Dear Cabinet Secretary,

PUBLIC INTEREST JOURNALISM IN SCOTLAND

I am writing to you, on behalf of the Scottish Parliament's Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee, with regard to evidence we have taken, on the sustainability of the newspaper industry, on 1 October 2020. The evidence session focussed on three areas: the industry pre-pandemic; the impact of the pandemic; and possible future direction for the industry to enable it to deal with the long-term challenges it is facing and still contribute to a well-functioning democracy. The official report for this session is available here: http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12869.

As part of the evidence session, the Committee discussed recommendations of the Cairncross Review and specific recommendations made by the National Union of Journalists. As you will be aware, Dame Cairncross published her review in February 2019. While the recommendations of the review are aimed at the UK Government and UK institutions, several of her recommendations could be addressed at a Scottish level. The Committee would be interested in the Scottish Government’s response to the conclusions of the Cairncross review and whether the Scottish Government is planning to develop its own policy in response to the review.

As well as the Scottish Government’s broad response to the review, the Committee is particularly interested in the role of Scottish Government’s agencies in supporting...
innovation in the industry, media literacy and the proposal for the establishment of an Institute for Public Interest News.

Public Interest news

The NUJ argued that there could be an Institute for Public Interest News at Scotland level. It also suggested that the Scottish Government could do more to support local communities to take over their local publications on a not-for-profit basis.

The Committee would be grateful if you could set out what support the Scottish Government, and its agencies, currently provide to community groups and organisations that wished take ownership of local newspapers and if the Scottish Government has any plans to create further support for community buy-outs of local newspaper titles.

The Committee would be grateful if you could share your views on the benefits of an Institute for Public Interest News. The Committee understands some work might be taking place in this area and would be grateful if you could provide information on any progress made to date.

Working group on public interest news in Scotland

One of our witnesses, Joyce McMillan, Chair of the National Union of Journalists Edinburgh Freelance Branch, said during the session that you are in the process of setting up a working group on public interest news in Scotland. The Committee would be grateful if you could confirm this and provide details on the membership and remit of this group and the timescales for its work.

Media literacy

It is arguable that critical engagement with the media has never been more important and this is clearly something that could be addressed in our schools. The Committee recognises that local authorities and individual schools have a great deal of autonomy over what pupils learn.

The Committee would be grateful if you could provide details of any work the Scottish Government or Education Scotland has undertaken to understand how well media literacy is covered in our schools. Dame Cairncross’ raised concerns that adults should not be left out of consideration of media literacy¹ and the Committee would welcome your views on what actions the Scottish Government may be able to undertake to address this.

Vouchers for young people

Linked to media literacy for young people, the NUJ suggested that all young people between the ages of 16 and 19 be provided vouchers to spend on subscriptions to high quality journalism. The Committee would be grateful for the Scottish Government’s view on this suggestion.

¹ See p95 of the Cairncross Review
Advertising

The Committee understand how vital advertising revenue is to papers to provide quality journalism and also how advertising has greatly changed with the move to digital media. The Committee would be grateful if you could confirm how the Scottish Government is using its advertising expenditure to support high quality journalism at a local and national level.

The Committee would appreciate a response to this letter by 9 November 2020.

Yours sincerely,

Joan McAlpine MSP
Convener, Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee