BBC Trust

Review of Local Radio, Regional News & Current Affairs on Television and Local News Online

March 2016
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2 Introduction

2.1 Background

The BBC Trust is required to review each of the BBC’s services in depth against the relevant service licences once every five years.

This qualitative research is part of a broader service review of the BBC’s local radio, BBC regional news and current affairs on television and local news online offer. It represents the audience’s voice within the review, alongside a public consultation, a piece of quantitative research and the analysis of audience data.

This qualitative report provides the audience perspective on how BBC local services perform against the commitments detailed in their service licences, and in relation to the audience’s own perceptions and expectations, in a changing local media environment.

The remit of BBC Local Radio is follows:

- To provide a primarily speech-based service of news, information and debate to local communities across England. Speech output should be complemented by music. The target audience should be listeners aged 50 and over, who are not well-served elsewhere, although the service may appeal to all those interested in local issues. There should be a strong emphasis on interactivity and audience involvement.

Commitments to BBC Regional TV News and Current Affairs, and to BBC Local News online are set out in the BBC One, and BBC Online and Red Button services licences respectively:

- **BBC One:** Content that comes from, and reflects, the nations, regions and communities of the UK should feature on BBC One, including during peak time – helping to make BBC One’s schedule distinctive in comparison with other mass appeal channels. It should offer opt-out programmes and news bulletins for the nations and English regions. BBC One contributes to a shared statutory commitment to a minimum level of regional programming.

- **BBC Online and Red Button:** To provide comprehensive impartial, accurate and independent news and analysis covering UK and international news and news from the UK’s nations and local areas. BBC Online may have sites for 53 local areas across the UK, which in England, are linked to BBC local radio. These should cover news, weather and travel and may include local interests, such as sport, heritage and events. Nations and local sites should

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1 ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015
2 BBC Local Radio Service Licence, July 2015 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/services/radio/service_licences/bbc_local_radio.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/services/radio/service_licences/bbc_local_radio.html)
3 BBC One Service Licence, July 2015 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/services/television/service_licences/bbc_one.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/services/television/service_licences/bbc_one.html)
work with other providers of local information, sourcing or sharing content and providing clear links. The service should encourage audience involvement.  

2.2 Objectives

This research was designed to provide the BBC Trust with a comprehensive assessment of audience attitudes in England to the BBC’s local offer across:

- BBC Local Radio stations
- BBC Regional television news and current affairs
- BBC Local News Online (including social media platforms)

There were three central research objectives:

1. Explore local news and information consumption behaviours across platforms (both BBC and non-BBC), identifying why sources are used, for what purposes and to what extent the BBC is fulfilling these identified need-states.
2. Assess how audiences feel that BBC Local Radio stations, Regional TV news services and current affairs, and BBC Local News Online are performing against their current service licence commitments.
3. Understand audience expectations of the BBC’s local services across platforms now and in the future, in light of the ways in which listening, viewing and usage habits are changing.

2.3 Research methodology and sample

The research was designed with these considerations in mind:

- **The need to deliver a balanced, fair and credible evaluation of BBC local services.** All audience members were recruited ‘blind’ for this reason (i.e. unaware initially that this was a study for the BBC Trust), in order to provide an open and honest view of the BBC services in the initial stages of the research.

- **The need to contextualise BBC local services in the wider market.** For this reason MTM conducted a preliminary phase of desk research to develop an understanding of how audiences are engaging with both BBC and non-BBC local content to properly assess how well BBC local services are delivering against audience needs.

- **Ensuring a clear understanding of the BBC’s service licence commitments by audiences.** Each BBC Local service was evaluated against the different areas of its remit with the specific terms of the service licences translated into more audience-friendly language by MTM, in association with the BBC Trust.

- **Grounding perceptions of local services in audiences’ considered real-world behaviour.** Recognising that local media consumption is often lost in daily routines and not always top-of-mind, it was considered necessary to delve into actual habits through a local media diary, kept over a period of nine days, encompassing two weekends.

- **Reaching older audiences.** The BBC Local Radio target audience is aged 50 and above. In order to reach BBC Local Radio audiences the sample therefore purposely skewed.

