

Got a story? Contact 0161 831 5563 or email: news@bigissuenorth.co.uk

News in brief

It's hot on the press

Free newspapers produced by councils are to be scrutinised by the Audit Commission, which will decide whether restraints should be placed on them competing with local newspapers for paid-for advertising.

The government announced an inquiry into the effect council publications have on the local media as part of its white paper Digital Britain, which was published on 16 June.

Culture minister Ben Bradshaw said: "We are asking the Audit Commission to examine the practice of local authorities spending quite a lot of council tax payers' money putting out free newspapers and swallowing up a lot of local advertising that might otherwise go to local papers."

Media analysis company Enders predicts that half of local newspapers will close in the next five years, partly due to a fall in advertising. Council magazines are accused of contributing to this decline by accepting advertising from bodies like the NHS, police and housing associations, as well as businesses.

The Digital Britain report, which looks at the future of the national, regional and local press, says: "It is essential that high quality, independent journalism should continue to thrive and keep UK citizens informed." It raises concerns that council publications will "inevitably not be as rigorous in holding local institutions to account as independent local media".

A former member of the editorial board of Life in Salford, Salford City Council's monthly magazine, agreed, calling council newspapers a "PR tool". Liberal Democrat

Council papers will "not be as rigorous in holding local institutions to account".

councillor Steve Cooke said: "Council-funded newspapers are not subject to the same standards of journalistic integrity as newspapers and neither do they hold councils to account.

"In Salford the council leader admitted the council paper would not publish anything critical. These newsletters should be about informing people, not persuading them. Councils use their own taxpayer-funded papers to paint an extremely biased view of their performance, and harm the local press and democratic accountability as a result."

However, councils argue that by accepting paid-for adverts they free up taxpayers' money, and the Local Government Association insists council-funded freesheets do not pose a threat to newspapers.

An LGA spokesman said: "We have surveyed our member authorities and there is no evidence that council newspapers have any adverse impact.

"These publications are infrequent, whereas the vast majority of newspapers are daily or weekly. Their function is not to provide news – you do not go to them to find out what's happened over the last week. They exist to inform residents about how to access services."

NATALIE BRADBURY

PAPER BILL

Comedians are holding a benefit gig for the National Union of Journalists' campaign against cuts at local newspapers. BBC Radio Manchester presenter Chris Holliday will comper the event at the Baker's Vault in Stockport at 7.30pm on 5 July. In Stockport MEN Media has removed all journalists from the office, where the *Stockport Express*, *South Manchester Reporter* and *Trafford Metro News* were based. Acts to be confirmed. Cost: £5.

INSPIRING WOMAN

Anne Davies, chief executive of the Jigsaw4u charity in Newton Le Willows, Merseyside, has won She magazine's inspiring woman of the year award. In 1997 Davies founded Jigsaw4u to support young people and families who experience grief, loss and trauma. There are 27 staff and volunteers with three offices in the UK. The charity works with other organisations to help children in South Africa, Peru and Nigeria.

GREEN JOBS

If local authorities on Merseyside insulated buildings and fitted green energy, it could create 600 jobs as well as cutting climate-changing emissions, according to research by Friends of the Earth. The research – by social enterprise and environment trust Carbon Descent – was published to launch a new nationwide campaign calling for local councils to take urgent action to cut CO2 by at least 40 per cent by 2020. Liverpool City Council aims to reduce carbon emissions by 35 per cent by 2024.

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Five towns and cities in the North West and Yorkshire and Humber are in the ten with the highest percentage rise in young people claiming benefits in the past year, according to the thinktank Centre for Cities. Swindon in Wiltshire was the worst performing town in England but the ten also include Doncaster, Barnsley, Wigan, Hull and Wakefield. Centre for Cities predicts youth unemployment in the country to treble between now and the end of 2011.



Leeds Prison will this week be transformed into a giant exhibition, with the work of photographer Casey Orr emblazoned on its exterior walls.

The collection of 24 photos will focus on issues such as migration, community and home, and will also contain shots of inmates and their families. They will also be on display inside for the prisoners to see.



"The prison is a landmark in this area but it's as if it's invisible or impenetrable," said Orr. "I hope to make a connection between what's happening on the inside and outside of the building."

Pictured are Megan and Aurora from Canada, and a caged bird. The exhibition starts on 2 July.

TOM EGLIN