Written submission from Scottish Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 25 November 2026

Broadcasting and News evidence session 1 December 2026

Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

By Richard Walker, SPIJI chair

The Scottish Public Interest Journalism Initiative (formerly Institute) is an attempt to establish an independent organisation to promote, support and protect public interest journalism in Scotland. It aims to do so by exploring ways to articulate the importance of journalism to democracy, highlighting the threats to that journalism and, eventually, providing funding opportunities for essential public interest journalism projects that the free market struggles to support. It also hopes to encourage media literacy and diversity within newsrooms in Scotland.

SPIJI was established after a recommendation from a Scottish Government-commissioned, cross-industry working group in 2021. The working group was established because the impact of new technology had sig-nificantly undermined the established business model for journalism, leading to widespread redundancies in the industry and to repeated cuts to resources and pagination and therefore a reduction in local and national news coverage.

Although there remains significant demand for journalism throughout Scotland – indeed an increase in the platforms providing Scottish journalism has increased public demand for it – the migration of advertising away from print and the fall in paid-for newspaper circulations has significantly reduced the money which had been available to subsidise journalism.

The Scottish Government's 2021 working group was set up in response to these challenges and to the effects of the Covid pandemic. Its report aimed ‘‘to provide the basis for a rich and sustainable news publishing landscape which provides the public with a reliable supply of accessible, trusted information, enhances democratically accountability at all levels, binds communities together and represents all groups in Scottish society, including those that historically had not had a strong voice in the media.’’

The working group therefore recognised the importance of public interest journalism in promoting what its report described as ‘‘a robust democratic culture, in Scotland and beyond’’.

Journalism undoubtedly serves an important a democratic function. It informs the public, scrutinises institutions, investigates wrongdoing and gives communities a voice. The problem SPIJI has to address is that these activities are not always commercially viable, particularly at local and regional levels.

Its role is partly institutional: to create an organisation capable of bringing together

funding, expertise, re-search and practical support that individual publishers and journalists might otherwise struggle to access.

The creation of SPIJI was the first of a number of recommendations put forward by the Scottish Government's working group. The Scottish Government provides administrative support for SPIJI, which recently registered itself as a company limited by guarantee at Companies House and which remains independent of that government.

Since the 2021 report the challenges facing news providers in Scotland have intensified. Virtually all the mainstream news companies have seen their print circulations fall and their advertising revenues reduce significantly enough to warrant regular redundancies and budget cuts.

When I began my career in local journalism in Ayrshire, which I have to admit was as far back as the 1970s, the main towns of Ayr and Irvine each had two competing newspapers and other towns such as Kilmarnock, Troon and Prestwick, Largs, Girvan, Cumnock and Ardrossan, Saltcoats and Sevenston had their own. Those newspapers had their own offices, their own staff and their own editors. They were woven into the fabric of their communities, reporting on all the major council decisions affecting their readers and providing oversight of the local courts.

Today most of those newspapers, and others fulfilling the same functions all over the country, still exist, but in a much-reduced form. Most share offices and staffs with other titles in the same stable. They can't possibly provide the standard of news coverage they once did.

Fears of so-called news deserts where local communities were left with no news service at all, have so far proved unfounded but there is certainly a cost to democracy of the reduction of news coverage of certain areas. This reduction comes at a time of growth in the tide of fake news and the resulting loss of trust among readers, who desperately need to know how to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources of news.

The problems which have been experienced by the printed press are also inflicting broadcasters, resulting in the cuts which have been announced recently by BBC Scotland and STV.

The Westminster parliament's local media action plan is a recognition of the importance of journalism, pro-viding six million pounds for local journalism in 2026/2027 and another six million pounds in 2027/2028. Scottish news publishers have been largely excluded from the main action plan grants, given that press funding is a devolved matter. The Scottish Government has not so far indicated it would replicate the West-minster plan.

SPJI has been hampered by a severe lack of funds. We have to rely on volunteers for all the work SPIJI needs to do. As a result, progress has been much slower than we would have liked. SPIJI has recently commissioned research into exactly how Scottish news coverage has been reduced in certain specified areas to begin painting a picture of the scale and the effects of the cuts in local news. The results of

that research should be published soon.

Our recent registration with Companies House will finally allow us to raise funds for more detailed research into where and what we need to concentrate on first and that will be our focus in the year ahead. Our current working group includes talented representatives of the industry, the academic world, and independent journalists.

We are well aware of a number of exciting, independent journalistic endeavours such as The Ferret and the Bell as well as excellent new community newspapers, many of them brought together by the Scottish Beacon network. There is no shortage of work to be done but we need to find the resources necessary to do it.