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4 BBC Online and Red Button Service Licence, August 2015
http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/services/online/service_licences/online_red_button.html
towards an older demographic. Tasks and discussions were designed not to overburden older participants.

- **Balancing natural and prompted evaluations.** MTM required an approach that allowed the audience to share their opinions in their own language, but also a framework for prompted evaluation of BBC Local services against the service licences. The discussion guide was structured to cover natural observations as well as prompted feedback on service licence commitments.

The research consisted of 2 main elements:

1. **Local media habits pre-task booklet**

   The first contact point for audiences with the research process was a booklet for them to complete prior to groups, split into two sections:

   - **Part 1: Local media consumption diary.** Participants were tasked with keeping a nine day diary of local TV, radio and online consumption. This was designed to capture audiences’ ‘real world’ local media consumption across platforms.

   - **Part 2: Final day reflection.** At the end of the diary period, on day ten, respondents were prompted to reflect on their local media consumption over the preceding nine days and asked to: note down examples of content (either BBC or competitors) that delivered against specific statements, which broadly related to the Trust’s current performance measures and the BBC public purposes; and to write about their local consumption behaviour over time, highlighting points of change. In addition, those more comfortable with technology were offered the opportunity to record a circa 60 second video blog summarising their views on local news and information sources, for which a flipcam was provided.

2. **A series of 12 extended group discussions (2 hours long, with 6 respondents in each) that covered the following areas:**

   - Identifying and understanding local news and information needs
   - Exploring the range of platforms and services used for local content
   - Understanding changing needs for local news and information
   - Focused service evaluation: an in depth review of BBC Local Radio, BBC Regional news and current affairs and BBC Local News Online (see below)
   - Investigation of future areas of consideration for the relevant BBC local services

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5 BBC Trust, BBC Local Radio Service Licence  
Within the groups audiences were asked to evaluate the BBC’s Local offer across platforms. This included evaluating BBC Local Radio, Regional TV news and current affairs and the BBC Local News online offer against various commitments in their Service Licences as well as a number of additional areas that the BBC Trust was interested in understanding audiences views on. For the purposes of research service licence commitments were adapted to be more consumer-friendly, and similar ones were amalgamated where relevant, to avoid over burdening audiences with too many areas to evaluate against. This process was undertaken in collaboration with the BBC Trust.

The 12 two-hour discussion groups were conducted across six locations in England: Merseyside, Tees, Shropshire, West Midlands, Berkshire and Devon. The specific locations are detailed on the graphic below.

**Figure 1: sample breakdown of 12 x 2 hour group discussions across the six case study regions**

The sample was structured as follows:

- **Age**: as the map illustrates, the sample was split into ‘younger’ (40-59) and older (60+) audiences. Each location was assigned one 40-59 group and one 60+ group to ensure a balance across locations. MTM did not set an upper age limit on the 60+ age group.

- **Social grade**: MTM rotated social grades, (A)BC1 and C2D(E), in order to understand differences in behaviour and attitudes across locations. This rotated across ages in the locations so that overall MTM were speaking to the same number of higher and lower social grade audience members across the sample.
- **A balanced gender mix**: groups were roughly evenly split between males and females.
- **BAME audiences**: MTM recruited a mix of ethnicities reflective of each location.
- **BBC consumption**: In each group MTM recruited a mix of TV platform ownership, device ownership, higher and lower BBC General Impression scores, heavy and medium users of the relevant BBC Local Radio station and BBC Local news viewing. Additionally each group had representation for viewing the Inside Out and/or the Sunday Politics show for their area, as well as usage of BBC Local News Online, which fell out naturally.
3 Management summary

This research explored audience views on the BBC Local services’ performance against the commitments in their service licences, and against the audience’s own experiences, perceptions and expectations, in a changing local media environment. The services evaluated in this study were BBC Local Radio, BBC Regional TV news and current affairs, and BBC Local News Online including the website and content on social media.

