

LOCAL NEWS DESERTS IN THE UK

WHAT EFFECT IS THE DECLINE IN PROVISION
OF LOCAL NEWS AND INFORMATION
HAVING ON COMMUNITIES?

Research by the Charitable Journalism Project

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FOREWORD

The collapse of local reporting is a slow-burning crisis in Britain. Properly resourced journalism is the systematic effort to set out the truth of what matters to a community or a society in real time. For often the first time in over two centuries, towns, villages and communities in Britain have no reliable and useful news - either because local newsrooms have been shut down, or because publishers have shrunk their investment in local reporting as the business model for printed news deteriorates.

This report on 'news deserts' by the Charitable Journalism Project looks in-depth at seven of these places and at how people now find out about what happens where they live. Dr. Steven Barclay's report describes in vivid and sometimes shocking detail what goes wrong in a news desert. Citizens are forced to rely on social media, which is both quick and often helpful. But those networks are also mistrusted because they can be unreliable and divisive. Important issues never surface because few, if any, hear about them. Powerful institutions such as local authorities, police forces and hospitals are not fully held to account because they are not consistently covered by reporters.

The income which kept local newspapers afloat in the past will not return: new sources of income are essential. The Charitable Journalism Project was formed to research ways to make it easier for local and community newsrooms to be registered as charities. Achieving charity status is one way – at no cost to the taxpayer – that small newsrooms whose resources are stretched can access more sources of funding and maximise the benefit from donations both large and small. Newsrooms that are charities can also show that they are held to account for the quality and standards of their journalism.

Help for journalism is urgently needed to prevent the further spread of news deserts. Applying to be a charity is currently a complex and expensive process but can be a game-changer for the viability and sustainability of newsrooms. The Charitable Journalism Project is currently raising a fund to provide help from specialists in charity law to local and community news organisations that want to explore being registered as charities. Our research underlines the need for this kind of practical support and we look forward to continuing to share what we learn through this work.

If you want to know more about the Charitable Journalism Project, visit cjproject.org or contact Elizabeth Mizon on ekmizon@gmail.com.

George Brock
Chair, Charitable Journalism Project
1 June 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report investigates the conditions for local news in seven communities in the UK. Based on focus groups and interviews in these communities, its main findings are that:

- Social media are now dominant in local news and information systems, used for a range of local information and communication functions as well as to access local news websites
- Social media use and interactions are seen as causes of local social division and sources of misinformation
- Local newspapers are no longer perceived as ‘community glue’, holding community identity and collective emotion. Some respondents even characterised local news websites as provocative ‘clickbait’, mostly devoid of nuanced or positive reporting
- Local government is considered to be poorly scrutinised by journalists (though in some communities coverage still exceeded that of other institutions)
- National institutions and local public services – including the NHS, police, education and the environment – are thought to be both under-reported and misrepresented
- Local news providers are seen as repeating institutional lines by publishing press releases uncritically instead of reporting independently
- There is a significant lack of knowledge about local politics and current affairs (in two communities there was virtually no awareness of imminent local government reorganisation). This unfamiliarity appears to be driving distrust
- Respondents reported struggling to access basic local information
- Poor new-media literacy skills and lack of access to digital media due to poverty prevent many from accessing local news and information online
- Respondents want a trusted, locally based, professional and accessible source of local news, that reports and investigates local issues and institutions, and publishes positive stories that help bind the community together.

INTRODUCTION

Aims of the Study

This is an investigation into the effects of the decline of local news provision in the UK. There are gaps in our knowledge about 'news deserts' – areas where provision of local news has declined or disappeared – most notably a lack of empirical data on what impact this has on local communities.¹ For this reason we sought to better understand how people in seven communities around the UK find – or fail to find – local news and information. These seven communities were: Lewisham in London; Trowbridge, Wiltshire; Whitby, North Yorkshire; Tiverton and Cullompton in Devon; Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire; Corby, North Northamptonshire; and Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria. Our rationale for selection and detailed profiles of each area can be found in Appendix 1.

In each of these communities we conducted interviews and organised focus groups to discover how people access information about community life, the nature of that information, and the impact this has on democratic participation.

This project aims:

- To investigate how local people find local news and information in the absence of professional journalism;
- To understand the impact of the lack of local news and information in the areas identified;
- To assess the effects on democratic participation.

Context and Background

The current local news landscape of the UK is unrecognisable compared to 25 years ago. The rise of the internet and social media has led to a profound change in the way local news and information is produced and consumed. Average daily print circulation for the local and regional press in 2019 was around 31%, and average weekly circulation around 39%, of 2007 figures – declines which accelerated after the pandemic of 2020.² The loss of revenue from print sales and the migration of advertising online has brought about successive shocks to the business model of local news. It has led to multiple title closures, redundancies, the 'hollowing out' of news rooms, office closures and centralisation. There were around 17,000 frontline journalists in 2018, compared to 23,000 in 2007.³ At the same time, independently owned small newspaper publishers have been replaced by large consolidated operations, so that as of 2016, around 80% of local titles were owned by just five publishers.⁴

Most local journalism is no longer written by separate editorial teams associated with a specific title. Editorial staff have been amalgamated in central locations with the same or similar content distributed to multiple sites. Centralising strategies have been most prominent in the largest companies, Reach and Newsquest, who now operate 'digital first' strategies across their titles. For example, Reach's *Devon Live* amalgamates a string of titles in the area with sections for Tiverton, Crediton and Cullompton, the towns formerly covered by separate editions of the *Mid Devon Gazette*. The *Gazette* maintains a

tiny dedicated print staff, while the website compiles county-wide (and national) news stories from a base in Exeter.⁵ Recent research suggests that the effects of the decline in professional newsgathering and the centralisation of titles are beginning to emerge. It has been found, for example, that “local newspaper circulation has a positive and significant effect on local election turnout.”⁶

While print has declined, local attention has been captured by social media and the internet. Local news outlets now rely heavily on Google and Facebook to distribute their work, and have found that basic information they used to provide is more easily accessed elsewhere online. Information such as classified advertising, traffic news, cinema listings, or fundraising appeals have migrated to social media and other online spaces. There is also evidence to suggest that ‘hard news’, about politics, crime, and health, is now also being accessed and shared through social media.

Yet, as we discovered, each of the communities studied had a complex local online media environment which had developed recently and rapidly, and which was – for the most part – still little studied and poorly understood.

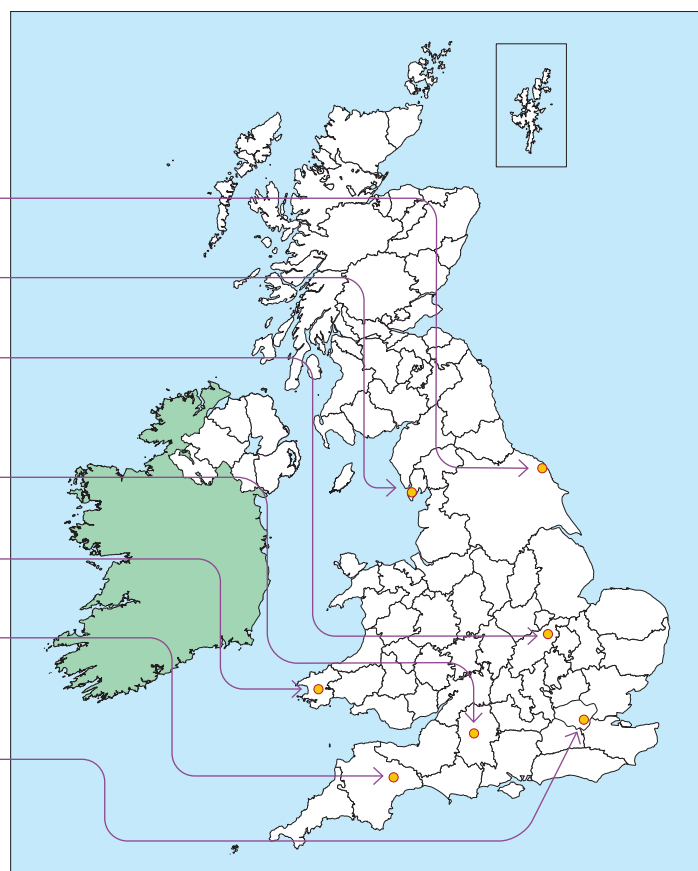
Research Overview

Following the introduction is an overview of where the research was conducted and with whom, followed by the six main findings and a conclusion.

At the end of the report there are two appendices which explain our methodology in detail and provide profiles of the seven communities studied.

