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### **NUJ briefing on the local news crisis in London**

According to the media trade magazine, the Press Gazette, London has fewer newspapers per million of population compared to other regions in the country.

The NUJ has reported cuts to newsrooms across the capital that have had a serious impact on their ability to fully cover the Assembly, local councils, health authorities and other democratic organisations. Research has also shown there is a link between poor local news coverage and participation in local elections.

It would be expected that London, as a political and cultural centre and with its vast population, would have a vibrant press. There is no shortage of stories and readers, but investment in journalism by the owners of the capital's newspapers, websites and radio stations is at an all-time low.

Members on Newsquest's south London titles are now balloting for industrial action over inadequate staffing levels, excessive workloads, reduced quality of newspapers, the health and safety of employees, plus pay.

A stress survey earlier this year covering these workers showed many were suffering from high workloads, struggling with a new production system and poor communication from the company's senior management. Staff say they live in fear of losing their jobs because of the company's many redundancy rounds.

It is not just the health and safety of journalists that has driven them to ballot for a strike. They are passionate about their jobs and want to produce the best newspapers and websites as possible, but understaffing and the loss of experienced colleagues have put quality under threat. One NUJ member said that at least one newspaper had been sent to print without being read by anyone more senior than a content editor.

The NUJ's Newsquest south London chapel has reported that newspapers covering Merton and Epsom have been staffed by lone trainees with no permanent editor and the 142-year-old Richmond & Twickenham Times will have just one trainee reporter from September. The Wandsworth Guardian will soon have no reporters because the intern who covers the entire borough is due to leave.

An analysis of the Evening Standard website in the report, *Monopolising local news: Is there an emerging local democratic deficit in the UK due to the decline of local newspapers?* by the

Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, King's College London, indicates that a large number of London boroughs are the subject of less than one article per day. The report also pointed to the fact that newspaper production jobs have been taken out of the capital – Newsquest's newspapers are being sub-edited in Weymouth, approximately 140 miles away. There are signs the company is reversing this policy, with production being sent back to local titles which have sacked all their experienced editing staff.

Gordon Ramsay and Martin Moore, authors of the report, analysed the amount of choice and found that of the 32 boroughs in Greater London served by a local newspaper:

- 20 Local Authority Districts (LADs) had a publisher with greater than 70 per cent share of the market.
- 13 had a monopoly publisher – these were mainly in west London and included Hounslow, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Richmond upon Thames and Kingston upon Thames.
- Trinity Mirror had a monopoly in four Greater London LADs (Hillingdon, Ealing, Hounslow, Hammersmith & Fulham).
- Newsquest had a monopoly in four Greater London LADs (Harrow, Richmond upon Thames, Kingston upon Thames, Wandsworth).
- Archant had a monopoly in three Greater London LADs (Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Newham).
- Tindle had a monopoly in one Greater London LAD (Kensington and Chelsea).

Gareth Davies is an award-winning journalist who took voluntary redundancy from the Croydon Advertiser following its take-over from Local World by Trinity Mirror. He sparked a debate in the Press Gazette about what was happening to the local press. "Reporters no longer have any input or involvement in the paper product, including no chance to proofread," he said. "A paper with a proud 147-year history is reduced to being a thrown-together collection of clickbait written for the web." Davies says that under Trinity Mirror the paper has two reporters who cover Surrey and Sussex as well as Croydon (which has a population of 380,000), but no photographers.

Last year, NUJ members working for Newsquest titles in south London went on strike for 10 days because of redundancies and heavy workloads and to persuade the management to pay trainees a living wage. This summer, one journalist who recently left Newsquest south London wrote to the NUJ with grave concerns. "Morale is at rock bottom. There used to be at least two reporters on each paper, now desks are lucky if they have one. Audiences are being isolated. The content isn't as good because reporters are so stretched they don't have time to investigate issues or scrutinise the stories properly so the papers are losing credibility. The websites carry news which is not relevant to the particular area and the homepages now look generic, losing any idea of local identity."

Journalists now balloting for action, say there appears to be an unofficial recruitment freeze, with staff who leave not being replaced. They say they have had no guidance or communication from managing director, Tony Portelli, regarding the future of newsrooms where staffing is at dangerously low levels.

The titles balloting include the Croydon, Epsom, Kingston, Richmond, Sutton, Wandsworth and Wimbledon Guardians, the Richmond & Twickenham Times, the Surrey Comet and the News Shopper (Bexley, Bromley, Dartford, Gravesend, Greenwich and Lewisham editions) as well as their associated websites.

The NUJ's stress survey at these titles found 88 per cent often or always worked intensively, 36 per cent said they had unachievable deadlines, more than half (52 per cent) did not have supportive feedback on their work, 56 per cent did not have sufficient breaks and 88 per cent said they were not consulted about changes at work.

Comments included:

- "I have had no support from my editor or those above throughout my time at Newsquest, despite being given an unrealistically large and high-pressure workload in my first job as a trainee, and being the sole trainee expected to complete a large paper alone. Changes are agreed behind closed doors with no consultation with reporters and apparent total disregard of how it will affect them."
- "There is plenty of support and encouragement in the office from colleagues, but not enough from the company. Each desk is working with the bare minimum of reporters and every reporter is stretched to their limits to cover everything going on in their patch. Stress levels are exceptionally high at times because of this."
- "The company's strategy of managed decline has created a pervasive negativity in the office. Staff are expected to produce a lot of work in little time. The opportunity to produce quality, in-depth journalism is lacking for that reason, which gnaws at reporters who know they are capable of better journalism than they produce. That said, their attitude in the face of all this is generally good and good work is still done here [but] Newsquest's approach has soured the collective attitude to the point that even trainee reporters are leaving the company in disgust."

A statement from the NUJ chapel said: "Newsquest's willingness to lie to the trade press, by denying just how desperately under-resourced its newsrooms are, came as no surprise to the teams working in them. Our journalists remain in the dark about what the managing director's plans are because he has not communicated with us. This chips away at our morale and emotional well-being week by week.

"Newspapers covering Merton and Epsom have been staffed by lone trainees with no permanent editor for months, while the 142-year-old Richmond & Twickenham Times will have just one trainee reporter from September. The Wandsworth Guardian will have no reporters once the intern currently expected to cover the entire borough leaves in the coming weeks.

"Henry Faure Walker, the chief executive, must take our concerns seriously by ending his hiring freeze and relinquishing his veto on bringing in any new staff," the union said.

"Last week, the Gravesend edition of News Shopper folded owing to under-staffing and the Lewisham and Greenwich editions were merged, weakening the identity of both in one fell swoop."

- *Monopolising local news: Is there an emerging local democratic deficit in the UK due to the decline of local newspapers?* by Gordon Ramsay and Martin Moore, the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, King's College London.  
<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/CMCP/local-news.pdf>
- *Journey to the centre of a news black hole: examining the democratic deficit in a town with no newspaper*, Rachel Howells