Overall, audiences are pleased and satisfied with BBC Local services. There was a lot of warmth for the BBC Local offer in the six case study regions visited. Audiences felt it was important that they “had a voice” via regional BBC media and that their local news and information was being presented and delivered to them by people who live in, and understand, the region. BBC Local Radio was particularly valued, especially by older listeners (60+) who found it gave them companionship. Audiences like how BBC Local Radio keeps them informed about local news and events, whilst the debates and phone-ins help listeners feel involved in their community. The regional BBC TV news is seen as professional and accurate, but there appears to be licence for the presenters to demonstrate more personality. Awareness and understanding of the BBC Local current affairs content is mixed. Whilst there was some positivity for Inside Out, the local segment within Sunday Politics was thought to be too hidden away. The Local websites are valued, especially for news, sport and utility information (traffic, weather), however the content is felt to not be as comprehensive as it could be. Usage of BBC Local social media was low, but audiences feel it is important for the BBC to be active in such spaces, in order to engage younger and future audiences in local news and information.

Taking each platform in more detail:

**BBC Local Radio** is felt to be performing well and is seen as distinctive from commercial competitors due to its speech content. Whilst it is generally seen to be delivering against its service licence requirements, there were some differences in views between older and younger audiences. This mainly centred around the music versus speech balance on their BBC Local Radio station. All valued the information it provided, but older listeners were driven more by a companionship need, which meant they preferred extended speech content. Younger listeners, however, were often looking to relax with radio and so had a preference to hear more music on their respective station.

The most important areas for BBC Local Radio to be providing for audiences are felt to be impartial, independent, and up-to-date, accurate news. These were important factors across all age groups.

**BBC Regional TV news** was felt to be providing accurate and up-to-date news, which was important in the eyes of audiences. In addition, it was found to be giving audiences a better understanding of news and topical issues in their region and keeping them informed of news and events in the local area. Many called BBC Regional TV news in their area ‘professional’ and ‘smart’ and it was widely felt to be a good quality service, performing well against audience
expectations. Regional TV news bulletins were also felt to do a good job of relating national and international news to the regions.

Audiences in some locations however, typically more rural ones, felt that proportionately not enough coverage was given to their area. Audiences also felt that, in contrast to BBC Local Radio, the availability of BBC social and online content to support BBC Regional TV news was not as obvious and could be highlighted within or at the end of the programme more often. BBC Regional TV News was also seen to not be performing as well in helping audiences understand politics and decision-making in their local area. Since local news follows the national news, it inevitably drew direct comparisons, which meant audiences felt local news had a lot to live up to.

**BBC Regional TV current affairs** content includes Inside Out and a section of Sunday Politics; audiences evaluated both of these programmes. Awareness was mixed for both shows, and this affected how well BBC Local could be considered to be performing for current affairs.

Audiences judged that Inside Out and Sunday Politics were performing well in: covering a wide range of topics and subject matter; delivering a better understanding of local issues; highlighting important social issues; and reflecting local issues and concerns. Viewers thought both programmes were informative and relevant, believing that they helped to provide a good understanding of what is going on locally. They also highlighted that there were no equivalent programmes on ITV, so they were considered to be distinctive as a result.

BBC Regional TV current affairs content received a mixed response from audiences on the following areas: covers the important political stories in the local area; provides political analysis; puts issues into context; explains complex issues; investigates and scrutinises issues and institutions. Audiences also felt they were more could be done to hold local decision makers to account, typically judging BBC regional content against the BBC’s national current affairs programming which they saw as very high quality. By comparison, regional current affairs programming was felt to be much gentler in its approach to questioning, and they felt it could be more interrogative.

**BBC Local News Online** was thought to successfully provide information of local interest, such as sport, heritage and events. BBC Local websites were felt to offer relevant local information on news, weather, traffic and sport in particular.

As well as offering impartial and independent news (which was felt to be important across all services), audiences felt it was very important for BBC Local News Online to provide up-to-date news about their local area. Related to this, and also identified as important by many, was to reflect news from the local area. There was a mixed response on how far the BBC was succeeding with these areas. There was a perceived lack of volume on the BBC Local websites and as a result audiences did not always feel the content was relevant (sometimes out of date) or that it reflected their local area enough. Ideally audiences would like to be able to drill down to a hyper-local level but agreed that social platforms could help more with this. In saying this,
those regions with ‘Local Live’ felt that this helped make the site feel more up-to-date, although it had low awareness. It was also thought that this format was more suited to major events of local significance than everyday ones.

