

*Championing
excellence and diversity
in broadcasting*

Founded in 1983 by Jocelyn Hay CBE



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**RESPONSE BY VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER
TO BBC TRUST CONSULTATION ON
BBC LOCAL RADIO AND LOCAL NEWS
AND CURRENT AFFAIRS IN ENGLAND**

September 2015

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INFORMATION ABOUT VLV

Voice of the Listener & Viewer Limited (VLV) represents the citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and speaks for listeners and viewers on the full range of broadcasting issues. It uses its independent expertise to champion quality and diversity in public service broadcasting, to respond to consultations, to produce policy briefings and to conduct research. VLV has no political, commercial or sectarian affiliations and is concerned with the issues, structures, institutions and regulations that underpin the British broadcasting system. VLV supports the principles of public service in broadcasting. It is a charitable company limited by guarantee (registered in England No 4407712 - Charity No 1152136).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. VLV believes that the BBC's local output is a distinctive and vital addition to local democracy and community cohesion. It makes available the kind of in depth services that local commercial stations do not have the resources, motivation or ability to provide. For this reason, these services are highly valued by VLV members.
2. VLV, in common with the BBC Trust's *Audience Councils Annual Review 2014-15*, considers "there is a great deal of distinctive, engaging journalism in regional news and current affairs programmes, much of which is significantly different from that available on the national news." We welcome the increasing emphasis on BBC Local Radio to hold those in positions of power and responsibility to account. We also welcome the introduction of specialist local political reporters. The local current affairs series, *Inside Out*, deserves a special mention for its contribution to our more detailed understanding of local issues.
3. VLV questions whether the remit for BBC Local Radio in its service licence should state that the target audience for this service should be listeners aged 50 and over who are not well-served elsewhere. It is our view that local news and sport should be able to attract cross generational audiences. The inclusion of the need to attract a wider audience, including younger age groups, will include those who are at home with technology and may be able to encourage older listeners to use it.
4. With reference to local news and current affairs, VLV believes that these services deliver very good value for money.
5. VLV believes that any further reductions in funding for local services will make it very difficult for BBC local radio to deliver its service licence commitments in the future.
6. We make recommendations that the service licences for BBC One and Two should include a provision in the Conditions of these services to reflect the statutory commitment of both channels to provide a minimum level of regional programming in order to guarantee delivery of such content.
7. We would like to see provision in the service licence for local radio to ensure that it has a commitment to provide educational content, to reflect local arts and music and include the work of local writers as part of a station's speech output.

INTRODUCTION

8. VLV welcomes the opportunity to provide its comments in response to the BBC Trust's consultation on BBC local radio, news and current affairs provision in England.
9. VLV believes that the BBC's local output is a distinctive and vital addition to local democracy and community cohesion. It makes available the kind of in depth services that local commercial stations do not have the resources, motivation or ability to provide. For this reason, these services are highly valued by VLV members.
10. When preparing this submission we were surprised that it has been reported that David Holdsworth, Controller of English Regions, has already emailed staff announcing "a new direction for BBC local radio stations, with a focus on personalities and production." (*Radio Today* 15 July, 2015)

Although this report stated that BBC local radio is "not giving up on high quality journalism" it also suggested that content is to be "showcased in a way that delivers growing audiences". It promises a service with "presenters and output that will cheer you up as we involve you in local life."

VLV is concerned that:

This decision appears to have been taken before the data from the present consultation have been taken into account and

This policy is likely to make it more difficult to argue that BBC local radio is providing distinct public service broadcasting.

11. We have set out the rest of our response using the questions set out in the Terms of Reference.

How well does the BBC serve audiences with local radio and local news and current affairs in England?

How well does the BBC serve audiences across TV, radio and online with local news, current affairs and information?

12. VLV, in common with the BBC Trust's *Audience Councils Annual Review 2014-15*, considers "there is a great deal of distinctive, engaging journalism in regional news and current affairs programmes, much of which is significantly different from that available on the national news." We welcome the increasing emphasis on BBC Local Radio to hold those in positions of power and responsibility to account. We also welcome the introduction of specialist local political reporters. The local current affairs series, *Inside Out*, deserves a special mention for its contribution to our more detailed understanding of local issues.

How are new technologies changing the way the BBC should serve audiences with local news and information?

