conservatives.com/news/2023/cpc23-address-from-mark-harper>

CHART 1

PROPORTION OF 'ENGAGED WITH POSTS' BY NARRATIVE AND DISINFORMATION



Our analysis of the online debate captures the range of experiences and attitudes towards the policy and its implementation that hardened over time- in tandem with the rise in disinformation:

EVIDENCE: The strong dividing lines in attitudes to the policy online focused on the poor quality of information provided by local governments and frustrating democratic processes available to citizens. Those who opposed the policy would question the evidence of the impact of LTNs and highlighted the variety of sources available to prove multiple viewpoints. Some argued that traffic had decreased because of the LTNs whereas others insisted the traffic had simply been displaced to boundary roads.

TRADE-OFFS: Citizens also fundamentally disagreed on the value of the trade-offs associated with the policy, with pro-LTN respondents praising the impact on air quality and anti-LTN users stressing their perception of a disproportionate impact on the elderly, disabled and marginalised populations.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS: Anti-LTN online commentators argued that the process of decision-making in communities had been "undemocratic" and "deceptive". Some, who oppose LTNs, argued that "the majority" are anti-LTN and those who support the policy argued that there's a "silent majority" who feel the same.

ABUSE: Those who supported and opposed the policy faced a range of attacks online. Those who opposed were very often labelled as "conspiracy theorists" and "SUV drivers", whereas those who supported the policy were labelled as "anti-motorist" and "woke". Local politicians who chose to engage online received significant levels of personal abuse from both sides of the debate.

Weaknesses in information ecosystems allowed disinformation to rise

Where disinformation had previously been blamed for vicious local rows over LTNs, this research turns that assumption on its head. Weaknesses at every level of our information ecosystems enabled disinformation to rise and for campaigners to then weaponize division.

Local governments were not trusted

Residents across our three case studies, to varying degrees, suggested it was 'the Council' i.e. local government who was the driver of misinformation within local communities - underlining the severe damage done to relationships at a local level, fuelled at least in part by cuts to local budgets and the speed with which local governments were encouraged by national government to implement the policies.¹⁷ The issues highlighted by respondents included:

- The fast introduction of the trial schemes, particularly during the pandemic, and lack of comprehensive communication and consultation with communities. Many respondents highlighted that they found out about the policy for the first time by being caught in traffic or receiving a penalty fine. This created shock and frustration for some.
- Local government was perceived as relying on poor evidence and mischaracterizing the level of positive impact schemes were having - highlighting a lack of recognition of the experiences of those who felt negatively affected by the schemes. This led to accusations that the local government was being deliberately deceptive.
- The lack of proactive and offline consultation and the approach to presenting the results of such engagements in some communities caused some residents to accuse their local government of manipulation and "gaslighting".
- A lack of digital access and civic digital literacy excluded already marginalised communities from engaging in web-only communication and consultation methods made available by local government.
- The lack of pre-existing relationships between some communities and their local governments, the historical lack of funding and the speed with which the policy was implemented, was felt to have undermined local governments' ability to effectively communicate and consult.

We found that disinformation narratives online linked to more mainstream critiques of local governments' approaches to policy implementation and consultation demonstrating an easy slide from constructive political debate to conspiracy online.

National politicians fuelled the rows

Both the national government and individual MPs destabilised the information environment at the national level. Having required local governments to act swiftly to make changes to their road network during lockdown in 2020, the national government's U-turn and attacks of the LTN policy in 2023 fractured and undermined trust in local government as a policy and information actor.¹⁸

The engagement of national politicians in the LTN debate in 2023, including specifically making attacks on local governments as 'anti-motorist' and with validation of conspiratorial references to 15-minute cities by Ministers, correlated with a rise in anti-LTN engagement online in the same year.¹⁹

¹⁷ Traffic Management Act 2004: network management in response to Covid-19, May 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Andrew Bridgen on Twitter, May 2023. <https://twitter.com/ABridgen/status/1682751753979146240>; Andrew Bridgen on Twitter, July 2023. <https://twitter.com/ABridgen/status/1686117795719700480>; The Sun, September 2023. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/motors/24208749/rishi-sunak-car-drivers-ltn-speed-scheme/>; Mark Harper, October 2023. <https://www.conservatives.com/news/2023/cpc23-address-from-mark-harper>

A lack of local news meant there were limited sources of trusted information

The deterioration of news ecosystems at a local level as well as increases in harassment of journalists reduced the capacity for local accountability and factual information available at a local level with residents turning to Facebook and, in some locations, Next Door groups for information.