More broadly this research also found that:

- The types of local content audiences are accessing remains largely unchanged / consistent over time. (Types of local content audiences were accessing included incidents and events, crime, sport, weather, traffic, public services).

- **Interest** in local news and information typically increases with age

- However, there was some sense of a heightened interested in local decision making and its ‘real world’ impact. At a local level there was interest in development/regeneration, refuse/recycling collection, housing, schools/education, hospitals and healthcare (particularly among over 60s).

- **Local TV news and radio remain key for older audiences** – providing companionship and structure to their days

- People are increasingly using online and social media to find locally specific information. Whilst this is more prevalent amongst younger (40-59) audiences, there is evidence that older (60+) audiences are gradually embracing online for their local news and information needs

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6 Local Live is a regularly updated live news and information module on certain BBC Local websites that displays short updates of local news, sport, travel, weather, user comments and links to external sites and sources.
4 BBC Local Radio

4.1 Overview

Audiences felt BBC Local Radio is performing well across its service licence requirements and that its speech content makes it distinctive from commercial competitors. Older listeners valued it for companionship in particular, although some younger listeners suggested that their respective local station could benefit from a greater volume of music than there is currently.

Audiences were asked about their typical radio listening habits, and found that radio is an important part of morning routines, with many using radio clock alarms. In-car listening remains popular, with many now using online sources to listen (e.g. on the phone at the gym, on the Kindle around the house). Most listening is done live rather than via catch up. Younger listeners (those aged 40-59) tended to tune in at specific times of day, with older listeners tuning in more frequently throughout the day, often having the radio on in the background. It was clear that online sources were also being used for information alongside / in place of radio (e.g. to find out about events, to get detail on news headlines of interest and to get the latest traffic information).

Audiences felt that BBC Local Radio was doing well in these areas:

- Provides opportunities to share my views and hear other listeners’ views
- Helps me feel more involved and interested in my local community
- Gives me a better understanding of news / topical issues locally and UK wide
- Provides coverage of major events that are important to people in my local area
- Tells me about musical and arts events and introduces me to new performers, writers and artists
- Plays the right amount and type of music that I enjoy (60+ year olds)

There was a mixed response to the following areas for BBC Local Radio:

- I turn to it when I need information about a major local issue or crisis
- Reflects the range of faiths, cultures and communities
- Provides coverage of local sporting teams and events, including minority sports
- Provides additional content on social media
- Helps me to make the most of digital/DAB radio and the internet
- Plays the right amount and type of music that I enjoy (40-59 year olds)
- Helps me understand politics and decision making in my local area and holds decision makers to account*
• Provides impartial news*
• Provides high quality, independent news*

Note that those statements with an asterix represent the areas with the biggest ‘performance gaps’ in the quantitative research phase of the service licence review.7

Audiences felt that the most important areas for BBC Local Radio to provide were impartial, independent, and up-to-date, accurate news – these were felt to be important across all age groups.

4.2 Areas where audiences thought the service was performing strongly

Providing a platform for audiences to share views

BBC Local Radio was valued by audiences for providing a voice for their region. It was considered to be performing well at providing opportunities for audiences to share their views and hear other listeners' views. Giving the local community the opportunity to voice opinions on topical issues via phone-ins, debates and other interactive audience activities was an especially valued part of the BBC Local Radio service.

“It gives people a voice on the radio, about what’s happening to them, about what’s going on the news and how it affects them”

40-59, C2DE, Liverpool

Listeners generally felt that it was important that BBC Local Radio should provide a platform for the public to express their views, but for some it was not necessarily important to them personally, as they were unlikely to participate or specifically look out for phone-ins themselves.8

“I wouldn’t choose to listen to Radio Shropshire [for audiences sharing views]… but if you do listen to it you hear all these things”

40-59, ABC1, Shrewsbury

7 ICM Unlimited. BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015. A performance gap is the gap in percentage points between a) the amount that audiences agree that a BBC Local service is doing something and b) those who believe it is important that they do it.
8 It may be this distinction that is reflected in the quantitative phase of research conducted by ICM Unlimited, where the importance of this commitment was rated less highly (65%) than the level to which the BBC was delivering (77%).
In addition to being a valuable and necessary service for audiences’ points of view, listeners felt phone-ins were entertaining and an opportunity for presenters to engage with the listeners.