13. The adoption of new technologies enables the BBC to provide a wider and more relevant source of information and news for local audiences than in the past. In addition, new technologies enable people who have moved away from an area, or simply have an interest in it, to maintain contact with local news and sport specific to that area.
14. With reference to sport, “its influence over local sport and less popular events should not be underestimated.”¹ For example, the BBC in partnership with the ECB provides live ball-by-ball commentary of every County Championship match plus all NatWest T20 Blast and Royal London One-Day Cup games. The commentaries are broadcast via BBC online streams and are also available to mobile listeners via the BBC Sport app.
15. We also note the value of the BBC’s local news provision online, agreeing with the comment from a non BBC source that: “The BBC’s website has been at the forefront of many innovations later copied by other news groups. It is where people go for news they can trust. It would be a piece of monumental spite if the enemies and rivals of the corporation succeeded in killing or hobbling the BBC website”. (Stanistreet 2015)

How does the BBC’s local output fit with provision available from other local media?

16. VLV believes that the BBC’s local output is a distinctive and vital addition to local democracy and community cohesion. It makes available the kind of in depth services that local commercial stations do not have the resources, motivation or ability to provide.

How well is BBC Local Radio and local news and current affairs in England performing against commitments set out in services licences?

Are the services delivering high quality and distinctive content?

17. The 2012 review of local radio offers a wealth of evidence of the importance of the services provided, with 7.2 million people tuning into their local station sometime in each week. The review also offers a number of valuable comments and findings in relation to local news provision: 81% of the audience surveyed agreed that high quality journalism was important for BBC Local Radio.
18. VLV considers that BBC local radio news is significantly different and a valuable alternative to the news output from local commercial stations. Some commercial stations do produce local bulletins but since radio localness guidelines were changed in 2010 commercial radio operators have taken different approaches to local news and information provision, and local production. Research has shown that the majority of local radio listeners express an interest in local news (85%) with 82% of local radio listeners satisfied with BBC provision compared with 70% satisfied with provision on local commercial stations.²
19. There is little local current affairs provision outside that provided by the BBC on radio and therefore its contribution cannot be underestimated.

¹ Pixel Sport blog

² *Attitudes towards local radio, Ofcom 2013*

To what extent are licence fee payers using the services, and are some demographic groups better served than others?

20. VLV notes the BBC Trust's 2012 review of local radio which found that as many as 113 million listeners to BBC local radio stations did not listen to any other radio stations. It also remarks that *Ofcom's 2015 review of Public Service Broadcasting* found that "Viewers in ..., England and their regions feel the provision of news is one of the most important of the PSB purposes and, overall, viewers are satisfied with news for their local area."
21. VLV recognises that BBC Local Radio is targeted at an audience of over 50s. VLV believes this requirement limits the value of BBC Local Radio. We believe that local news should aim to attract younger audiences as well, many of whom may be users of digital media (which may be less the case than with the older target audience for BBC Local Radio.)
22. With reference to minority audiences, BBC research has found that "Older uncomfortable heterosexual people (aged 55-70) really struggled to accept the portrayal of LGB people" It further observed that it needs "to be accepted that some may never reach a point of comfort with portrayal of LGB people." VLV agrees with the report's observation that news broadcasters should "behave as broadsheets; namely, researched, evidenced, validated reporting without tabloid style sensationalism."³
23. With reference to ethnic minority audiences, we note that according to the Ofcom PSB Report 2015 the BBC faces a challenge engaging these audiences effectively.
24. Just over a year ago the journalist and broadcaster Hugh Muir⁴ spoke out, noting "the erosion of the black and Asian newsgathering facility providing material to minority shows on local radio". He said in writing his article that he expected correspondence "questioning the need for any community-specific programmes. Salvoes insisting that the concept is divisive." And he suggested that we "agree that in a perfect world, the black and Asian shows wouldn't be necessary. And when we get to that perfect world, let's scrap them. In the meantime, give them some respect." We share his concern that local news, radio and current affairs in England could do more to represent the interests of those from the ethnic minority community.
25. VLV also finds that there is only limited observance of the Licence Service Requirement to include specialist music output at off-peak times.

Are the services making an effective contribution to delivering the BBC's public purposes?

26. A case could be made that the BBC local services are making a contribution to all of the stated public purposes, however this is especially true when considering their contribution to "Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities", "Sustaining citizenship and civil society "and increasingly "Delivering to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services."
27. The first two of these purposes are now more important than ever because the local news sector is at increasing risk of market failure. It is argued by some that the BBC is in some ways responsible for this market failure but we note the opinion of the General Secretary of the

³ *BBC Portrayal of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People on the BBC Research Report* September 2010

⁴ 'Minority radio shows are no laughing matter', *The Guardian*, 18 August 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/aug/18/minority-radio-shows-iain-lee-no-laughing-matter>

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National Union of Journalists that; “It is completely disingenuous for these self-interested entities, who have been the masters of their own decline, to point to the BBC’s website as the culprit.” (Stanistreet 2015)

Are the services delivering good value for money?