- The symptoms of a widely recognised collapse in local journalism, in terms of both breadth and depth of local outlets, was evident in all three of the local news ecosystem case studies.²⁰ Residents noted a hollowing out of established titles, resulting in a drop in the volume and quality of articles focusing on local issues, including LTNs, and reduced coverage of local government activities.
- Journalists commented on their growing reluctance to cover the LTN story because of harassment and abuse and the difficulty finding sources who were supportive of the policy to contribute their view.
- The loss of diverse local news coverage, was somewhat filled by activists and local campaigners, but without the balance and rigour of high-quality journalism and only by those actors with significant political capital and private funding, and national campaigners, some of which played an active role in disseminating disinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Some residents decried a loss of space to effectively deliberate with fellow citizens regarding crucial political issues that affect their lives, describing Facebook as a “cess-pit”.

²⁰ Press Gazette, 2024. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/regional-newspapers/colossal-decline-of-uk-regional-media-since-2007-revealed/>
Ibid, 2022. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/uk-local-newspaper-closures-2022/>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings demonstrate the significant barriers facing the implementation of climate policies that require compromise within our communities. The scale of the challenge, if left unaddressed, will continue to deadlock meaningful progress at a local level - with local governments at an impasse with their communities and worsening levels of disengagement from public participation in democratic life.

The following recommendations amount to significant reform to rebuild trust and participation in local democracy. They target every layer of the ecosystem, from national government to local government and journalism.²¹

While these policy recommendations have been developed for and tailored to UK political structures and media ecosystems, the general mechanisms they operationalize are transferable to the EU context.

FOR EU & NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Recommendation 1: Activate a local democracy health monitor

A key lever in accountability infrastructure is to gather more consistent and comprehensive data to inform our understanding of the relative vulnerabilities of local democracy across the country (or EU region). Given that, at the moment, there are very limited data sources that enable us to conduct such assessments, at least within the UK we recommend that the Office for Local Government (Oflog)—the newly created unit within the the UK government’s Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government — take responsibility for defining, curating and transparently sharing this data.

Other departments relevant to EU member states that could play a similar role to the UK’s Oflog in monitoring the health of local democracies include, for example, the European Committee of the Regions or at a country level, for example, the German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community.

In the UK, Oflog has already begun collating local government data across a number of other metrics. Therefore the extension into collating data for local democracy reflects an incremental step. The indicators for the health of local democracy are illustrative and demonstrate a minimum baseline for what could be curated. We suggest that this data is shared through self-reporting by local governments in most instances.

²¹ Additional recommendations can be found in our extended report [here](#).

This role for Oflog (or parallel departments within EU member state governments) could include:

1. Curating local democracy data for each local authority via its Data Explorer tool in collaboration with local governments
2. Reporting on whether the local authority has a published, transparent local democracy strategy available for its citizens;
3. Reporting on how much each local government is investing in local democracy, including local elections, engagement and consultation activities with the local community, per year;
4. Reporting on the level of participation in each local authority's democratic processes including average number of consultations per year, level of participation in consultations, number of consultation methods used, whether offline consultation methods are enabled, voter turnout at local elections, number of candidates at local elections and the diversity of candidates at local elections.

Supplementary recommendations:

5. Local governments should be given consistent guidance on how to include their level of investment in local democracy via their financial budget reporting. For example, in the UK the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA - an international standard setting body) could update their Service Reporting Code of Practice (SeRCOP) to provide this guidance.
6. Annual censuses of local politicians should be analysed to identify the extent to which the local government reflects the local population in their constituency. Gaps in representation and diversity should be highlighted. In the UK, this could be a role for the Local Government Association (LGA).

Recommendation 2: Local News Funds to ensure that local news serves local communities

Central governments should provide funding packages to stimulate a new era of vibrant local news. For example, in the UK it has been recommended by the Cairncross Review, the Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee, Nesta, and the News for All campaign, that the UK government should provide funding to stimulate the local news market starting at £100 million per year.²² This funding should not create perverse incentives for poor-quality journalism or clickbait but should be geared towards the needs and interests of local communities.

The funding package should have the following characteristics:²³

1. Funding should be administered through **Local News Funds**, based at local or regional levels, and modelled on the network of community foundations.²⁴ These Local News Funds could administer both public funding and philanthropic grants and donations. Local News Funds would act as a firewall between funders and news providers, to protect journalists' independence whilst ensuring stability of funding;

²² House of Commons, 2023. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmcomeds/153/summary.html>; Nesta. https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Nesta_Future_News_Pilot_Fund_End_Of_Prog.pdf; Public Interest News Foundation. <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/news-for-all>

²³ Whilst this is not the full £100 million per year that has been recommended, £50 million could still be transformative for 200 local governments where news ecosystems are at their worst. The assumptions based on this number are detailed fully in: Grayson, 2023. https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/_files/ugd/cde0e9_f2d9ecdbebac4f82826995d14b9dc017.pdf