> What I like about Jim Hawkins (BBC Radio Shropshire), when he interviews, you know they have phone ins, the other morning they were phoning in about empty nest syndrome which I could really identify with, and I love the way he chats to the public and gets the best of them

60+, C2DE, Telford

**Helping audiences to feel involved in their local community**

Participants believed their BBC Local Radio station was **helping them to feel involved and interested in their local community**. Listeners across the case study regions felt that their BBC Local Radio service performed well in this area and felt it was important that it did so. Local Radio’s local accents and breadth of subject matter covered helps audiences to feel involved in their local community.

> Helping me feel involved is the most important thing it does, because we live here – anything that affects us we want to know about

60+, C2DE, Kingsteignton

There were various ways in which the BBC Local Radio service was felt to be doing this. As identified, phone-ins and listener interaction make audiences feel interested and involved in their local community.

> It’s community orientated (Radio Tees) through information, phone-ins and local accents… you want to hear local accents from the local area when talking about local things

60+, C2DE, Stockton

Down to earth, friendly presenters with local accents who are from the area were also important. When information is delivered by presenters with a local accent it was felt to be engaging. Audiences described it as “warm”, “inviting” and “friendly”. Having presenters who are from the area is seen to add credibility as well as giving the sense that this is a station that is made in – and part of – the community.
Seeing or hearing people that they know on (or reflected in) local media outputs was seen as an important aspect across all local media platforms by audiences. For example, some had close friends or family that had been interviewed on BBC Local Radio and appreciated this. Audiences felt a sense of pride that their station is involved in their community like this. Covering locations/organisations (e.g. schools) very close to them were also important and helped to make listeners feel part of a community and involved in what is going on.

Good information on news and events in the area was central to developing an impression of community involvement for audiences.

Coverage of local sports (e.g. football commentaries) and local artists and musicians (playing live in the studio or via reviews of local performances) was another way of feeling involved in the community for those who were interested in these things.

By helping audiences feel involved and interested in their community BBC Local Radio was also clearly fulfilling a companionship role/need, in particular for older (60+) audiences. For these listeners, the local BBC radio station also provides a comforting and reassuring voice/friend and helps them to feel less alone and isolated. The warm, friendly nature of local presenters was particularly relevant here. Many younger (40-59) audiences also recognised the value of companionship, although it was not usually the reason they used the service. Instead, they typically felt this value was for people older than themselves (e.g. their parents).

With that balance of music and chat you feel you’ve got someone in the room with you chatting away, waiting for the end of the music to see who phones in next from the community.
Contextualising news and providing coverage of major local events

Audiences felt that their BBC Local Radio performed well in providing coverage of major events that are important to people in the local area; and in giving listeners a better understanding of news and topical issues in their local area. Covering major events was felt to be particularly important across the locations visited, second only to the need to strive for impartial and independent news. Audiences appreciate BBC Local Radio informing them about events of local importance that might not be picked up by national media, particularly national radio stations. The range of topics also helped audiences feel more informed about issues that affect the local area, as well as the rest of the UK. Additionally, being based and broadcast from the local area (as opposed to being delivered out of London) further enhanced this sense of trust and relevance for audiences.

It’s trustworthy and that’s what I want when I get the news. We believe it… I don’t do much research - when I hear something on Radio Merseyside, I take it as gospel

60+, ABC1, St. Helens

It keeps me informed of what’s going on (locally). I wouldn’t know if I didn’t have Radio Tees… it tells you about things that are on at the Town Hall for example

40-59, ABC1, Middlesbrough
Keeping audiences informed about local cultural events and new artists

While audiences did not perceive being informed about musical and arts events and introduced to new artists to be as important as some of the other areas explored, it was nonetheless significant. This kind of content was thought to help keep the station interesting and provide a sense of community involvement. It was another way in which audiences told us they might hear people they know or are familiar with from the local community, on air.