Fig 1: Map of UK showing location of the communities examined in the report

- Whitby:** 13 Key Informant interviews,
3 focus groups March–April 2022
- Barrow-in-Furness:** 8 key informant
interviews March–May 2022
- Corby:** 13 Key informant interviews
January–April 2022
- Trowbridge:** 12 Key informant interviews,
2 focus groups
December 2021–April 2022
- Haverfordwest:** 8 key informant interviews
March–May 2022
- Tiverton and Cullompton:** 8 key informant
interviews March–May 2022
- Lewisham:** 10 key informant interviews,
3 focus groups December 2021 –
February 2022
- Total number of interviews: 72**
- Total number of focus groups: 8**



MAIN FINDINGS

1. Social Media are now the dominant channels of local news and information

- Social media are widely used for basic information about areas
- Social media are viewed by local people and organisations as the best method of communicating with, and organising in, their communities
- Social media are the first point of access to local news websites – but are not seen as providers of ‘hard news’

Respondents were aware of, or relied on, a small number of social media services for local news and information. By far the most important of these is Facebook.

“Facebook has taken over. The *Gazette* office is shut now. So it’s Facebook. It’s ok for maybe our generation. But the elderly like my nan in her 70s – they don’t have Facebook. To see what’s going on they have to ask us young ones. Even reporting a death. It is all social media. Everything is about social media these days.” (Focus group, Whitby)

“If there’s something going on, the first place I look is the (Facebook) *I love SE4* group...⁷ a lot of it’s trash to be honest, but a lot of it’s very useful. A couple of weeks ago there was these fireworks going on for 30 or 40 minutes... I was just kind of wondering what was going on and everyone had the answers.” (Focus group, Lewisham)

In each community studied, there was a range of applicable local Facebook pages and groups. Most local institutions, including local government, local police, and local businesses, operate a page. For smaller organisations this may be instead of a website. Only the operator of the page is able to post there, though its ‘followers’ may comment on posts. Groups can be posted on by any member of that group, though the content is sometimes private to group members. For a Facebook user, following a page or group means that they will see content from it in their ‘feed’. The most popular groups amongst those questioned were dedicated to buying and selling. In each of these communities there were also several groups concerned broadly with local news and information, though each with different purposes and admin policies. In Trowbridge, Wiltshire, one group was widely mentioned: *Spotted in Trowbridge*.⁸ It had around 31,000 ‘followers’ (representing a significant proportion of all Trowbridge residents).

“I seek out the news now, so I look on *Spotted in Trowbridge*... it is the main one for getting a big flavour of what’s going on...” (Interview, Trowbridge)

The group features a variety of information, from job seeking requests to crime reports, and links to news websites. One respondent claimed the *Wiltshire Times* lifted quotes unattributed from the page, and the administrators (who work under anonymity) had regular communication with Wiltshire Police. The admin policy prioritised freedom of speech and speed:

"We are quick. We don't wait for hours on end before checking in and publishing the information sent to us... The people want to be heard and, provided it is done with respect, we allow them to have their voice... Even if it's not said with complete respect, we allow people to comment as they wish.... we have no right to determine if they are right / wrong or otherwise." (Interview, Facebook group administrator, Trowbridge)

Use of social media increased during the pandemic.

"I helped by posting announcements (on *Spotted in Trowbridge*) clearing up confusion around test centres." (Interview, Trowbridge)

"A couple of weeks ago, when the major shortage of lateral flows occurred, I desperately needed them... All I did was ask a question on *Corby Chats Back* if they have any.⁹ The amount of messages I got offering me one was amazing." (Interview, Corby)

Social media was viewed as essential for communication and publicity by local organisations.

"In the past we have used the *Whitby Gazette* to publicise changes in our (NHS) services. Like flu vaccine campaigns. We don't do that now because putting something on Facebook is more effective than putting it in the *Gazette*." (Interview, NHS worker, Whitby)

"The mosque or the Pentecostal churches have their own Facebook pages. So if you are in the community all the updates will be there for you. And it will be in your own language." (Interview, Trowbridge)

Twitter was the next most widely mentioned social media service, and was also seen as useful for communication and for organising campaigns.

"Whenever I've got a bee in my bonnet or something I'm not happy with within the Council, I always tweet at my local councillor person... I tweeted him literally two weeks ago about the whole road works thing and he said that he'd get someone to look into it." (Focus group, Lewisham)

"The Afghan refugee appeal was entirely carried by social media... We didn't have time to contact the local paper to get something in. We just took to Twitter... Some people came and said their daughter or mum saw it on social media and told them." (Interview, Corby)

The young people's focus group in Lewisham (aged 14–18) revealed a preference for the social media services Instagram and Snapchat. A range of Instagram pages serve local young people specifically, including pages to "make fun" of individual schools. Some news outlets specialised in approaches to local journalism and topics that were aimed at young people.

"(A London based Instagram page) is Grime news... A Lewisham rapper got arrested and they look at the story and unpick it. The photo on the caption tells you all the story." (Focus group, Lewisham)

Nextdoor was mentioned much less than Facebook or Twitter though it was viewed as more reliable because of the higher degree of authentication required for users. A councillor noted that a successful campaign against a local development was organised on the platform.

“The campaign was waged mainly on Nextdoor... it persuaded my colleague to drop the plan... The rhetoric was getting quite aggressive towards us... It was reacting to all sorts of fantasy developments before there was even an application... The guy who was doing most of it... was nasty online but nice in person and I often find that. We did check at an early stage who these people were and made a point of talking to them.” (Interview, Local councillor)

Normally, respondents did not access local news websites directly, but ‘clicked through’ to them through posts on social media.

“People will share a news article on Facebook and that is where I would read it normally. Normally it is with an angry comment.” (Focus group, Whitby)

But social media was not seen in itself as substituting for or providing in-depth news.

“In terms of how I find out about anything these days, yeah there is a serious lack of information, but generally it will be through my local Facebook group because somebody will say, have you seen this? Have you seen what they’re trying to do? But some of the big stuff? No, we just don’t know it’s happening. Unless somebody has posted it on the local Facebook group. And then I’ll hear about it, if it comes up on my feed in the first hour, or if there’s enough sort of, you know, chatter about it”. (Focus group, Lewisham)

Overall, it was clear that social media platforms are central to the news and information environments of these communities.

2. Social Media can cause local division and be a source of misinformation

- Social media groups and online interactions are seen as creating social division
- Social media use is seen as a leading source of misinformation
- Poor new-media literacy skills and digital poverty prevent many from accessing local news and information online

Respondents consistently expressed fear that social media use exacerbated social divisions.

“I think *Spotted in Trowbridge* is probably quite a significant part of people’s information exchange which is quite terrifying. It’s really toxic.” (Interview, Trowbridge)

“There are quite a lot of Whitby Facebook groups. Some of those groups are quite noxious. Quite regressive and racist actually... They are not all like that but the stronger ones are of that ilk.” (Interview, Whitby)

The unverified nature of many social media posts mean they can be a source of local misinformation.

“We spend a fair amount of time fighting off Facebook rumours. Housing allowance is a good example. We’ll have a client who comes in and says ‘I need to apply for social housing.’ We say ‘you need to go through this process, be on the waiting list, bid for a property’ and they say ‘but if I’d come from Syria and I was a refugee I’d get given a house automatically no questions asked’ and we ask ‘where did you hear this?’ they say ‘I saw it on a Facebook site.’” (Interview, Citizens Advice Bureau worker)

Respondents referred to the effects of ‘Facebook rumours’. In one case a respondent mentioned a claim made by a local Facebook user that a recent dog illness was caused by walking dogs on beaches where there had been mass crustacean deaths. The rumour spread through other Facebook users, and was reported, at first uncritically, in local newspapers, and the national press.¹⁰

“It was all from one source who set herself up as an expert. That dogs were getting ill on the beach and it was linked with the shellfish deaths. There was no evidence for it whatsoever... A lot of unnecessary fear and anxiety and irresponsible reporting.” (Interview, Whitby)

“I also saw – but that was on Facebook saying don’t walk your dogs on the beach and then they were saying it was because of all the crabs who had died... I heard it from three different people.” (Focus group, Whitby)

In another case, Whitby’s statue of Captain Cook was rumoured to be under threat of removal during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. A crowd of local people turned out to ‘protect’ the statue.¹¹ In fact there had not been any specific threat to remove the statue.

“Remember people were threatening to take down Captain Cook’s thing on the cliff? And everyone was gathering round because everyone was protecting it.” (Focus group, Whitby)

Respondents noted that the issue quickly escalated into an argument carried over social media.

