

Pubs and Papers: Pillars of Local Life That Deserve Our Support

By News Media Association chief executive Owen Meredith

As someone who is found perhaps more frequently than I should be in my local pub, I'm genuinely thrilled that the government has finally recognised the need for action to support these institutions. Whether it's catching up with friends over a pint, watching sport, or enjoying a quiet moment at the bar - I know just how vital these establishments are to the soul of our communities. But pubs, like local newspapers, are facing an uphill battle to survive.

As part of its review of the Licensing Act 2003 which applies to England and Wales, the government's Licensing Taskforce came up with some very sensible proposals to support the hospitality sector - both long-established venues that are struggling with rising costs and fewer punters, and those seeking to bring new watering holes to our high streets.

But one proposal in the package of 10 recommendations has been particularly ill thought out; namely, the suggestion that removing licensing application notices from local newspapers is somehow a necessary cut to bureaucratic red tape. In reality, this proposal, which was put out for consultation by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and Business Secretary Peter Kyle on 9 October, would amount to a betrayal - not only of local papers and the essential role they play in informing the public, but also of the very community institutions like pubs that these notices often concern.

Because make no mistake: pubs and papers go hand in hand. They are community hubs, rooted in place, fostering connection, and acting as a glue that binds neighbourhoods together. Both have suffered heavily in recent years - from the pandemic, changing consumer habits, and rising costs - but both have also shown remarkable grit and innovation in rising to the challenge.

Walk into any pub today and you'll likely find more than just a beer on tap. You'll find quiz nights, open mic sessions, parent-and-baby coffee mornings, pizza trucks in the car park, and even coworking spaces. Pubs are working harder than ever to appeal to a new generation of patrons - and many are succeeding, transforming themselves into vibrant, multifunctional venues that still keep that warm, inclusive pub feel.

The same is true of local newspapers. We've innovated to adapt to a changing world. Local publishers now reach more readers than ever before, not just through the printed page but through dynamic websites, newsletters, podcasts, and social media. Public notices - like those relating to licensing applications for pubs - are published in print and online through the Public Notice Portal, a free-to-access platform developed by the industry with funding from the Google News Initiative, which ensures maximum visibility and reach.

This isn't about clinging to the past. It's about recognising the vital role that trusted, independent local journalism plays in democratic life - and how it intersects with the survival and success of places like your local pub.

Removing licensing notices from local newspapers doesn't just hurt publishers - it shuts local people out of decisions that affect their daily lives. These notices give residents the chance to

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have their say on new venues opening up, changes to licensing hours, or proposed developments that may impact local amenities. Taking that away strips power from communities by shrouding them in secrecy, quietly eroding accountability in local decision-making.

And for what? A minor administrative tweak dressed up as a cost-saving measure, but which in truth will deliver negligible savings while inflicting disproportionate damage. Made up mainly of representatives from the hospitality sector and night-time industries, the Licensing Taskforce was not equipped with the right expertise to foresee and avoid these dangers.

As if that wasn't enough to contend with, Ministers are also proposing, through a provision in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, to remove from local papers public notices concerned with changes to local authority governance arrangements.

As it embarks upon the most dramatic reform of local government in 50 years, this would result in far-reaching changes happening in secret, utterly at odds with the principles of open local democratic engagement.

The truth is that public notices aren't red tape - they're part of the infrastructure that keeps our communities connected, informed, and empowered. They bring readers to local newspapers, both print and digital, and provide a crucial income stream that supports community journalism in the public interest. And, crucially, the requirement to publish in print ensures that those who cannot, or prefer not to, use digital technology - often the older, isolated and more vulnerable members of society - can still access public notices.

What's more, independent research shows that local news media remains the primary source used by the public to access public notices - ahead of other sources such as social media, local authority websites, search engines, and printed mailouts.

Taken together, the government's misguided proposals to remove public notices from local papers amount to a highly damaging attack on the public right to know, which would shroud local communities in secrecy. For the sake of our local communities, Ministers must immediately change course and commit to keeping public notices in highly trusted local newspapers.