I think this is equally important but I don’t rank it so highly because I get it from the newspaper

60+, ABC1, Thatcham

On a Saturday night, they have a lot of the local bands live on radio… my partner’s son is in a band and they play on Radio Tees quite regularly

60+, C2DE, Stockton

BBC Local Radio was felt to be good, on the whole, at informing audiences about local cultural activity via previews and reviews of events that are happening in the local area and through interviews with artists. Participants identified that there was dedicated airtime for local bands / artists (e.g. Saturday nights) as well as discussions about activities of interest (e.g. things going on that weekend, guests talking about events). This kind of programming was felt to be entertaining as well as informative.

They do bring in local performers… you hear them talking about things that are going on locally

60+, C2DE, Walsall

As older participants (60+) tended to be listening for more hours throughout the day, and younger participants said that they tuned in mainly for information during peak and drive time shows, younger listeners (40-59) were slightly less aware of their BBC station informing them about events. They claimed to use newspapers or online sources instead to find out about events.

Meeting the different music needs of younger and older audiences

All audiences we spoke to valued BBC Local Radio for information and news and were turning to it to fulfil this need. However, it appears that there are slightly different underlying need states when listening to radio for younger and older audiences.
As identified earlier, older (60+) audiences are more likely to turn to the radio for companionship, to help them feel less isolated and to feel like they are more involved in their local community. However younger audiences (40-59) claimed they are more likely to use the radio for relaxation, due to their busy lives. Thus, they turn to the radio to ‘switch off’ and listen to music.

As a result, there was a difference of opinion regarding the volume and type(s) of music that their BBC Local Radio played:

- Older (60+) audiences typically felt that the volume of speech was about right. They tended to prefer more speech to music and this was often a key driver for tuning into BBC Local Radio. They find that the discussions, debates and phone-ins make the station distinctive and different to commercial alternatives. These also provide entertainment, which helps them feel less isolated and more involved in their community – meeting the companionship need. This age group is generally satisfied with the higher volume of speech to music, and did not raise any major concerns about the volume or type of music played.

- Younger audiences (40-59) are more mixed in their attitudes regarding the speech versus music balance. Despite recognition that the higher volume of speech content helps to differentiate BBC Local Radio from local commercial stations, there is nonetheless a desire for a greater volume of music (especially at breakfast) and a wider range of music. This means that some will seek out local commercial stations instead (e.g. Heart, Smooth) as they offer more music alongside local news and information. Younger listeners told us they may also turn to national stations, such as BBC Radio 2, for music.

“I would never say that I turn on Radio Merseyside to listen to the music. Somehow that doesn’t correlate with me. It’s news that I’m interested in.”

60+, ABC1, St Helens

“It’s entertaining but not all the time. Because of the lack of music… you don’t want to hear talking all the time – a little bit more music would be nice.”

40-59, ABC1, Shrewsbury

“I honestly think younger people aren’t interested anyway [in local radio], they’re going to find their own media and generally if you’re listening to that you tend to be middle aged or older. So if they made it more relevant, younger people would actually destroy what it is.”

40-59, C2DE, Reading
4.3 Areas that received a mixed response from audiences

Audiences will turn to BBC Local Radio during a local crisis, but also use other sources

BBC Local Radio is one of many sources that listeners will use when they need information about a major local issue or crisis. It was widely felt that this was an important role for BBC Local Radio and it was being used to corroborate facts (as the BBC is seen as a trusted source), to learn more information, and for a reassuring, constant voice. It was also seen to be a useful resource for more minor incidents, e.g. school closures during inclement weather.

However, many did say that – in the first instance – they would typically look online if there was a major issue or crisis happening in their area. This was particularly true for the younger (40-59 year old) respondents, who would use their smartphones or tablets to seek out such information. They would use a mixture of search engines as well as BBC and non-BBC news sources. There was a perception that online is more up-to-date and can be quicker to find the information required, as they do not need to wait for it to be mentioned on-air and can access it immediately via an internet connected device. However, C2DE audiences and those aged over 60, were more likely to turn to their BBC Local Radio station as a default destination for information during a major local issue or crisis. This was because they trusted the information, as it is being delivered by people from the local area who they are familiar with. It was also because they were less confident with technology, or because they did not always have internet access or own internet-enabled devices.

