

Publishers | February 26, 2026

# Chelsea Citizen banks campaign wins and local goodwill, but yet to turn profit

Rob McGibbon on his first year as a local newsbrand owner.

By Alice Brooker



Rob McGibbon holding an old copy of the Wimbledon News in London. Picture: June Torrance



The affluent London borough of Chelsea and Kensington is no longer a news desert following the launch of The Chelsea Citizen a year ago providing postcode level coverage of the area.

Founder Rob McGibbon has already made an impact with campaigning journalism and established a dedicated local following. But so far profitability has been hard to find despite the title's largely high-earning audience.

McGibbon said the Chelsea Citizen covers "everything from council matters and planning disputes, to golden weddings, births and deaths," alongside cultural content.

The site's main success, McGibbon told Press Gazette, has been with campaigning, as seen with the recent petition against a proposed 29-storey luxury tower block in Battersea.

"The tower one is really, really important," he said, referring to Stop One Battersea Bridge (SOBB) campaign. An eight-day public enquiry begins on 17 March. "I'm taking two reporters with me. I'm having to pay for those. We're going to file copy every day on it."

The Chelsea Citizen has been fighting to stop the development for two years, and has the support of high profile residents Mick Jagger, Eric Clapton and Felicity Kendal behind it, said McGibbon. He added he is the "centre point" of the campaign, which aims to convince the government inspector to Save Battersea Riverside, linking key local residents, the press, the environment agency and a number of borough societies.

Previous separate campaigns have led to the council taking renewed action against a man dubbed the "neighbour from hell", following the Chelsea Citizen's coverage of his home's rampant Japanese knotweed, presence of rats and even a decaying corpse in its basement. The story was picked up as a double-page spread in the Mail.

"That was very awkward for the council, because they really ignored the residents for years... I got it on my news site, in the Daily Mail... Now they're acting."



The Daily Mail's coverage of The Chelsea Citizen's story of a house in the borough that fell into disrepair. Picture: The Chelsea Citizen

Another campaign, which caused McGibbon "a lot of anxiety", was picked up by the Sunday Times, and prevented a local multi-millionaire entrepreneur building a 7,760 sq ft luxury basement after he'd spent "hundreds of thousands" on planning applications. Another story, followed by the Private Eye, covered a house the council bought in 2017 for £4.1m that remains empty.

"Campaigns are really important to me, because they get great recognition locally," said McGibbon, adding it's also the "small stories that matter" such as one about budgie being found in the local cemetery which ended up as "the talk of the local dentist".

## Local stories haven't changed in 40 years

McGibbon began his career at Wimbledon News, from where he was fired after a year in 1986 for moonlighting on The Sun. He then moved on to report for the Daily Star, later becoming a showbiz writer at The Sun. He has written 12 celebrity biographies and previously contributed columns to Press Gazette and the Daily Mail.

The Chelsea Citizen has got "40 years' worth of Fleet Street experience coming at local journalism", McGibbon said. "Local journalism hasn't changed in 40 years, because I'm now doing stories that I did 40 years ago, and they're still more relevant than ever. The work I've been doing the last year has been more fulfilling than the acres of stuff I've done over the decades."

McGibbon works full-time on the site, paying a web developer to manage the site part-time and working with another reporter, ex-Sky News and Bloomberg journalist John Cookson, since November. He said self-financing the project has been the biggest challenge, "almost wiping out my savings to do this".

McGibbon launched a funding campaign for the title launch with a target of raising £60,000 in 20 days, but this was unsuccessful.

The site's traffic is growing, however: in the last 90 days the site has attracted 5,500 clicks (up 71%) and 2,400 unique users (up 65%). Its fortnightly newsletter containing 16 news items has around 1,400 free subscribers.

"There's no one doing it in Chelsea, I'm amazed at that," said McGibbon, in reference to local news reporting. "There is such an appetite for what I'm doing locally... the engagement stats are amazing."

McGibbon said the newsletter being written with humour is key to engagement – though "last year, I had one of my earliest readers emailed me to say... 'can you please stop telling all these jokes? We just want the news'".

McGibbon published the feedback in redacted form in the next newsletter, adding that a joke-free service is available at £75 a month.

For now, the Chelsea Citizen's success can only be measured by feedback, McGibbon said, which is something he didn't receive at national papers.

Looking back at the Citizen's first year, McGibbon said: "The highlight of the year for me was being asked to lay a wreath during the Remembrance Sunday service at Sloane Square war memorial. I could only have got such an honour by virtue of being the editor of the local rag."

In the future, McGibbon hopes to secure six annual sponsors within three months and hire two training reporters and a web editor over time as traffic organically grows. He also plans to appeal for reader donations for the site to help it last in the long term.

"I'm 60 now, I've gone back to the very beginning, and it's bizarre," McGibbon said. "If it doesn't work out, I'm going to go back and resit my A levels and go straight into banking – sod journalism!"

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RobMcGibbon

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