28. We note that the 2012 review of local radio found that “The majority of BBC Local Radio listeners agree that the service represents good value for money and concluded that “it was 'performing well' and was 'highly appreciated”.
29. At the same time the Trust approved revised plans to cut £8m from the local radio budget, rather than the £15m originally proposed. Considering this cut and the increasing need for trusted, balanced and accurate sources of local news and information the audience satisfaction rate of 82% for BBC for local news coverage is a positive indication that services are continuing to deliver good value for money.
30. With reference to local news and current affairs, VLV believes that these services deliver very good value for money.

Is BBC Local Radio and local news and current affairs in England well-positioned to deliver its service licence commitments in the future?

Do their strategies and funding allow them to meet their objectives?

31. VLV believes that any further reductions in funding for local services will make it very difficult for BBC local radio to deliver its service licence commitments in the future.
32. Previous research has shown that it is the old and vulnerable who are most affected by local BBC radio cuts. At the time of the 2012 review the Local Government Association expressed fears that cuts could seriously compromise local radio's effectiveness during emergencies and potentially put lives at risk,” We believe lessons are to be learnt from the 2012 Review when across the country listeners reacted strongly against the proposed cuts to funding. At that time the BBC was obliged to take notice and reduced the amount. It stated that the scale and impact of the proposed cuts to BBC local radio had been “disproportionate to the value of these services to their audience.”
33. We note that, no doubt due to budgetary constraints, there are still areas such as Dorset that do not have a dedicated local station and suffer poor service from nearby local BBC stations. The large number of complaints from local people led to the formation of the Dorset Broadcasting Action Group (DorBAG). This was originally called WEDBAG (West Dorset Broadcasting Action Group).

Are the services responding effectively to changing audience expectations and consumption habits, primarily in response to technological shifts?

34. The target audience for BBC local services contains, as mandated in the Service Licence, is a significant group of people who are ambivalent towards the new technology because it has limited relevance to their lives.
35. Information researchers have argued that,” it could well be appropriate for the government and other interested parties to begin to consider alternative means of “reshaping” ICT to fit

better with the lives of older adults—rather than the other way around.” (Selwyn (2004) *Journal of Aging Studies* 18) 369–384). That said, as indicated above, there are an increasing number of people who expect to use the latest technology to listen to, read and or debate local matters. This number will no doubt increase as digital natives become part of the local radio audience.

Should the service licences be changed?

36. The service licences which refer to local news, current affairs and local radio in England most especially are those for BBC One, BBC Two and Local Radio. We comment on each in turn.

37. BBC One

As well as its statutory commitments to provide local news BBC One also has a requirement in its service licence to provide *Content that comes from, and reflects, the nations, regions and communities of the UK and It should offer opt-out programming for audiences in the BBC's nations and regions.*

VLV would like this commitment to remain in BBC One's service licence.

In addition we would recommend that there is a provision in the Conditions of the BBC One service licence which reflects the service's current statutory commitment to provide a minimum level of regional programming. We believe that this would strengthen the guarantee of such provision which is valuable because it is only through longer form programmes that the complexity of stories which are relevant to regional audiences can be examined in detail.

38. BBC Two

As with the service licence for BBC One, VLV believes that the current shared statutory commitment to provide a minimum level of regional programming should be included in the Conditions of the BBC Two service licence.

BBC Local Radio

39. VLV questions whether the remit for BBC Local Radio in its service licence should state that the target audience for this service should be listeners aged 50 and over who are not well-served elsewhere. It is our view that local news and sport should be able to attract cross generational audiences. The inclusion of the need to attract a wider audience, including younger age groups, will include those who are at home with technology and may be able to encourage older listeners to use it.

40. Additionally, some VLV members have said they would like BBC local radio to have a greater educational content, to reflect local arts and music and include the work of local writers as part of a station's speech output. BBC Radio Sheffield once had an educational producer, the late Dave Sheasby, who wrote and produced quality drama with a local content and introduced Berlie Doherty and Ian McMillan to radio listeners.

Name: Sophie Chalk

Name of organisation: Voice of the Listener & Viewer

DECLARATION

I confirm that the information I have submitted is a formal consultation response. It can be published in full on the BBC Trust's website, unless otherwise specified, and I authorise the BBC Trust to make use of the information in this response to meet its legal requirements. If I have sent my response by email, the BBC can disregard any standard e-mail text about not disclosing email contents and attachments.

Signed (if hard copy): Sophie Chalk

If you wish to keep some of all or your response confidential, please indicate this by including the relevant statement below and specifying sections if necessary.

We do not wish to keep any of our response confidential.