“It was a febrile atmosphere. There was a lot of people got involved. Two lots of agitators... someone set up a Facebook page to protect the statue and it got about 3,000 followers very quickly, and then became a closed, private group.” (Focus group, Whitby)

In other cases, the lack of professional journalism combined with unverified information on social media to create a sense of suspicion and confusion. The nature of Facebook means that it is especially appropriate for campaign groups, which then act as information and opinion exchanges for their members. In some of the local Facebook groups and pages, there had been discussion about an alleged cover-up by the police. Several respondents mentioned the allegations and associated them with the decline of public information and journalism in the town.

“There’s a big gap where nobody’s explaining what’s happening... Perfect for investigative journalists if there were any but there aren’t any [here]... There is a hole where the news should be, that might actually give people valid and accurate information and that has been filled by this huge... campaign.” (Interview)

The power of social media misinformation was feared by local business owners.

“Me or you can be hung by social media. You see it on TripAdvisor. If you have somebody who misbehaves drunk in a pub and they get kicked out, and the next thing you know you’ve got a review about how crap your food is and how crap your pub is. And they’ve not eaten. But they’ve already done the damage to that business. Nobody is held liable.” (Interview, Publican)

Respondents observed that participating in local institutions online required skills which not everyone has.

“Most official council and government websites are quite difficult to navigate. If you want to find something out you usually have to know the answer to know where to go to find the answer. Journalists used to do that.” (Interview, Barrow)

Respondents reported observing or experiencing local instances of poor new-media literacy.¹²

“We work with people with additional needs... They get all of their news from Facebook. There is a problem in terms of them believing everything they see on Facebook. They wouldn’t think ‘well that’s come from the *Western Telegraph* so that’s a trusted source’. I was working with a group of young college students with mild learning disabilities, one of whom was absolutely adamant that a church was going to be knocked down in Milford Haven and a mosque was going to be built in its place. He wasn’t looking at the source material, it was a nasty Britain First type group.” (Interview, Pembrokeshire)

Respondents also reported that digital poverty – lack of access to digital media and communications – was much more prevalent than was easily visible. This has particularly problematic effects in local news and information landscapes that are now primarily online.

“Lockdown really opened up a big can of worms and showed how much we all depend on WiFi. We had families who have one phone with WiFi between three children all relying on it to do their homework; I had to get laptops from schools to deliver to families.”

(Interview, Racial equality worker)

It was noted that poverty can be linked to media illiteracy.

“I know a man who didn’t know how to fill out a thing on his phone for universal credit. And he got sanctioned. For every story of food poverty there is more... something like, I don’t know how to use my phone.” (Interview, Lewisham)

Respondents were clear that the use of social media to access local news and information was associated with various problems. The content was unfiltered, meaning that while it was easy to access the discussions, it was often a source of misinformation. It could also be highly toxic and divisive. Furthermore, poor new-media literacy or digital poverty meant that many people were unable to access basic information or services.

3. Local newspapers are no longer perceived as 'community glue'

- Respondents said that local newspapers no longer created or sustained a sense of community identity
- Nor did they help the community work through collective trauma or crises
- People complained that local news sites more often provided 'clickbait' intended to provoke a reaction, preventing nuanced or positive reporting

"The *Whitby Gazette* is not a source of living, social, current news. It is mainly stuff fitted in between the adverts, that increasingly people have provided themselves... There is nobody collecting and coordinating, there is nobody to speak to, there is nobody reporting on community groups as there used to be. It is gone." (Interview, Whitby)

Respondents linked the use of local newspapers in the past to their integration within their community.

"I used to deliver the *News Shopper*. That was a way of getting to know the community... I found that people were looking forward to me putting this newspaper through their door... I read all of it. I used to look forward to it. As a young person, I thought 'I know that road.'... I used to flick through it to see if I recognised people's faces." (Interview, Lewisham)

In Whitby, the absence of campaigning by the *Whitby Gazette* about mass shellfish deaths led, respondents said, to division between sections of the community.

"There is something about the fisherman feeling left alone and feeling resentful and the failure of journalism to take the call to arms of a sector. The fisherman feel 'Sod it, we are separate from Whitby.'" (Focus group, Whitby)

Respondents referred to the role that journalists traditionally played in reporting and mediating information which represented local collective feeling, such as local births, deaths and marriage notices, that had now disappeared.

"Those over 60 don't use social media but don't buy the paper anymore... I go to sheltered schemes and people ask me "How do I find out who's died?" They can't find anything out now." (Interview, Corby)

Respondents mentioned that newspapers were not helping to work through collective trauma.

"There are serious mental health issues below the surface in the community. Visibly evidenced by the number of suicide attempts at (location)... I overheard teenagers' conversations: 'oh so and so said they're going to jump off (location)'... And as a town I don't notice that we are sort of 'going there'... And journalists in the past have not been mindful of how that's reported and the transformative narrative that could be built around it." (Interview, Trowbridge)

Respondents reported an overall impression of local newspapers and their websites as negative and divisive, or irrelevant 'clickbait'.

"The *Wiltshire Times* is all about people who have been busted for drugs."
(Focus group, Trowbridge)

"The *Mail's* (formerly *North West Evening Mail*) website has become an absolute toxic battleground. Because they let people say anything... We held a (LGBTQ+ event)... They contacted me because they'd seen something on our Facebook or something. So they sent someone over to interview me and then a piece was written....It went on the website and the comments started piling in. The first one was why is there nothing for heterosexual people?...I don't go on the *Mail's* website, I think it's vile, so I wasn't aware this was going on 'til the day of the event...The comments were just toxic. There was one that jumped out at me. They said we need to do something about this. And someone else came in and said yeah we need to do something. So I took it to the police and they said yeah that is a direct threat we'll send you a police presence." (Interview, Barrow)

"The problem with the *Whitby Gazette* is that so many headlines are clickbait. The question posed is designed for people to row about it." (Focus group, Whitby)

Reporting of news involving ethnic minority groups was described as too negative.

"You might only hear about my community, which is the African heritage community, in October which is black history month. It is almost as if we're not contributing to the community because it is not being heard or read or seen so people in general don't really acknowledge us because they don't see anything about us in the media. We are only talked about when there is a health issue or a knife crime issue." (Interview, Lewisham)

Respondents were clear that local newspapers were no longer playing the valuable role of binding their community together, and they missed how the paper used to provide a compendium of community information. The new style of local journalism which had replaced it was felt to be commercialised and, on occasion, damaging and divisive.

4. There is a lack of knowledge of local affairs that is linked to a dearth of local reporting

- Respondents did not feel knowledgeable about local government activities
- There was even less awareness about other local institutions or public services – including the NHS, education, police and the environment
- Respondents said that some, notably the police, appeared to avoid scrutiny thanks to their public relations operations
- There was a dearth of local reporting about public interest issues, people said
- Local newspapers reproduced press releases or repeated institutional claims rather than investigating them, respondents claimed

Respondents viewed coverage of local government activities as inadequate.

“We have an overview and scrutiny committee. It scrutinises the decisions of the executive arm. A lot of it is pretty juicy stuff... The local news organisation doesn’t have the numbers to send a reporter.” (Interview, Local councillor)

“...when the bid had gone in, a plan was added at the last minute to get rid of the multi-storey car park, the only free one in Wiltshire. There was a petition and everyone got very upset. The leader of the council was quoted in the paper as saying no final decision had been made... Well I knew that the decision had already been made.... It wouldn’t have taken much journalistic digging to challenge that statement.” (Interview, Trowbridge)

In Whitby a high proportion of homes are used as holiday lets. During the lockdowns of 2020, £10,000 grants were available for these businesses due to lost revenue. Respondents said that some of these were fraudulently claimed.

Respondent: “Scarborough borough council employed fraud investigators because they had the highest level of fraud in the country”

Interviewer: “How did you find out about that?”

Respondent: “I watched a council meeting. It was when the vote was going on about (issue respondent was involved with). And I continued watching. It was a live broadcast.”

Interviewer: “Was it picked up and reported anywhere?”

Respondent: “God no. The press wouldn’t report that.”

(Interview, Whitby)

However, in some cases the coverage of local government was singled out as relatively good compared to the coverage of other institutions and public services. Though respondents (except those who worked in journalism) were not aware of the scheme, the reporting referred to could be traced to the Local Democracy Reporter (LDR) in the area.¹³

“The journalists covering local government have been brilliant in terms of going to council meetings and tweeting stuff.” (Interview, Trowbridge)

LDRs were able to maintain coverage of council meetings in some areas, to varying extents, where this had been cut down due to staff shortages. However, the LDR scheme does not work uniformly well. Northamptonshire has struggled to recruit due to low pay and the rarity of the skillset required, leaving a position vacant for over a year at the time of writing (Interview, Corby). In one community the LDR left to join the local authority as a communications officer:

“(Journalist who was an LDR) left and became communications officer at (the council). We had been passing him information from (our campaign group). And we wondered why we weren’t getting anywhere with (campaign group)!” (Interview)

Respondents described a simple absence of or difficulty in obtaining vital local information.