²⁴ UK Community Foundations. <https://www.ukcommunityfoundations.org/>

2. Resources for Local News Funds could be drawn from **dormant assets**, which, in the UK, the government is able to direct towards good causes as set out in the Dormant Assets Act, 2022.²⁵ If necessary, the government should amend the legislation to ensure that local journalism is recognised as an appropriate cause for support. Other potential funding sources might include a hypothecated tax on big tech platforms that create economic value by piggy-backing on the work of news providers or a reformed funding settlement for public service media, whereby - for example - the BBC Licence Fee in the UK might be distributed across the news ecosystem, with the BBC playing an anchor role alongside other independent but subsidised local news outlets;
3. The allocation of funding should be informed by **Local News Plans** which could be drawn up by a task and finish group of a wide range of local stakeholders from across the community and assembled by the local government. Like Neighbourhood Plans, these plans should create a framework for the development of local media, identifying challenges and opportunities and showing the community's priorities for local news;
4. The allocation of funding should also be informed by a detailed **Local News Map**, to be updated regularly, to ensure that funding is used to address areas of low local news provision, and to monitor the change in local news provision over time as one way of monitoring the impact of funding.

Alongside funding for news providers, governments, via Local News Funds, should also:

1. Invest in the infrastructure for local journalism, including ongoing training, mentoring and leadership development for journalists from the widest possible range of backgrounds, to ensure that the local news sector reflects the diversity of the nation, and that journalists have the skills they need to meet the changing demands of audiences;²⁶
2. Include innovation funding for shared tools or technologies that will enhance revenue generation, such as shared advertising exchanges or platforms;
3. Support **new entrants** into the market, including grants for programmes like the New Media Incubator, to allow news entrepreneurs to understand the character of a particular local area before launching a new outlet;²⁷
4. Ensure a section of these funds are used to transfer legacy local newspapers into **community ownership**.²⁸ National and local governments should legislate if necessary to ensure that legacy local newspapers are treated as 'community assets' for this purpose, giving first refusal to community groups to take over outlets that are otherwise at risk of closure;
5. Prioritise support for co-creational forms of local news, where members of the local community are actively involved in the production of journalism.²⁹

The framework of Local News Funds should be regulated, in the UK, by **Ofcom**, whose media plurality duties should be enhanced to give them a more proactive role, advising local news funds on how to **increase** plurality, as well as reacting to proposed takeovers and mergers that might **reduce** plurality.³⁰

25 Dormant Assets Act, 2022. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/5/contents/enacted>

26 This training is distinct from formal accredited courses offered by the likes of NCTJ, BJTC or PTC and instead reflects a more informal mentoring model that could be facilitated by grants to bodies within the independent news sector.

27 New Media Incubator. <https://ipi.media/innovation/new-media-incubator/>; The Local News Incubator. <https://www.theajp.org/incubator/>

28 ITV, 2017. <https://www.itv.com/news/border/2017-05-03/langholm-community-group-takes-over-local-newspaper>

29 PINF, 2023. <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/post/co-creational-media-committing-to-truth-and-public-participation>;

30 Ofcom, 2021. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/228124/statement-future-of-media-plurality.pdf

Similar relevant government departments within the EU member states include, for example, the Joint Management Office of the Media Authorities in Germany or the General Directorate of Media and Culture Industry in France.

6. Alongside the direct subsidies provided through the Local News Funds, governments should also create and enhance tax incentives in support of local news.³¹ These incentives should encourage advertisers, investors, charitable donors and subscribers to support truly local news. They should also encourage the owners of local news outlets to employ journalists, rather than leaching profits in dividends, for example through an employment tax credit for local journalists.

There are examples from elsewhere in Europe and North America of readers receiving tax incentives to support news. For instance, a one-off incentive was offered to news subscribers in France during the Covid-19 pandemic and Canada has also experimented with a similar scheme.³²

FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Recommendation 3: A new 'Civic Accord' to restore trust in local democracy in our local communities

Our findings demonstrate not just that local communities in the UK are struggling to listen and learn from one another to achieve compromise, but that local governments lack the historical investment and tools to facilitate such engagement. The existing toolbox of 'engagement' and 'consultation' by local government in the UK is not working and requires a more holistic reform package.

The new Civic Accord represents an opportunity to reset and establish new principles for a trusted relationship between local government and their communities. It establishes what citizens can expect from their local government to enable communities to effectively participate in their local democracy and provides transparency for how those contributions will be facilitated, recognised and taken into account.

