

*'Working for quality
and diversity in
British broadcasting'*



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VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER RESPONSE TO THE BBC TRUST CONSULTATION

LOCAL RADIO SERVICE REVIEW

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Confidentiality Statement

No part of this response is confidential.

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Please note that Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) has also submitted a Response to the BBC Trust's Consultation on Delivery Quality First, which should be read in conjunction with this submission, where VLV expands its views about the overall proposals and the role which BBC Local Radio plays within them.

VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER RESPONSE TO THE BBC TRUST CONSULTATION

LOCAL RADIO SERVICE REVIEW

Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) is an independent, non-profit-making association, free from political, commercial and sectarian affiliations, working for quality and diversity in British broadcasting. VLV represents the interests of listeners and viewers as citizens and consumers across the full range of broadcasting issues. VLV is concerned with the structures, regulation, funding and institutions that underpin the British broadcasting system.

VLV welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. As a national organisation we have restricted our comments to the general implications of the Delivering Quality First project for local radio. We have encouraged our members to respond on the details of the performance of the services in their own communities.

When the DQF process was announced in the spring of 2011 VLV began consulting our membership and holding discussions. In recent months we have organised public meetings in Sheffield, Leeds, Edinburgh, Manchester, Belfast and London.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of BBC Local Radio was emphasised by the Chairman of the BBC Trust in oral evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport on December 13th. 'The services are often the glue that holds the community together.' He also explained that the services made up for the failure of the market to provide a comprehensive service locally.

In the same evidence it was explained that the local radio proposals had so far attracted the largest and most articulate response to the DQF proposals. VLV has also received a lot of feed back expressing concerns about the changes, both in correspondence and at our public meetings. We are reassured that the BBC Executive and Trust are listening to the reaction; however we will not be totally convinced about the future of BBC Local Radio until we see some significantly revised proposals. Therefore we make the submission below.

2. RADIO IN GENERAL

Radio is a special part of the media as it has a unique nature 'a flexible medium, radio's appeal to the listener is that it is more than simply a stream of audio: it is an intimate, portable and ambient medium; and it is a very personal medium: the pictures that it forms inside our heads are different for every listener.'¹ It is a central part of the lives of many groups: the housebound, the sight impaired, those in institutions, the elderly, people who work alone or through the night. Radio keeps them in touch in a personal way not achieved by other media.

For this reason any attempts to reduce output or change radio channels must be done with great care. Radio is a very economical medium with very few staff working on each programme. We have found it a challenge to respond adequately to this section of the consultation as there is so little detail given the many hours of programming that may be effected. Where we quantify a cut it is based on well sourced information we have received.

¹ Digital Britain Report Chapter 3b paragraph 2

3. SPECIFIC MATTERS ARISING FROM DELIVERING QUALITY FIRST, RELATING TO BBC LOCAL RADIO

The consequences of the planned cuts in BBC Local Radio are severe. They are relatively modest services where a small staff cut will make a major impact. Even a small cut can affect quality and content.

VLV is puzzled that as a consequence of the 2010 licence fee settlement, the BBC is to support the development of local commercial television with £40 million over three years when its own local radio stations are to have budget cuts estimated at £15 million. The content cut alone is £5.3 million a year and this is before the efficiency cuts bite; these could be much bigger.²

BBC Local Radio was established in 1967 to provide a distinctive voice within an editorially cohesive community. It replaced the unwieldy regions. Over 40 years later many of these BBC stations are the most popular in their editorial area. Imposed programme sharing between neighbours would be a significant step back in time to sub-regional radio. We are unimpressed by the management decision which recently combined Sheffield, Leeds and York for a sharing experiment – disparate neighbours with little in common. Local presence, particularly during the day, is a vital part of a BBC station's role. It is when the older audience is most likely to listen. They are not 'drive time' listeners. Many of them are lonely, isolated and suffering from financial hardship. Their local station provides a much needed 'conversation' when listeners can share experiences, gain advice and feel part of the community. They are just as loyal as those who prefer Radio 4. VLV understands that programme sharing in itself would only save about a quarter of the target.