“If there are any events that will cause road closures, because I work for a scaffolding company, those things are very important to us. It’s harder now than it was. I would keep an eye on the *Gazette*... Now we have to ring the council in the morning.” (Focus group, Whitby)

Planning and development was the function most frequently identified by respondents when considering the quality of information available about local government, perhaps because its impact is visible in a way that even local elections are not. There was a strong sense of scepticism about the genuineness of the council’s desire to communicate, yet little awareness of journalism acting as a watchdog.

Lack of scrutiny was felt most acutely in national institutions which operate locally. There was widespread lack of awareness among respondents about how the NHS is organised locally.

“I couldn’t find any mentions on the web or in local journalism that the Lewisham CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group) had been put into special measures. It spent £500m a year of public money, much more than Lewisham Council. I found that absolutely astonishing... There’s all sorts of potential for reasonable journalism about that.” (Interview, Hospital governor)

In Whitby, a hospital was recently partly demolished and refurbished with different services.

“Clearly it wasn’t well enough reported. Actually a couple of people have made comments to me to ask if Whitby Hospital has re-opened. Actually it has never been shut... The whole rationale behind that made sense. But evidently it wasn’t communicated to people... And now the government have mandated that the ‘Integrated Care Systems’ are formed. Again it’s quite a big shift in how the NHS is administered. And it hasn’t been really widely discussed. People don’t understand how the NHS works and it’s not surprising.”
(Interview, NHS worker, Whitby)

A merger of trusts in North Yorkshire was known to only one respondent outside the NHS, who had heard about it incidentally through communications over the care of her son who was undergoing a series of operations:

“It has been ridiculous because my son was dropped from their list. Luckily we managed to get it sorted but I think a lot of parents have been dropped. I haven’t seen it discussed anywhere.” (Focus group, Whitby)

It was felt that this lack of scrutiny may reflect reluctance by the NHS to be open to journalistic scrutiny:

“The NHS are the ones we have the most trouble with in terms of being quite obstructive... there are a huge amount of reports that are just not being made public at all...But they know that there is not one specialist health reporter in the county.” (Interview, Journalist)

Each local police force operates a website with a news section linked to social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter.¹⁴ The average size of a police force communications team regionally is 20,¹⁵ often rivalling or outweighing the number of active journalists in a region. Because the way that people normally interact with local news is through social media, in their ‘feeds’, institutions like the police have as much or more prominence as the journalism providers who report on them.

“Northamptonshire police... act as a competitor and they have a massive advantage... crime is our big draw and when the police are putting stuff out before you it is blooming frustrating... they’ve got about 200k followers which is 4 times more than we’ve got...And of course if the police are criticised in court you can guarantee that it is not going to be on Northants police website.” (Interview, Journalist)

Yet respondents felt that crime was under-reported.

“The town council get crime figures every month. I have never seen them in the (local paper). (Interview, Town councillor)

Lewisham residents referred to an unrecognised “crime wave” (Focus groups, Lewisham). In Trowbridge the issue of drug trafficking across county boundaries using underage children was felt to be under-reported.

“County lines is a huge thing in Trowbridge, more than people know about... There are parents who naively think it isn’t there... If people don’t know about it then how can we safeguard them?” (Focus group, Trowbridge)

Direct communication between police officers and the press was felt to have diminished.¹⁶

“In my day if you had a bad accident or whatever, the local reporter turned up. If it was a good one and they were reliable, they got a call from the local policeman... Now I very much doubt there’s a bobby on the beat knows his local press man at all.” (Interview, Ex-police officer)

“By the early 2000s you were getting more PR people involved. The police briefings wouldn’t happen, you got press releases instead.” (Interview, Journalist)

Respondents viewed educational issues and their local consequences as under-reported.

“I really don’t think that academisation has been well enough reported... there is not enough accountability of the big academy chains. There is an assumption that the community doesn’t care. The community can’t care if it doesn’t know.” (Interview, Whitby)

Respondents also thought environmental issues were under-reported.

“You’ve got a situation in Corby where we have just planted 4,500 trees. You’ve got a building site which has just chopped down 5,500 trees. There is a story there. But the journalist is not going to pick up the story about the building site because there are no sort of dignitaries and no this, that and the other...There is a massive story but no one is picking it up.” (Interview, Corby)

Research in Whitby identified an important environmental issue that was not widely known. Mass crustacean deaths in October 2021 devastated the local fishing fleet. A DEFRA report identified algal bloom as the most likely cause, and ruled out the effects of dredging at the Tees, north of Whitby. However, an independent report cast doubt on DEFRA’s explanation and left open dredging as a potential cause. The Tees port development was a sensitive political issue nationally because it will become a ‘free port’ according to post-Brexit legislation. Fisherman were angry, since if dredging were the real cause, they would be entitled to compensation. Despite the environmental, political and economic local significance, when asked, Whitby focus group participants had not heard about the issue.

Respondents said local newspapers customarily recycle press releases as news stories, without extra scrutiny.¹⁷

“The *Wiltshire Times* is very ‘corporate press release’ ... if you have a corporate line it’s there.” (Interview, Trowbridge)

“We (a local charity) tend to write the story for them, supply the pictures and caption and suggested headline. That’s the way to get it in... I got to edit the article. I mean actually changing the words. I’ve never had that before.” (Interview, Trowbridge)

Respondents with knowledge of the sector observed that pay rates were superior in the PR industry than in journalism. Ex-local journalists now working in PR for local organisations supply copy to their former employers.

“I feed them stuff and I can get it in easily as I know the house style.” (Interview, Whitby)

Respondents were clear that a wide range of local issues and institutions were not getting sufficient coverage. Where there was coverage, respondents believed that much of it was driven by institutional public affairs teams and press releases, rather than independent reporting. A partial exception was the coverage of local government in a few areas, most of which could be traced to the work of Local Democracy Reporters.

5. There is evidence of democratic disenchantment and apathy

- The absence of sufficient coverage of local government was leading to lack of interest in its activities
- In two communities where local government reorganisation was imminent, interviews and focus groups revealed a widespread lack of awareness

The most common feelings respondents expressed towards local government were apathy or negativity. This was often linked to a lack of information about their activities.

“People in Whitby want to talk about what a crap council Whitby town council is. But because it is not reported, it is like a vicious circle – nothing reported, nothing’s going on, it must be crap.” (Interview, Whitby)

“You can keep up to date with local politics if you look for it but what’s the point if you can’t do anything?” (Interview, Corby)

“I only hear about things like planning permission through leaflets. Sometimes I feel that it is like that because they’d rather you wouldn’t know. With a big housing development it is better they keep it under the radar in case people object.” (Focus group, Trowbridge)

“I had never heard about MPs’ surgeries before this (focus group).” (Focus group, Whitby)

In Whitby and Barrow, there was little knowledge among respondents about imminent local government reorganisation.

“I heard in a passing conversation that Scarborough Council is being abolished. But I don’t know when or anything else about it.” (Focus group, Whitby)

“We are doing door knocking and we say ‘Will you vote for us for the new council?’, and they say ‘Well what is it?’ And we say ‘Well Barrow Council is being dissolved, Cumbria County Council is being dissolved and a new unitary body is being set up...’ And you can see them not grasping it... a full searchlight needs to be shone on that subject and it just isn’t happening.” (Interview, Local councillor)

A journalist blamed this partly on the nature of the story:

“I don’t think it is well understood by people... it does feel a complicated, technical and wordy story to tell. That does make it difficult to make it accessible to the audience. We just do little bits but even then it is difficult to put it into plain English.” (Journalist, Whitby)

In another community, local government reorganisation had recently been completed. North Northamptonshire was reorganised in 2019, following the dissolution of Northamptonshire County Council after it became insolvent the previous year. The *Northamptonshire Telegraph* changed from a daily to a weekly paper in 2012. Many respondents mentioned the change as coinciding with a loss of importance of the title. Its circulation fell from around 19,500 in 2010 to around 8,500 in 2018.

"I think if we'd had had a daily paper we'd have been able to do more to stop it, to galvanise and get people to know what was going on. People sleptwalk into reorganization. I kept telling them this is happening. They said we didn't know about this – I said I kept telling you, they said 'Well it wasn't in the paper.'" (Interview, Corby)

A *Northamptonshire Telegraph* journalist explained:

"We lost our county council reporter. He was replaced with people who weren't that experienced and were being asked to do other stuff because we were short staffed... If anyone had looked at the accounts and was speaking to councillors on a daily basis we would have known it was going to happen...." (Interview, Journalist, Corby)

In Whitby older respondents linked the loss of relevance of the *Whitby Gazette* directly to the loss of influence of the town itself over its own affairs during the last major local government reorganisation of 1974.

