

Minutes of the Ofcom / sector representative bodies

Virtual meeting held on 25 February 2025

In attendance

Ofcom staff

Welsh Community Radio Network (WCRN), Chair

Cornwall Community Media Network (CCMN), Representative

Community Media Association (CMA), Interim Chair and representatives

UK Community Radio Network (UKCRN), Chair

1. Welcome and introductions

- Ofcom opened the meeting and welcomed new attendees. All in attendees were invited to introduce themselves and provide an overview of the organisations they represent.
- It was explained that the focus of meeting is to explore themes of relevance to the sector and Ofcom at present.

2. Social Gain research and role of the sector bodies in the future

- An overview of the origins of the Ofcom-funded research was shared.
- Attendees heard that common challenges around financial sustainability, cost of living and the impact of Covid shared by the sector during a series of Ofcom-hosted stakeholder events was the inspiration behind the commissioning of this research into how services can demonstrate social gain.
- It was confirmed that the research outcomes are not intended to add regulatory burden, but rather to provide a menu of options that services can explore to demonstrate their social gain delivery particularly in applications for prospective grant funding, with ongoing development of this resource to be led by the sector.
- It was confirmed that use of the toolkit options will not be mandatory and that services will not be required to submit additional data to Ofcom.
- Ofcom provided an update on the current status, timelines and next steps of the project, with confirmation that the research is due to conclude in late Spring 2025.
- It was AGREED that the representative bodies would encourage licensees to respond to the survey request, with a particular focus on smaller services who question the impact they will have.

- The respective bodies provided an update on their engagement with and promotion of research.
- A concern was raised by a representative that the research may highlight disparities in social gain delivery.
- In response to a question about how representative bodies address this issue, CMA confirmed that it assists to redress any disparities by encouraging the sharing of success stories at CMA conferences and signposting.
- In response to a question about the use of Community Radio Fund data in the research, it was explained that use of final report data would be prohibited on the basis that the data was not collected for use in this research. It was confirmed that Wavehill, the company who was commissioned by Ofcom to complete the research, are planning to undertake case studies which will provide an opportunity for success stories to be showcased.
- It was AGREED that further discussions should be held to explore the possibility of representative bodies working together to maintain a legacy for this work.
- It was AGREED that the research will be added to the agenda for the next meeting.

3. Financial sustainability

- Ofcom thanked CMA for circulating results of its recent sector survey ahead of the meeting. The group noted several themes, particularly around sustainability.
- Ofcom provided an update on its current Public Service Media (PSM) Review and plans to highlight the role that Community Radio plays whilst reflecting some of the challenges the sector faces.
- The representative bodies shared additional insights to be fed back to the PSM Review team which included the future of services in the context of succession planning. It was noted that some services will be reaching their 20th anniversary meaning founders of some services will be reaching retirement age. Other challenges highlighted include governance and management; recruitment and retention of skilled and experienced staff; volunteers wishing to be a part of but not necessarily run a service; lack of diversity (age and gender) particularly on-air; and the specific need for more female role models.
- It was suggested that financial sustainability may be achieved with paid roles despite this being at odds with the ethos of community radio, and that commissioning of content from Government departments (i.e. education and health) should play a role given the social gain benefits provided in these areas.
- It was heard that CCMN provide a Digital Skills Bootcamp to address some of the issues discussed which generates further interest in community radio. The potential savings to community radio services through skills sharing was also noted.

- It was heard that UKCRN are working on journalism and the role that community radio plays in local news.
- It was AGREED that this will be fed back to the PSM Review team.
- It was AGREED that “Sustainability” will be a standing item to encourage respective bodies to share updates on their work to secure the sustainability of the sector and any success stories.

4. Community Radio Fund (CRF)

- An update was provided on the outcome of second round of the Community Radio Fund 2024/5 including a summary of the Panel’s feedback on applications from this and previous rounds.
- It was heard that many services are not confident with bid-writing.
- It was noted that the Fund is oversubscribed. Feedback by the sector highlighted that even when they feel they have implemented feedback provided by the Panel when previous applications have been unsuccessful, some services may still not receive funding.
- In response to queries about how the respective bodies plan to share feedback and support services with future applications, CMA explained that they support services by acting as a “critical friend” by providing feedback on proposed applications. UKCRN confirmed that they signpost services to CMA and also encourage services to partner with existing or previous grant holders.
- It was confirmed that CMA will share the Panel’s feedback in the next newsletter and provide a session on fundraising at the next AGM to enable successful applicants to share their journey.
- It was confirmed that UKCRN will direct services to the Panel’s feedback.
- It was suggested that non-confidential versions of final grant reports be publicly available amid concerns about grant spend reporting, and to be a mechanism to share learnings.
- It was AGREED that Ofcom will consider this.
- The payment and reporting of grant spend was discussed in the context of final funds being released upon receipt of a final report. It was explained that this is standard practice amongst funders.
- It was AGREED that Ofcom will consult with DCMS on this along with the eligibility of new services who have been broadcasting for less than 18 months.
- It was agreed that Ofcom will share forthcoming grant reporting deadlines with the CMA with a view to dates being shared to members via the newsletter.
- It was heard that publication of the Statement announcing the outcome of funding rounds coincides with email notifications to applicants to enable unsuccessful applicants to easily access and engage with the Panel’s feedback.

5. Key Commitments simplification and General Procedures

- Appreciation was expressed for the work that the sector bodies played in encouraging services to engage with the Key Commitments simplification process.
- An update was provided on the Key Commitments simplification project and it was confirmed that a reminder will be sent to non-responders ahead of the deadline.
- It was noted that the initial communications caused confusion amongst some services. Ofcom confirmed that the feedback will be noted for the future.
- Whilst feedback was shared by UKCRN on potential challenges of regulating the qualitative elements of KCs going forward, CMA noted that most stations have been positive about the proposed changes.
- An update was provided on the General Procedures consultation which was followed by a general discussion of how the Sector has engaged with the consultation.

6. AOB

- It was confirmed that a consultation will be published in mid-2025 in relation to Part 6 of the Media Act and the online streaming of broadcast services, and representative bodies could helpfully disseminate the details to their members.
- A query arose regarding support for CR services struggling to be made available on TuneIn and Amazon. It was suggested that the sector bodies could helpfully co-ordinate the types of issues being experienced by services, and provide that input to the development of this new regulation, or directly to the platforms.
- A query arose regarding incorrect contact details for a licensee on the Ofcom website. It was confirmed the website is fed by information in the licensing database and that it is the licensee's responsibility to ensure we hold up to date information on licence contacts. It was confirmed that a director of the licence holding company needs to email details of any contact updates to broadcast.licensing@ofcom.org.uk so that up-to-date details are reflected in the database.
- It was queried whether CRF results can be announced shortly after the Panel meeting. It was heard that whilst Ofcom strives to administer rounds swiftly, decisions and publication of the Statement, including Panel feedback, require additional governance procedures meaning that applicants cannot be notified as soon as the Panel meeting has taken place. It was NOTED that increasing application volumes impact the time taken to administer the Fund and that despite high application numbers in the recent round, the Panel meeting and award announcements for the recent round happened ahead of schedule when compared to previous years.
- It was confirmed that the Local DAB Association will be joining the next meeting, with a view to them being a regular attendee going forward. Although there were mixed views about their inclusion, they will be invited to the next meeting to update us on their purpose and what they see as the key challenges for their sector.
- It was confirmed that a note of this meeting and future meetings will be published on the Ofcom website for interested parties to view.

