

DEMOS

DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS, DISINFORMATION AND LOW TRAFFIC NEIGHBOURHOODS

POLICY BRIEFING

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CONTEXT

In the last 18-months, disinformation surrounding Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) erupted online with a marked rise in conspiracy theories. The deterioration in the quality of debate within local communities played out offline too. In Rochdale, planters were set alight, while councillors in Enfield received death threats and neo-Nazi groups in Oxford joined rallies and called residents 'guinea pigs'.

It was against this backdrop that, in late 2023, Demos and the Public Interest News Foundation explored what had driven such community division. Over a 6-month research period, we considered:

- How do disinformation campaigns weaponise and amplify existing social divisions in local communities?
- What is the role of local information ecosystems in challenging this?

Instead of disinformation and conspiracy theories as the main drivers, our findings reveal that local divisions were 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 councils to understand and effectively engage with their communities reflecting a democratic chasm at the heart of local decision-making. It illuminates how the actions of the then government did little to prevent these outcomes and if anything may have made the situation worse. Any focus exclusively on online disinformation campaigners ignores the fertile ground on which they thrive.¹

At the start of a new government with the challenge of implementing radical planning reforms and rebuilding trust in politics, our paper highlights the deep work needed across the country to restore local relationships and enable future policies to succeed with and for our communities.

¹ For more on what can trigger conspiracy theories, see Demos's paper: [Conspiracy Loops: From distrust to conspiracy to culture wars](#).

APPROACH

The methodology was designed to achieve a rich and in-depth understanding of both the offline and online information ecosystems in specific locations 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 council 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.

KEY FINDINGS

Our findings highlight the impact of both long-term under-investment and short-term missteps in communication and community engagement, providing a toxic environment when seeking to implement complex and difficult reforms.

There is limited evidence that disinformation is driving division over LTNs

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 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 2023.² Examples of disinformation, such as misleading statements that undermined trust in democratic institutions, included councils 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 councils, accusations of LTNs being ‘anti-motorist’, and references to the 15-minute city conspiracy—may also have contributed to engagement with disinformation narratives.³

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

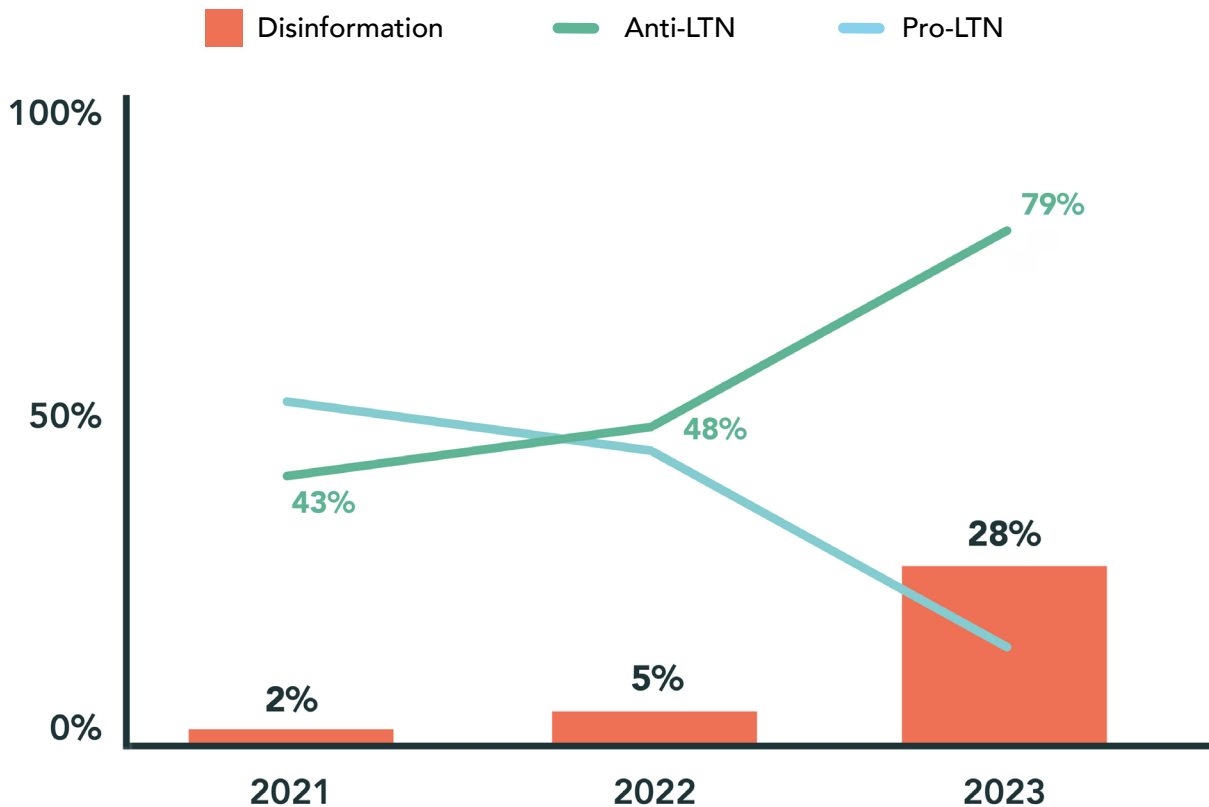
The division surrounding the LTN policy hardened in online spaces. Between 2021 and 2022, as a greater number of LTNs were being introduced across the country, engagement with LTN posts online was initially stable and relatively balanced between the pro and anti-LTN position. Yet, opposition to the policy strengthened online over time. In 2023, the proportion of posts with high engagement that were anti-LTN 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 2021 and 2022, to much more anti-LTN in 2023. This rise also correlates with a rise in disinformation in 2023 discussed above.