To achieve this, we recommend that the Civic Accord includes the following:

1. The creation of a local government's 'local democracy' strategy and set of principles that are published and transparent to demonstrate an ongoing investment in local community engagement. The strategy and principles will clarify:
 - a. The procedures the local government follows when designing and implementing a policy in terms of its engagement with local politicians throughout the process;
 - b. How and when the local government chooses to run different forms of engagement, consultation, and participation exercises with citizens i.e. what types of policy and threshold of change for communities require what method;
 - c. The regulatory process within which the local government will commit to undertaking its community mapping exercise, particularly identifying key community leaders;
 - d. The ways in which the local government intends to maintain its relationships with community leaders;

31 PINF. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107669/pdf/>

32 News Media UK, 2020. <https://newsmediauk.org/blog/2020/07/02/france-gives-tax-credits-to-news-subscribers/>; Nieman Lab, April 2022. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/04/canada-offered-a-tax-credit-to-encourage-digital-news-subscriptions-heres-how-its-going/>

- e. The ways in which the local government uses online social media groups, either when it creates new ones or when local politicians or civil servants might observe or participate in local groups to share information;
 - f. The support that will be offered to enable community members to take part in engagement, consultation and participation exercises, particularly those who lack digital access or lower political literacy.
2. A dedicated centralised staff member with named responsibility for delivering the local democracy strategy day-to-day. This staff member would be the central figure for collating community mapping information, sharing accountability data with the Office for Local Government (Oflog), the national government unit with responsibility for improving the performance of local government, and ensuring the local government follows its commitments to the accord.
 3. The initiation of a regular community mapping 'census' exercise every three years to identify key community groups and community leaders as well as key community spaces to better enable local governments to engage community members in spaces they already use and to strengthen understanding of community needs.
 4. A new set of commitments that are triggered when a policy meets a specific 'must know' threshold.³³ Where a policy has the potential to require significant changes to citizens' lives and compromises across the community, such as was the case with Low Traffic Neighbourhood measures, a commitment to:
 - a. Utilise participatory methods where possible in order to identify possible compromises or approaches that can minimise difficulties or any disproportionate negative impacts for any specific community;
 - b. Proactively ensure the inclusion of those who may be the most opposed and/or negatively affected by the policy together with those who support the policy so that all parties can learn more about the others' needs;
 - c. Provide balanced information, including the possible risks and trade-offs needed, for citizens ahead of any consultation or participation exercise;
 - d. A commitment to a minimum of 12 weeks between the initial communication of a new policy and a consultation closing to ensure there is sufficient time for community groups to become aware of the consultation, circulate information to their community members, and to give feedback.
 5. A mandate to always provide face-to-face methods of engagement, consultation and/or participation to ensure the inclusion of those who are digitally excluded and to rebuild human relationships where trust may already be low.
 6. Voluntary adoption of the National Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Statistics which encourages the consistent publication of any evidence for any public claims made to support the implementation of policies, adhering to consistent and high levels of quality.³⁴
 7. A commitment to a 'Civic Rebate' when a local government participation exercise requires a significant investment of time from members of the community.³⁵ This rebate would provide incentives to participate and would include reinvestment back into the community, such as providing vouchers for local shops and services.

33 The 'must know' threshold is a policy where citizens need to know about it before it directly impacts their lives in another way e.g. the installation of a planter in a route they normally take every day.

34 National Statistics Authority, 2024. <https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>

35 A nod to the Periclean jurors' payment system.

FOR NATIONAL POLITICIANS

Recommendation 4: An anti-disinformation standard in public life

The engagement of national politicians on specific sides of the LTN debate in 2023, including individual references to the 15-minute city conspiracy theory, was likely to have contributed to engagement with disinformation narratives online. This behaviour demonstrates how some politicians feel able to ignore standards of good conduct in political life, such as the UK government's Nolan Principle 'to be truthful' in public office.³⁶

The UK government's Committee for Standards in Public Life advises the Prime Minister of ethical standards across public life. It conducts broad inquiries, collects evidence to assess institutions, policies and practices and makes recommendations to the Prime Minister where improvements are needed. A comparable body for the EU might be the new inter-institutional ethics body currently in development.³⁷

In the UK, the Committee for Standards in Public Life should incorporate into its reviews the way in which politicians act in relation to online narratives that weaken relationships with democratic institutions and the rule of law. The Committee should also consider approaches to holding politicians to account if they do amplify such narratives online, creating a greater incentive for all politicians to thoroughly investigate the truth of certain accusations that undermine democratic institutions and processes before promoting them at scale.

³⁶ Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2>

³⁷ European Parliament, 2024. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240419IPR20581/parliament-signs-up-for-new-eu-body-for-ethical-standards>

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Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think tank. We put people at the heart of policy-making to create bold ideas and a more collaborative democracy. CASM, Demos's digital policy hub, aims for trustworthy technology, where technological progress aligns with the needs and values of citizens. This project is part of our 'Strengthening Information Environments' programme, which looks at how we can build a more inclusive, truth-producing and resilient information environment for citizens in support of their democratic and digital rights.

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If you have any questions, feedback on our report, or if you are interested in collaborating with us, please get in touch via: hannah.perry@demos.co.uk.

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