Radio Devon went on through the night keeping people informed when it snowed – a man stayed on air all night, very helpful for travellers

60+, C2DE, Kingsteignton

I don’t think so… I would turn on the telly as it usually tells you there or go online, because it’s more up-to-date. It can be quite good when the schools are closed though, if it’s snowing

40-59, ABC1, Middlesbrough

I turn to it when, if you hear someone saying ‘have you heard about what’s going on at Portland wood’ say, you turn the radio on and hear the news

60+, C2DE, Telford
BBC Local Radio is seen to reflect minority audiences, to a degree

Some participants were aware of content on BBC Local Radio targeted at minority audiences (e.g. Upfront on BBC Radio Merseyside) which help it to reflect the range of faiths, cultures and communities. Those that had listened to such content enjoyed it and welcomed its inclusion amongst the programming mix. There was a recognition that BBC Local Radio aimed to reflect ethnic minority audiences where possible. However awareness of examples was quite low overall. Audiences felt their BBC Local Radio station could go further in reflecting the breadth of the area’s communities in its programming and presenters, especially in more ethnically diverse areas. This was not necessarily through dedicated shows. Instead this could mean (more) talent to proportionately reflect the ethnic diversity of a region. Some audiences also felt more could be done to cover local cultural events. They did not necessarily expect this to be covered in detail, perhaps with directions to visit the website for more detail, as it was appreciated that some content may be specialist and not for everyone.

In less diverse locations, this aspect was felt to be less important to audiences. However they did still feel that the BBC has a duty to reflect the range of faiths, cultures and communities within BBC Local Radio output.

“'I've never known any programmes about anything to do with cultural diversity or anything like that on Radio Tees… I've never heard anything about faith or religion

40-59, ABC1, Middlesbrough

“On Sundays a show called Upfront, which covers black issues – culturally, what’s happening in the Liverpool area… there could be more

60+, C2DE, Liverpool

“I find the Sunday Service is pretty good, it’s not like a church service and the Thought of the Day is usually pretty good… it’s religious without being too religious… and they do ones with different faiths

60+, C2DE, Kingsteignton

Sport is seen as one of BBC Local Radio’s strengths, but minority sports less so

Audiences agreed that BBC Local Radio was covering local sporting teams and events well. Local commentaries were highlighted as a strength of BBC Local Radio. Local football coverage and commentaries were particularly valued by audiences, as the BBC was seen to be providing access to matches that were not covered elsewhere. A few respondents also praised BBC Local Radio for sometimes mentioning local children’s sports and results. However, some felt that local
minority sports did not receive enough attention and may be deserving of a greater focus if the sport is popular regionally, or if local talent excels in it.

"The sport is really good… they are people who really like commentating on the game and who play the game… you sit and listen and you feel like you’re there"

60+, C2DE, Stockton

"If either Telford or Shrewsbury are playing they cover that match. My son plays table tennis seriously and they had him on for about half an hour"

60+, C2DE, Telford

"The Reading ladies football team, when they’re playing at home in the local stadium, you get the updates [on BBC Radio Berkshire]"

40-59, C2DE, Reading

Online content is expected, but audiences felt greater clarity was required to help them engage with it

Audiences agreed that their BBC Local Radio station did provide and promote the fact that additional content was available online and social media. There was an expectation that BBC Local Radio stations would be active on social media. Although engagement with this content was not widespread, even those who are not active at all on social media recognised that that this is the ‘way things are going’ and that it was important for BBC Local Radio to be active in this way in order to engage younger / future audiences.

In saying this, audiences did highlight that their understanding of how social media content from BBC Local Radio benefitted them as listeners was not always clear to them. There was a sense that this could be communicated more on air, so that instead of just promoting the availability of a Facebook or Twitter page, there should be more explanation about why listeners should engage with those sources and what benefits they would get from doing so. This was especially true of less digitally savvy audiences and older listeners. Those audiences that were following (non-BBC) local news and information sources on social media (mainly via Facebook), were doing so because they had identified a benefit in doing so. This was often via friends and family on the social platform who had liked pages/posts or had made recommendations. It was also due to seeing things they had an interest in at the local level in their newsfeeds.