² See Chapter 5 in the [detailed findings report](#) for how we define this term in relation to narratives surrounding LTNs.

³ 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 the Council 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 and 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 while those who support the policy argued that there’s a “silent majority” who support LTNs.

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”. Councillors who chose to engage online received significant levels of personal abuse from both sides of the debate.

Weaknesses in information ecosystems allow disinformation to rise

Where disinformation has 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 authorities were not trusted

Residents across our three case studies, to varying degrees, suggested it was ‘the Council’ 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 councils’ budgets and the speed with which councils were encouraged by national government to implement the policies.⁴ 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.
- ‘The Council’ was perceived as relying on poor evidence and mischaracterising 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—leading to accusations of 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 council 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 the council.
- The lack of pre-existing relationships between some communities and their councils, the historical lack of funding and the speed with which the policy was implemented were felt to have undermined local authorities’ ability to effectively communicate and consult.

We found that disinformation narratives online linked to more mainstream critiques of the council’s approach 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 councils 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.⁵

The engagement of national politicians in the LTN debate in 2023, including specifically making attacks on councils 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.⁶

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.

⁴ Traffic Management Act 2004: network management in response to Covid-19, May 2020.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ 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>

- 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.⁷ 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 council activities.
- Journalists commented on their growing reluctance to cover LTN stories because of harassment and abuse, as well as the difficulty in 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”.

Findings summary

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 councils 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 councils and communities in which disinformation has flourished.

⁷ 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 a government seeking to lead and implement 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 councils 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:⁸

NATIONAL POLITICIANS

Recommendation 1: 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, is likely to have contributed to engagement with disinformation narratives online. This behaviour demonstrates how some politicians feel able to ignore the Nolan Principle 'to be truthful' in public office.⁹

The Committee for Standards in Public Life and the Labour Party's new independent Ethics and Integrity Commission should incorporate into their reviews the way in which politicians act in relation to online narratives that weaken relationships with democratic institutions and the rule of law. The Commission 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.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Recommendation 2: A new 'Civic Accord' to restore trust in local democracy in our local communities.

Our findings demonstrate not just that our local communities 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. Our existing toolbox of 'engagement' and 'consultation' is not working and requires a more holistic reform package.

⁸ Additional recommendations can be found in our extended report here.

⁹ 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>

At this pivotal moment of a new government, 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 Council 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 council '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 council follows when designing and implementing a policy in terms of its engagement with councillors throughout the process;
 - b.** How and when the council 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 council will commit to undertaking its community mapping exercise, particularly identifying key community leaders;
 - d.** The ways in which the council intends to maintain its relationships with community leaders;
 - e.** The ways in which the council uses online social media groups, either when it creates new ones or when members of the council 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 Oflog and ensuring the council 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 Council's 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.¹⁰ 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;

¹⁰ 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.

- 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.¹¹
 7. A commitment to a 'Civic Rebate' when a council participation exercise requires a significant investment of time from members of the community.¹² This rebate would provide incentives to participate and would include reinvestment back into the community, such as providing vouchers for local shops and services.

UK GOVERNMENT - OFLOG

Recommendation 3: 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. Given that, at the moment, there are very limited data sources that enable us to conduct such assessments, we recommend that Oflog—the newly created unit within the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government — take responsibility for defining, curating and transparently sharing this data.

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 councils in most instances.

This role for Oflog would include:

1. Curating local democracy data for each local authority via its Data Explorer tool in collaboration with local councils
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 authority 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

¹¹ National Statistics Authority, 2024. <https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>

¹² A nod to the Periclean jurors' payment system.

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. CIPFA should update their Service Reporting Code of Practice (SeRCOP) guidance for local authorities to include a consistent explanation for how councils should include the level of investment in their local democracy via their financial budget reporting.
6. LGA should analyse their annual census of councillors to identify the extent to which the council reflects the local population in their constituency. Gaps in representation and diversity should be highlighted.

UK GOVERNMENT - DCMS

Recommendation 4: Local News Funds to ensure that local news serves local communities

Central government should provide a funding package to stimulate a new era of vibrant local news, starting at £50 million per year. As recommended by the Cairncross Review, the Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee, Nesta, and the News for All campaign, the UK government should provide funding to stimulate the local news market.¹³ 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:¹⁴

1. Funding should be administered through Local News Funds, based at local or regional levels, and modelled on the network of UK Community Foundations.¹⁵ 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;
2. Resources for Local News Funds could be drawn from dormant assets, which the government is able to direct towards good causes as set out in the Dormant Assets Act, 2022.¹⁶ 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 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 Council. 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;

13 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>

14 Whilst this is not the full £100 million per year that has been recommended, £50 million could still be transformative for 200 local authorities 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

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

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

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, the government, 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 UK, and that journalists have the skills they need to meet the changing demands of audiences;¹⁷
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;¹⁸
4. Ensure a section of these funds are used to transfer legacy local newspapers into community ownership.¹⁹ The UK government and devolved 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.²⁰

The framework of Local News Funds should be regulated 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.²¹

6. Alongside the direct subsidies provided through the Local News Funds, the UK government should also create and enhance tax incentives in support of local news.²² 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.²³

17 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.

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

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

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

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

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

23 News Media UK, 2020. <https://newsmediauk.org/blog/2020/07/02/france-gives-tax-credits-to-news-subscribers/>; Nieman Lab, April

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The Public Interest News Foundation is the UK's first charity to support public interest news – ethical and impartial journalism that informs and empowers the public about the things that matter to all of us. We believe that everyone in the UK should benefit from public interest news that speaks to them, for them and with them. Our mission is to ensure the social and financial sustainability of independent news providers in communities across the UK, through research, capacity-building and advocacy

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