"Whitby ran its own affairs and it had a very large budget... The political ability to change things – that was real before 1974... The *Whitby Gazette* has fought many rearguard actions since then... The 1974 reorganisation was unstoppable of course, but the *Whitby Gazette* covered it in great detail. The Whitby town councillors talking rather wryly about how its going to be. What they thought about it is all recorded." (Interview, Whitby)¹⁸

During the recent pandemic lockdowns, many county, district and parish councils were held remotely and streamed online. Some local journalists mentioned that this had transformed their ability to cover the meetings.

"During the lockdown, all local authorities were meeting online on Zoom. They were all streamed live... I could get really good info and stories from that. Since they stopped doing that, it is quite difficult for us to get to a town hall meeting on a Saturday night... During lockdown, we ran so many more stories than we had done before." (Interview, Journalist)

However, it was also mentioned that this was only a minor corrective to the loss of journalistic staff numbers, and that the imperatives of the new style of centralised online local journalism would mean that most local journalists were no longer interested in council meetings. Furthermore, the trend was not seen as necessarily positive by journalists.

"When the pandemic happened, a lot of the councils retreated behind virtual meetings. Which had a bit of a chilling effect as well. Because you can't ask them questions after, you can't watch the body language, who is getting mean with who." (Interview, Journalist)

Apathy and lack of interest in local democracy was found to be widespread in our respondents. When asked if sufficient information was available about local politics, respondents criticised both communication from councils and its coverage in the local press. Furthermore, recent efforts at renewal through local government reorganisation were not matched with grassroots interest or support.

6. People want a trusted source of local news

- Respondents wanted a trusted source of local news
- It was important to respondents that news and information was provided by journalists local to their communities
- Respondents wanted greater scrutiny of local institutions
- Respondents wanted journalism to act as 'community glue'
- Respondents were mixed in how they preferred to access news, with some, mainly older, preferring print formats
- Respondents wanted local news and information to be written in an accessible format

Respondents frequently mentioned the issue of trust.

"It's about trust. If you trust what you're reading, you feel safer to start to interrogate that. It feels like there is very little trust in what is being published through whatever media. So you get the soundbites. 'Councillor corrupt' or 'it is a whitewash'. That decision was made anyway, they don't care what we think. And no one is coming out to challenge that." (Interview, Whitby)

"We tend to get a lot of our information from online where we can't really verify whether it's true or not. So it would be good to have some really good local journalism which we know we can trust." (Focus Group, Lewisham)

Respondents often linked the closure of the local newspaper office with a loss of relevance of the title.

"I do feel the closure of the office has negatively affected the reporting. You see that online a lot of the photos they use are from Google Maps. It just feels lazy. But you can't expect someone to travel for half an hour just to take a photo and then go home." (Interview, Barrow)

Respondents wanted greater scrutiny of local institutions.

"(I would like local news to find)... where the bodies are buried... Scandals or decision making or things where there was a fait accompli or there was a decision where people weren't asked to get involved. Just shining a light on local things and the way decisions are made." (Interview, Trowbridge)

Respondents wanted more positive, community binding news stories. This was associated with the role that local newspapers used to play, and in some cases respondents mentioned hyperlocal news websites or magazines which helped to fill the role.¹⁹

"I mourn the loss of the *County Echo*. Which was in many ways very small-town. About 25 years ago I had a flower pot stolen from my front garden – that made the paper. How lovely to live somewhere where that happens... I can't imagine an edition of the *County Echo* in which

I didn't know 20 people. It fostered the community. It was ours. And the fact that it was in print answered a need that I don't think digital media ever really can." (Interview, Pembrokeshire)

"Communities are not working at the moment. People are behind closed doors. People are learning how to be alone. And they need to unlearn how to be alone. Journalism will be an essential tool in building back that cohesion." (Interview, Lewisham)

"We live in very unequal society. And people don't know. If you're living in poverty you know you are, but if you are living in affluence you don't know and maybe you don't want to know. If you have skilled journalists who can tell that story in a creatively challenging way, it doesn't have to be confrontation, it's about raising awareness and heightening knowledge. And that in itself would breed community feeling." (Interview, Trowbridge)

Some, mainly older, respondents mentioned that they preferred print as a format.

"What is missing is print. There is nothing like the physicality. It confers respectability and officialness to the information." (Interview, Mid-Devon)

Respondents wanted news and information written in an engaging and accessible format.

"(I would like journalism to) talk about things in a simplistic form. Not in a complicated form. Most people just want simplistic information which can be easily understood. You don't have to have a degree or been to college. Keep it simple and keep it relevant." (Interview, Corby)

"I hate the way press releases are written. It is impersonal. People are sent on these courses to learn how to write press releases and I think 'oh no!' It doesn't really reach that voice you need which is local and personal and talks to you." (Interview, Independent local journalist)

The current form of local news websites was often criticised.

"I don't blame people for wanting to read it for free, but surrounded by a hundred flashing adverts with all the substance removed...Those local newspaper websites are appalling and no one reads them." (Interview, Whitby)

Overall, when asked what sort of local news they would like, respondents highlighted the issues of trust, professionalism, authentic local origins, accessibility, positivity, and scrutiny of local issues and institutions.

CONCLUSION

This research into seven 'news deserts' reinforces concerns that we are currently living through a sudden and catastrophic collapse in public interest information systems. This collapse is partly hidden because it is less in evidence at national level, where titles remain in place and journalists are still working in their traditional roles. At local level the loss of journalistic staff has led to a dearth of scrutiny of local institutions and of national policies and issues which have local consequences. In some cases these were basic information failures, such as road closures and local services. In others they were more serious – a basic absence of awareness of what institutions are doing. These failures were found in local government, NHS, the police, education and environmental issues.

Social media platforms are now dominant and central in local media ecosystems. Most people are well-meaning in their use of social media, and many value their functionality in social organising, direct communication, and ease of use. However social media in itself does not replicate the role of local newspapers in providing local journalism to communities. Furthermore, a minority of social media users deliberately cause disputes, while well-meaning users cannot help being caught up in them. In addition, social media use was prone to causing tension and division – leaving some members of the community misinformed and suspicious. Digital poverty and poor new-media literacy also meant that social media was only accessible to some and not all.

Local papers no longer act as 'community glue' for these localities, or as compendiums or 'local bibles' where residents can get a comprehensive range of local information in one place.

Respondents felt that the loss of reliable news provision was contributing to a wider fragmentation, prompting and then exacerbating societal divisions. These divisions could be made worse, they believed, by sensationalised 'local' stories intended to prompt clicks and drive traffic to news websites. On top of this, rather than scrutinising local institutions, local papers were more prone to repeat institutional lines rather than scrutinising them.

There is pessimism in these communities that local government is relevant to them and a sense of apathy about local democracy. They associate this, in part, to the absence of local news and information. In North Northamptonshire, North Yorkshire and Cumbria people were unaware or confused about democratic developments, and – when they learnt about them – distrustful of their motivations and effects. Local journalism ought, the respondents believed, to help them understand and engage with their community and with local issues and events. There were, this research also found, dedicated journalists attempting to do independent and original reporting in increasingly difficult circumstances. Yet, the overwhelming impression of respondents in this study was that most local journalism was now either absent or ineffective.

APPENDIX 1: COMMUNITY PROFILES

This section provides an explanation of the rationale behind the research team's selection of areas. It also contains detailed profiles of the selected communities, with information on their population, economy, politics, demography, and local media landscape. All circulation data is taken from ABC and JICREG.²⁰

RATIONALE FOR SELECTED AREAS

The seven communities were selected because they had all undergone a significant reduction in the provision of local news in recent years. Most communities were strongly associated with a specific newspaper title which had declined. While these communities can be called local news 'deserts', all were in fact in 'patches' nominally covered by professional journalists.

The research team attempted to identify a selection of communities worst affected by 'hollowing out' and closure of titles in recent years. Large urban areas (apart from London), and Scotland in general, were not selected due to the relatively good coverage they received from their associated 'regional national' titles, such as the *Manchester Evening News* in Lancashire or the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* in North East Scotland. Given that this leaves a large potential sample, a geographical spread across England and Wales was selected, with one area in the North West, one in the North East, one in the Midlands, one in Wales, two in the South West and one in London.