BBC Local Radio is a success story with a large, as well as a loyal, audience. Across the country it attracts an audience of over 7.2 million, comparing favourably with the national station, Radio 4, which attracts an audience of 10.5 million.³

In the often negative assessment of local radio the obsession with peak time and drive time leads, in our view, to a significant misunderstanding of the nature of local radio and its audience. Peak listening times have virtually the same pattern for all radio, not just local. But there are major differences between communities: a farmer is not sitting at home listening to breakfast radio, neither are shift workers nor commuters.

3.1 News

News is a very important element in local radio and needs as many reporters as possible. A good journalist working for a local broadcaster should be able to understand the local area and politics but also to be responsible for a small enough 'patch' to be able to report on local issues in a genuinely informative manner. The cuts risk a decline into simply recycling press releases and giving interviews to various spokespeople rather than doing research. In the section on news and journalism in the VLV submission on DQF - across all BBC services - we refer to this development as 'churnalism'. We also cover the issue of news and journalism in more detail than in this submission.

² DQF page 39, table for content changes

³ RAJAR, September 2011

Local radio is able to respond quickly to local emergencies or disasters e.g. floods and urban disruption. They have very flexible programming and can usually continue live coverage for as long as necessary. We are not convinced by assurances that this aspect of the service will continue unaffected. We believe that stations will be hard pressed to offer swift and effective responses to emergencies with insufficient staff.

News is an essential part of any BBC radio service; however, we suggest that its significance is in danger of being overplayed by the BBC Directorate which 'owns' local radio, BBC News. We believe it is time for the BBC Trust to reconsider the structure and organisation of local radio and particularly to which directorate it should belong. For many years it was the responsibility of Network Radio which had the advantage of a balanced, including financial, overview of the BBC's domestic radio services. At present the Director of Audio & Music has few grass roots to enrich his output or from where to draw new talent.

3.2 Other Genres

We are concerned that some specific genres, which have a special role in the local radio context, will be lost. We give the following examples:

3.2.1 Sport

Live television sport is now locked behind the pay wall of subscription TV channels; as a result local radio is the only way for many to access live match commentary. This is particularly the case with cricket where local, live, ball-by-ball commentary can be heard on web casts across the UK. While in winter the smaller football teams often feature in live commentary. Local radio is also able to cover minority sports that national services are unable to fit into their schedules.

3.2.2 Religion

Religion is another genre which we consider may be at risk. Local radio is able to provide a unique insight into the life of faith groups across the community. This can be a particular help to the housebound and others with restricted mobility.

No two stations are the same and there has not been sufficient consideration of the complexities of serving different communities. For example, the cut of £1 million at Radio London fails to recognise that London is a complicated cultural area to serve. Fees for presenters and freelance effort are necessarily much higher than in the regions. Over the years, these larger stations have been able to draw audiences through high quality broadcasters like Vanessa Feltz in London and Ed Doolan in Birmingham. They are part of the essential mix.

4. CONCLUSION

With most stations potentially losing between a quarter and a third of their staff we are seriously concerned that the BBC is in danger of sacrificing its local radio services in England. The changes may be relatively slow but could be irreversible. They will be forced to economise with the content of existing programmes which will adversely affect their popularity. Minorities, one of the planks in the formation of local radio, will begin to be excluded as the use of Medium Wave is discontinued. The remaining staff will soon be overworked, popular presenters made redundant and the sense of fun and enjoyment, an intrinsic part of local radio broadcasting, will be lost. A

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reduction in quality and the amount of local material broadcast will lead to a fall in audience numbers and calls for the services to be closed.

In brief we oppose the scale of the proposed cuts to local radio in the belief that this is inimical to the growth of local democracy, to the expression of local interests and the reflection of local cultures.

VLV urges the BBC to re-examine the planned cuts which we believe to be particularly punitive. We recommend that line managers across the country should be set more modest targets and that they should be encouraged to produce their own solutions. They should not be forced to implement a centrally imposed plan which is out of touch and out of sympathy with the principles of BBC Local Radio. The current plans also appear to fail to understand the role of the services in the communities they serve.

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