



Consultation response form

Your response

Response

Radio, as a medium, continues to be hugely relevant in the UK, as evidenced by the latest audience research figure. This indicates a listenership of some 50 million people - representing 90% of the populous. Local radio, as we have seen during the Covid pandemic, continues to play a vital role in many communities not only with the obvious sharing of information but with the sense of connection to a community and as a vital tool in respect of rural isolation and well-being across diverse and often vulnerable audiences. Whilst we have seen a decline in local print media the unique relationship afforded to a listener by the one-to-one nature of radio is more important than ever. Local radio has a unique and special place in the community much like the pub, the post office or the church hall. It is however facing an existential threat.

The concerns of myself and many others stretch back over a period of some 20 years. Local radio was once at the heart of a community with its individuality and independence. Slowly but surely local commercial radio stations have been consumed by large conglomerates and merely offer a force feed of non- local, remotely derived simulcast programming offering very little to an area. So called Community Radio was rolled out with a view to combatting this is a failed experiment with poor quality programming and minimal audiences. The final straw came with the BBC's decision to dramatically restrict local oriented programming from its 39 local radio stations. Here in Suffolk in 2024, after 2pm there is not one single locally generated Suffolk radio station broadcasting on FM.

The license to broadcast local radio is a stringent affair under the management of Ofcom. All applications seek to clarify local content and benefit to the wider community. However Ofcom are an instrument of government and successive legislative changes having enabled the large media conglomerates to simply abandon their original promises without consequence. My discussions with Ofcom reveal an organization at the mercy of said legislation with no real power to govern the character or local relevance of radio stations.

What remains is a vast swathe of radio audiences that are no longer adequately served and rightly feel abandoned by an industry driven by accountants and in the case of commercial radio, shareholders.

A number of small Independent Radio operators have recognised this legislative failing and have made moves to return local radio to the community. This has been achieved utilizing numbers of former radio professionals often voluntarily giving their time to recreate local radio of old, super serving their local areas. They have been met by hugely appreciative audiences often in large numbers.

However, these operations, whilst vital to the community, are funded solely from the generation of local advertising revenues and face a number of difficult challenges accordingly. Much is against them and many struggle to survive.

Further pressures are brought to bear on these small licenced operators by 'internet radio'. Technologies now exist for inexpensive routes to broadcast. This has created a vast array of un-licensed, un-regulated 'bedroom radio stations' that bite at the apple of commercial revenues by holding themselves out as community radio stations and/or official radio stations, free to broadcast whatever they wish. The phrase 'radio station' has a traditional and understood meaning in the UK and the often poor quality amateur and unregulated offering diminishes to whole medium.

In brief there are a number of areas in desperate need of legislative attention;

1. Small independent operators are locked out of the FM radio spectrum. As a result of the licensing process there is no ability for an operator to successfully bid for an FM frequency, still the biggest reception platform in radio. It is my belief that if a local radio service fails to provide its original promise of performance then its FM license should immediately be advertised for tender, offering the opportunity of more locally focused operators to bid for the license.
2. The BBC's reduction in locally produced services should be reflected in the TV licence fee. It is simply unfair for TV license payers to be funding a service that is not providing what it was supposed to provide. In those instances a slice of the TV licence fee should be made available to operators that are filling the gap left behind by the BBC's diminishing local radio operation.
3. Advertising revenues are facing huge pressures from multinational online corporations. It is my belief that there is scope to introduce incentives through taxation to support local and UK business, particularly where international digital behemoths are funnelling revenues out of the country.
4. Ofcom to be given powers to offer funding assistance to the smaller commercial radio operators much as it does with the failed community radio project.
5. Government to set up a working party with a view to protecting and improving local radio provision in the United Kingdom.
6. For any organisation that represents itself as a 'radio station' in anyway to be licensed & regulated by Ofcom, regardless of transmission methods.