We attempted to choose a sample with a variety of population, geographical sizes and socio-economic characteristics, with one in a large urban conurbation (Lewisham), two relatively urban and industrial (Barrow-in-Furness and Corby), and the other four relatively rural, with greater or lesser degrees of geographic isolation. The London borough of Lewisham was by far the largest by population. Due to the importance of London to the UK, it was considered important to include a London community and it was necessary to include a whole borough. Due to the population and political geography of each community, it was often necessary to gather evidence from slightly wider areas than are named in the list, expanding into the district or county.

Community 1: Lewisham, London

PROFILE

London has an upper tier (the Greater London Authority) and 34 lower tier authorities, called boroughs. Although Greater London appears similar to two-tier counties (those with a district and county council tier), each borough in fact has similar powers (and population) to a single tier Unitary Authority.²¹

Lewisham has a population of 275,885 (as of 2011). It is an unusually ethnically diverse community. 57% of the population identify as white while 32% identify as Black African, Caribbean or other.²² Lewisham has a long history of emigration and settlement by ethnic minority groups. Several local historical incidents – the ‘Battle of Lewisham’ (1977), The New Cross Fire (1981), the murder of Stephen Lawrence (1993, which happened in the adjacent Greenwich borough but impacted Lewisham) – have significance for racial politics. Some respondents voluntarily identified themselves as from an ethnic minority group and included it as a factor in their views on journalism.

Politically Lewisham is dominated by a single political party: Labour. All 3 parliamentary constituencies (Lewisham Deptford, Lewisham East, and Lewisham West and Penge) are held by Labour as are all 54 council seats at both the 2018 and 2022 local elections (on turnouts of 36.9% and 33% respectively). Labour has held Lewisham since 1971 with the exception of 2006 when there was no overall control.

MEDIA IN LEWISHAM

The only traditional newspaper dedicated exclusively to the borough is the *Lewisham News Shopper*, a free weekly. The *News Shopper* group of titles is owned by Newsquest. Since 2011 it has been subject to ‘hollowing out’. In 2011 its budget was cut, resulting in the compulsory redundancy of the deputy editor. In 2015 it was one of a group of 16 weekly newspapers placed under a single group editor, while sub editing was centralised to an area hub.²³ In 2010 the *Lewisham News Shopper* had a circulation of 63,183.²⁴ This declined to 22,208 by 2020. It had a monthly online audience of 244,445.

Lewisham’s other principal traditional paper is MSI Media’s free weekly *South London Press* which covers several other South London boroughs in addition to Lewisham. Between 2007 and 2016 the paper was part of the Tindle Group, which bought it from Trinity Mirror. In 2016 the paper was acquired by Capital Media Newspapers before being sold on to Street Runners Ltd in July 2017 to be run by their subsidiary company MSI Media Ltd. The *South London Press* has an office on Bromley Road, the only traditional newspaper office in the borough. The *South London Press* has been hollowed out and currently runs an editorial staff of five. It is under severe financial pressure: recent editions contain a page 2 call for “donating whatever you can to our running costs, even £1 would be an enormous help.”²⁵ As of 2014 it had a circulation of around 15,400, likely to have significantly declined since.²⁶

Until recently, the borough was also covered by the *Lewisham Mercury*. This was later renamed the *Greenwich Mercury* and sold by Tindle to Capital Media in 2016 who merged it with the *South London Press*.²⁷ Tindle’s *Bromley Borough News*, which may have been used by residents

in the south of the borough, seems to have closed in 2020.²⁸ Many respondents were unaware that newspapers still existed which covered the borough. This was often linked to the cessation of deliveries of the *LNS* and the *Mercury* (sometime in the past ten years). The papers are available to pick up at certain locations, notably railway stations.

Lewisham also draws upon London-wide media, including the free daily *Evening Standard* and *Metro*, though these typically contain little that is local to Lewisham. Both Reach (*MyLondon*) and Newsquest (*thisislondon*) operate London-wide websites. Reach launched *MyLondon* in 2018 with a pool of journalists for the whole of London, some of whom may specialise in South East London.²⁹ Readers can opt to receive a feed of stories for their area, including Lewisham. The site has recruited heavily and has become the most visited news website for London.³⁰ It operates ambitious page view targets for reporters.³¹

The most commonly and widely cited single source of local news among respondents in our study was the Lewisham Council-published *Lewisham Life*, a monthly rundown of news and events in the borough. It is possible that the relative infrequency with which people described themselves as being poorly informed about council activities may be down to the free delivery of *Lewisham Life* to 116,000 homes and businesses.³² Outside the larger publishers and older titles, a small number of independent newspapers and websites exist which cover the borough. A relatively recent local hard copy quarterly paper is the *Lewisham Ledger*. Its emphasis is on culture and lifestyle but it also features some longer form reporting.

A range of social media featuring local news and information cover the area. One Facebook page, *SE6 SE13 Lewisham Catford Community* with 10,300 members was dedicated to issues of local relevance, a broad remit whose admin rules exclude certain popular functions such as buying and selling, and “click-bait, propaganda and spam”.³³ Post topics were varied but included granular local news such as a photograph of a shop window with a notice of proposed development stuck to it, and a caption.³⁴ The post had received 14 comments and a further 14 replies. Other relatively common post types were reports of crimes such as theft or car damage as an appeal to witnesses, or requests for recommendations for services. This page also acted as a portal to other websites, including links to local news websites.

Community 2: Trowbridge and West Wiltshire

PROFILE

Trowbridge, the seat of Wiltshire UA (Unitary Authority), is a market and former industrial town. Wiltshire is a relatively affluent local authority area, but there are significant pockets of deprivation in Trowbridge. Trowbridge has a population of 45,822, and Wiltshire as a whole of around 722,000.³⁵ Wiltshire has relatively low ethnic diversity, though Trowbridge has a significant number of Arabic and Polish speakers. Wiltshire UA is Conservative held. Trowbridge was recently awarded £16.3m from the Government's Future High Streets Fund (worth around £830m nationally).³⁶

Our study was relevant to other nearby communities in West Wiltshire, such as Bradford-on-Avon, North Bradley, Melksham, Chippenham, Westbury, Calne and Frome (in Somerset). Due to the nature of geographical settlement, respondents who either lived or worked in Trowbridge often had experience of West Wiltshire more generally. These areas are roughly coterminous with the patch (nominally) covered by the *Wiltshire Times*.

MEDIA IN TROWBRIDGE AND WEST WILTSHIRE

The *Wiltshire Times* was edited from an office in Trowbridge, but this was closed in 2019.³⁷ A number of other Newsquest titles, including the *Swindon Advertiser*, the *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald* and the *Wiltshire Times* had their editorial teams merged and centralised at an office in Swindon. This was accompanied by an overall reduction in staff, particularly of senior journalists. At one point the rationalisation resulted in one editor being in charge of 14 titles in Oxfordshire and Wiltshire.³⁸

The circulation of the *Wiltshire Times* has declined from around 17,000 in the late 1990s to 4,354 in December 2020 (the last year for which figures were available) with an estimated online audience of around 137,000. It has a dedicated website, but is also represented on Newsquest's county-wide website *This is Wiltshire*.³⁹ The *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald* nominally covers Trowbridge, though it was not mentioned by any respondents. Its circulation has declined from 23,098 in 2010 to 6,702 in 2020.

Reach launched the online-only *Wiltshire Live* in July 2021.⁴⁰ All staff work remotely. As with other of Reach's 'Live' websites, it features a mixture of local and national stories.⁴¹

Trowbridge Town Hall has recently started a monthly community newspaper *Celebrate*, emphasising good news and community binding stories.

Trowbridge is covered by *BBC Radio Wiltshire* which operates from Swindon. There is a BBC television news bulletin, *Points West*, covering Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, parts of Devon and Somerset and Bristol.

Online, one Facebook page was widely mentioned: *Spotted in Trowbridge*, a group with 30,387 'followers'. The page features a variety of information, from job seeking requests to crime reports, and links to news websites.⁴²

Community 3: Whitby and North Yorkshire Coast

PROFILE

Whitby is in the County of North Yorkshire, a non-metropolitan county headquartered in Northallerton, with seven districts. Whitby is in the district of Scarborough, administered by Scarborough Borough Council, based in Scarborough. North Yorkshire has a population of around 602,000, of which around 107,000 live in Scarborough District, Whitby around 13,000 and Scarborough around 52,000.⁴³ North Yorkshire County Council is in Conservative control, but Scarborough District is in Labour/Independent control.

The Yorkshire coast was felt to be cut off from the rest of Yorkshire and the UK (physically by the North York Moors, a national park) and to have somewhat different concerns to the inner part of North Yorkshire. Many people in Whitby have never been to Northallerton, an hour's drive away, with no direct bus or rail link. Indeed public transport in the borough is poor, with no direct rail link between Whitby and Scarborough, or between Whitby and the neighbouring council and city of York. Buses in the region are infrequent, expensive and do not run late in the day. North Yorkshire as a whole is largely agricultural and rural, with a significant portion of the county part of national parks. Harrogate and Scarborough are the largest towns. On the North Yorkshire Coast, significant industries are tourism and fishing. Whitby itself is a historic town, popular with visitors and second home owners.

During the course of our study it became clear that many of the issues surrounding local news in Whitby were connected to its position in relation to the town of Scarborough, both in its media economy and political and economic history. While the focus of research was on those who live and work in Whitby and its environs, contributions were also taken from those who live and work in Scarborough.

North Yorkshire County is set for reorganisation, with its district councils to be scrapped and replaced with a unitary authority based in Northallerton, and first elections in 2023.⁴⁴ As with other local government reorganisations, the government has linked this process with greater devolution and 'levelling up'.⁴⁵

MEDIA IN WHITBY AND NORTH YORKSHIRE

Whitby was unusual for the degree of identification among respondents with a single specific title: the weekly *Whitby Gazette*. The relative importance of the paper to the community accentuated the severity of the loss in recent years as the *Whitby Gazette* has been progressively hollowed out. In some ways Whitby and the *Whitby Gazette* serve as an archetypal example of the decline of a local newspaper. The paper had been in family ownership from its founding in 1857 to 1977. The office was in a prominent location overlooking the landmark bridge. Several respondents reported having known editors personally and "drank in the pub" with them, until the early 2000s.

Both the *Whitby Gazette* and the *Scarborough News* are owned by JPI media. The *Whitby Gazette* had a circulation of around 12,000 between 2000 and 2008. Since then the circulation has declined steadily, to around 2,800 in 2021. The *Whitby Gazette* is represented online as a section of the *Scarborough News* website.⁴⁶ This is said to have an online readership of 14,828 in 2019, increased to 17,012 in 2020. The *Scarborough News* changed from daily to weekly in 2012.⁴⁷ This

was identified by respondents as coinciding with a loss of importance of the title. The editorship of the two were merged in 2013, when in effect the *Whitby Gazette* editor was made redundant, and the *Scarborough News* editor became editor of both titles.⁴⁸ The *Whitby Gazette* office closed in 2018 (after moving from the town centre in 2013), ending a 164 year-long presence in the town.

Elsewhere in North Yorkshire, the *Mercury* series – with editions for Malton and Pickering in neighbouring Ryedale district (closed 2020), and one for Filey on the coast in Scarborough district (closed 2010) – was absorbed by the *Scarborough News*.⁴⁹ Regional nationals, *The Yorkshire Post* (JPI) and *Northern Echo* (Newsquest) were mentioned by some respondents as other sources of local news.

The most prominent hyperlocal publication, though it covered an area adjacent to Whitby rather than the town itself, was the *Esk Valley Observer*, which took an alternative, community-led editorial policy. There is a free door to door A3 publication *The Whitby Advertiser* composed mainly of classified adverts, but also containing some information about local activities. The *North Yorkshire Enquirer* was mentioned as a source of investigative journalism with a strong editorial line.⁵⁰

The local radio sector was said to be unusually strong. However, the most popular station *Yorkshire Coast Radio* was recently hollowed out when its news service was removed following its amalgamation with *Greatest Hits Yorkshire Radio*, following changes of legislation over ownership of local radio.⁵¹ Local news on radio continues to be provided by other local stations such as *Thisisthecoast*.

Whitby is a relatively small and geographically isolated community. It was unusual in the degree to which word of mouth was identified commonly by respondents as being their most important source of useful local news and information.

The most popular Whitby focused Facebook group is *Love Whitby*, with 16,700 followers.⁵²

Community 4: Tiverton and Cullompton, Devon

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Tiverton and Cullompton are towns in the Mid Devon District of the County of Devon. Tiverton has a population of around 19,000, Cullompton of around 9,000, Mid Devon of around 82,000 and Devon County of around 795,000. The economy of the district is heavily rural, though Tiverton has a significant manufacturing sector. Tiverton is the seat of Mid Devon District Council.

Mid Devon is an example of a local government district somewhat arbitrarily created in 1974. Devon is a district of market towns, whose identity and local economies have greater unity than the district as a whole. Devon County Council is Conservative dominated, whereas Mid Devon Council is run by a minority Conservative administration.

MEDIA IN TIVERTON AND CULLOMPTON

The weekly *Mid Devon Gazette* is owned by Reach. It merged editorship with the *Exeter Express and Echo*,⁵³ and as part of Reach's (then Trinity Mirror) 'digital first' strategy, the websites of the two merged in 2016.⁵⁴ From 2017, *Devon Live* became Reach's county-wide presence, incorporating several titles' websites, including the *North Devon Journal*, the *Exeter Express & Echo*, *Torquay Herald Express* and the *Mid Devon Gazette* series. The team in the *Mid Devon Gazette* office in Tiverton moved to Exeter. In 2019, Reach closed its Truro and Exeter offices, where its *Cornwall Live* and *Devon Live* sites were based. Reach staff in the region now work from home. There is a hub (not an office) in Plymouth. The *Devon Live* team operate separately to those of its equivalent print editions. The *Mid Devon Gazette* retains one dedicated print reporter.

Mid Devon is an example of how press coverage of areas can vary over relatively small geographical areas. Of the three principal towns that make up the district, one was well served by a newspaper, whereas the other two were not. But while the *Crediton Courier* (Tindle) was widely read in Crediton, the *Mid Devon Gazette* series, the main featured newspaper in the research in this case, had ceased its dedicated Crediton and Cullompton editions and was now known only as the *Tiverton Gazette*. Therefore both Tiverton and Cullompton were selected for examination. In 2010, the *Mid Devon Gazette* series had a circulation of 10,784 which had dropped to 2,904 by 2020.

Devon Live reports around 2 million unique browsers per month. As with other Reach 'Live' websites, it features a mixture of local and national stories.

Other papers which cover the area include Reach's *The Western Morning News*, a regional morning paper. A free weekly has recently been launched by Clearsky: the *Mid Devon Weekly*. Newsquest's *Mid Devon Star*, a free weekly, which was also based in Tiverton, closed in 2016.⁵⁵

Radio news is provided by *BBC Radio South West* and their bulletin *BBC Spotlight* and by *Radio Exe*.⁵⁶

Facebook groups which provide local news and information include *Spotted: Tiverton* (3,200 followers), *What's on – Tiverton* (11,200 followers), *What's On Cullompton* (33,000 followers) and *Positive Cullompton* (6,700 followers).⁵⁷ An attempt to launch a social media app specifically for the town of Tiverton, called the 'Tivvy Community App' in 2019 proved unsuccessful.⁵⁸ Tiverton Civic Society are active in providing planning news.⁵⁹

Community 5: Haverfordwest and Pembrokeshire

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Haverfordwest is the county town of the County of Pembrokeshire. It has a population of around 12,000 while Pembrokeshire as a whole has a population of around 126,000.⁶⁰

Pembrokeshire Council has a majority of independent councillors and is run by a coalition administration. Pembrokeshire's economy is based around tourism and agriculture, with Haverfordwest as the principal commercial centre.

Pembrokeshire is a relatively sparsely populated county. Respondents observed how the county viewed itself as having a strong community identity and mentioned the importance of the tourist board, Visit Pembrokeshire, in promoting the county.

MEDIA IN HAVERFORDWEST AND PEMBROKESHIRE

The main newspaper covering Haverfordwest is the *Western Telegraph*. In 2010 it had a circulation of 21,633. By 2021 this had sunk to 7,181. As of 2020 it had an online audience of around 120,000. This and two other Pembrokeshire Newsquest titles are produced from Haverfordwest: the *Milford Mercury*, and the *Tivyside Advertiser*. The Milford Haven office closed in 2008 and the print edition of the *Milford Mercury* was axed in 2020,⁶¹ though it retains its own website. These titles share an editor.⁶²

Tindle produces the *Tenby Observer* series, with editions for Tenby, Narberth and Whitland and Pembroke from a Tenby office. The office has recently reopened but the reporters currently work from home. Circulation figures were not available for these titles. The *Fishguard County Echo* was folded into the *Tenby Observer* series sometime after 2020.

Reach's *Wales Online* features a section for news about Pembrokeshire.⁶³ It reports around 700,000 unique browsers per month.

Other papers include the *Pembrokeshire Herald*, with editions for Carmarthenshire and Llanelli, recently taken into independent ownership.⁶⁴ It is based in Llanelli, Carmarthenshire.⁶⁵

Radio news is provided by *BBC Radio Pembrokeshire* and the independent community station *Pure West Radio*.⁶⁶

Facebook groups and pages include *What's happening in Haverfordwest* (1,500 followers) and *Milford Haven Town* (2,100 members).⁶⁷

Community 6: Corby and North Northamptonshire

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Corby is a town in North Northamptonshire. It has a population of 61,225.⁶⁸ The main part of Corby is a planned new town dating from the 1950s. In recent years it has expanded rapidly in population, including significant migration from the EU.⁶⁹ North Northamptonshire as a whole has a population of around 354,000. The local economy in Corby suffered following the decline of the steel industry in the 1980s, but has rebounded, with strong manufacturing and distribution industries. It has close links with the nearby towns of Kettering and Wellingborough.

Corby District Council, based in Corby, was a part of Northamptonshire County, which was based in Northampton until 2018. Financial difficulties led to the central government ordering the county council to be dissolved and reorganised. This led to the establishment of two new unitary authorities: North and West Northants, from 2019. The new North Northants Unitary Authority is based in Corby.

MEDIA IN CORBY AND NORTH NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Two JPI papers traditionally cover Northamptonshire: the *Northamptonshire Chronicle and Echo* for the West of the county, which is based in Northampton, and the *Northamptonshire Telegraph* for the North of the county including Corby, which is based in Kettering.

Until 2012 the *Northamptonshire Telegraph*, known as the *Northamptonshire Evening Telegraph*, was an evening newspaper published from Monday to Saturday. In 2012 it became weekly.⁷⁰ The four offices (Wellingborough, Rushden, Kettering and Corby) were collapsed into one in Kettering in 2015.⁷¹ Within four years the number of reporters had shrunk from ten to three. An editor works across both JPI titles, plus a third, the *Daventry Express*, covering rural West Northamptonshire.

The *Northants Telegraph* had a circulation of 19,607 in 2010, reduced to 17,018 in 2012 while still a daily. A move to weekly saw a brief increase in circulation to 19,314 in 2013 but a downward trend followed to 8,525 in 2018, prior to the dissolution of Northants County Council, and 5,794 in 2021. It was said to have a total online audience of around 226,000 in its print area in 2020. There are two Local Democracy Reporters assigned to cover West and North Northants (and Rutland County Council). The latter position is vacant at the time of writing.

Reach's recently launched *Northants Live* is run from Cambridge. As with other of Reach's 'Live' websites, it features a mixture of local and national stories.

An independent subscription-based journalism provider, the *North Northants Journal*, was launched in January 2021.⁷² *Corby Radio* provides some local news.⁷³

Corby is in an ambiguous BBC coverage area. Its evening news bulletin, *Look East (West)*, is part of the BBC's East of England coverage, though Northants is more properly understood as part of the Midlands. *Look East (West)* also covers Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire. The local *BBC Radio Northampton* was said to offer a good service but with a very small staff.

Popular Facebook groups include *Corby Chats Back*⁷⁴ (13,100 followers) and *Corby Alert & Chat*⁷⁵ (11,700 followers).

Community 7: Barrow-in-Furness

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Barrow-in-Furness is the headquarters of the district of the same name in the County of Cumbria. The County is headquartered in Carlisle in the extreme north of the County. Barrow District has a population of around 67,000. Cumbria as a whole has a population of around 500,000. Cumbria is a diverse county, with a mountainous and rural interior. Barrow is in the extreme south of the county and has a predominantly industrial economy anchored in shipbuilding. BAE Systems shipyard specialises in making submarines for the Ministry of Defence. Barrow-in-Furness district is in Labour control.

Cumbria County was created in 1974 from the merger of the counties of Cumberland and Westmorland – and part of Lancashire, of which Barrow had been traditionally counted as a part. Cumbria has been selected for reorganisation, into two new unitary authorities. A consultation of Barrow residents revealed most support a link with the Morecambe Bay area, but this option was later withdrawn. The Northern part will be a reborn Cumberland while Barrow will be part of Westmorland and Furness. This will be constituted in April 2023.

MEDIA IN BARROW-IN-FURNESS

A group of newspapers cover Cumbria, including the *News and Star*, the *Times and Star*, the *Whitehaven News*, *The Mail* (formerly the *North-West Evening Mail*), the *Westmorland Gazette*, and the *Hexham Courant*, owned by CN Group until 2018 when they were bought by Newsquest. They share an editor and are run from an office in Carlisle. Of these, the one associated with Barrow is the daily *The Mail*, which was run from an office in the town until 2020.⁷⁶ After rationalisation by the new owners, Newsquest journalists in Cumbria went on strike in December 2018 over low pay and redundancies.⁷⁷ *The Mail* had a circulation of 15,436 in 2010, dropping to 3,750 in 2020. In 2020 it had an online audience of 86,331.

Smaller publishers include Barrnon Media, whose website and Facebook page is called *Cumbria Crack*.⁷⁸

BBC Radio Cumbria had an office in Barrow which temporarily closed in 2021.⁷⁹ An independent community station which offers some local news is *CandoFM*.⁸⁰

Facebook groups offering local news and information include *Barrow-in-Furness Lost and Found Pets* (12,300 followers), *Barrow Idiot Drivers (and surrounding areas)* (7,700 members) and *The Beauty of Barrow-in-Furness* (10,500 followers).⁸¹

APPENDIX 2: METHODOLOGY

The project used a qualitative, social research methodology, aiming to capture data which are in-depth, detailed and sensitive to the social context. The project explores the phenomena of local news and information from the perspective of people in the communities chosen for study. A set of research aims were followed, with no preconceptions about the outcomes of a necessarily open-ended, exploratory approach.

The aims of the project were:

- To gather evidence about the impact of the decline in local news and information provision in the areas identified;
- To investigate how local people find local news and information in the absence of professional journalism;
- To learn about some of the impact of this decline on local communities, in particular on democratic participation.

We wanted this study to contribute to knowledge in a vital but greatly under-researched area, and thereby to advance policy debates on how to increase provision of reliable and independent local news. Appropriate research methods were chosen to address the research aims and were designed to gather empirical qualitative evidence through rigorous data collection and analysis.⁸²

Across 7 communities in the UK, 72 key informant interviews were conducted between October 2021 and May 2022. Key informants were people working in the public, charity, voluntary, arts, community and commercial sectors who had close experience of community issues and whose activities had been reported in the local press. Additionally, in 3 of the communities, 8 focus groups were conducted with 'news consumers': local people who were the intended audience for local news. All respondents contributed data in conditions of anonymity and according to a consent agreement.

The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured around the project aims. A standard set of questions was followed, with flexibility to explore different avenues or issues as these emerged from respondents. For the key informant interviews, the standard questions were:

- What is local news like in your community?
- What have been the key changes over time?
- What sort of reporting does your organisation get?
- How do you publicise your activities?
- What important local issues do you feel are not being properly reported?
- Is there enough information available for local people to participate as citizens?
- What would your ideal local news service look like?

For the focus groups, the standard questions were:

- What is local news like in your community?
- Have you noticed any changes over time?
- What are some important local issues and do you feel well informed about them?
- Have you noticed any issues that aren't being properly reported?
- What effect does it have on the community when there is not enough information available about these issues?
- How do you hear about opportunities to impact local decision making through *formal* channels?
- How do you hear about opportunities to impact local decision making through *informal* channels?
- What would your ideal local news service look like?

In **Lewisham** the research involved 3 focus groups and 10 key informant interviews. Focus Group 1 involved 15 participants, aged 25–74. Focus Group 2 involved 5 participants aged 25–64. Focus Group 3 involved 15 participants, aged 14–18. All participants were residents of Lewisham. Participants were selected using a screener survey via a focus group recruitment service. The younger group were members of a local youth group.

In **Trowbridge**, the research involved 2 focus groups and 12 key informant interviews. Focus Group 1 involved 7 participants aged 35–84, and Focus Group 2 involved 7 participants aged 18–75. Both groups were recruited using adverts in local charities. All participants were residents of Trowbridge or settlements nearby.

In **Whitby** the research involved 4 focus groups and 13 key informant interviews. Focus Group 1 involved 9 participants aged 35–75. Focus Group 2 involved 4 participants aged 35–65. Focus Group 3 involved 5 participants aged 18–35. Focus Group 4 involved 5 participants aged 18–45. All participants were residents of Whitby or settlements nearby.

8 key informant interviews were conducted in each of **Tiverton** and **Cullompton, Haverfordwest** and **Barrow-in-Furness** and 13 were conducted in **Corby**.

In addition to this, data was gathered from websites and social media. This was cross referenced with secondary research, findings from the interviews and focus groups, and news reports to create pictures of local news landscapes.

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