Thus, although audiences felt that their BBC Local Radio station does promote availability of its online offer and has additional content online, they weren’t necessarily sure if this helped them to make the most of digital radio and the internet.
Helps understanding of local politics, but unsure if decision-makers are held to account

Listeners largely agreed that BBC Local Radio was helping audiences to understand politics and decision-making. The combination of news reports, debates and phone-ins help them understand politics and decision-making in the area, although the relative volume of this was dependant on what was going on in the area at the time. However, audiences were less convinced that BBC Local Radio was always holding decision makers to account as effectively as it could be, and this was something that was important to people. Where BBC Local Radio presenters were seen to be succeeding at this, they elicited praise from listeners, such as Simon Bates on BBC Radio Devon and Eric Smith on BBC Radio Shropshire. This tended to be amongst older (60+) listeners.

However, generally amongst the audiences spoken to there was an appetite for more interrogative, hard line questioning on BBC Local Radio than there is currently. The BBC’s high quality delivery of this at the national level (e.g. BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 5 live) appears to be impacting upon similar audience expectations at the local level. Audiences would like to see local politicians and personnel questioned in meaningful ways, and held to account more directly. Their BBC Local Radio was not always seen to be fulfilling this. It was felt that interviewees sometimes got an ‘easier ride’ on BBC Local Radio than they would do on national radio, or national BBC current affairs programming (e.g. Question Time, Newsnight).

The quantitative research for this service review identified this as the biggest ‘performance gap’ for BBC Local Radio suggesting it is an area where audience expectations are not always being met. The feedback from the focus groups during this qualitative stage reinforces this finding.

ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015
It is important for a local station to have these MPs on and see what they’ve so called promised to do for us

60+, ABC1, Thatcham

I can’t remember what it was, but he [the MP] would not answer the question and he [the presenter] would not have it. He’s a real good devil’s advocate Eric Smith, and he really put him [the MP] on the spot, to the point where he [the MP] was a little bit rude to Eric and he had to be a little rude because he couldn’t get out because he was being questioned so intensely.

60+, C2DE, Telford

Striving for impartiality and independence: an ideal for all media

Audiences we spoke to told us they see impartiality and independence as aspirational measures (i.e. values to strive for), especially the BBC as a public service broadcaster, although audiences recognised that they are not necessarily achievable by any media organisation in reality. The nature of the BBC meant that audience had higher expectations in this regard, than they did of other providers. It was this attitude that may have been reflected in the quantitative research where ‘performance gaps’ were identified for BBC Local Radio providing impartial news, and high quality, independent news.¹⁰

There were mixed views across the case study regions as to whether impartiality was entirely possible on BBC Local Radio, due to the strong personalities of local talent. The presenters typically live in the area and so audiences feel the issues they are discussing will affect them, and some people felt they are often opinionated and confrontational by nature, which is why they are on the radio. However, when there are topical debates audiences do wish to hear both sides, and some listeners felt this was not always the case.

Nobody is impartial; you’re always going to get an opinion. Even an editor of the BBC has his personal opinion and whatever programme he’s doing or editing it will fractionally reflect that

40-59, ABC1, Shrewsbury

¹⁰ ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015
I think the news here is more impartial at this level than it is at the national. If you watch the national news regularly, you see biases coming in from certain parties and so, and I don’t think this manifests itself quite as much at this level.

60+, ABC1, St Helens

I don’t think it’s impartial news. Obviously it’s local, so they will always try and put a positivity on it, but that’s part of the local news I think, so that it’s not all bleak.

60+, ABC1, St Helens
5 BBC Regional TV news

5.1 Overview

Watching the Regional TV news (both BBC and ITV) is a fixed part of daily routines for many of the audiences in the six case study regions. They typically have this on in the background, with full attention being given when a story of interest comes on. Younger audiences (40-59) also mentioned that they would often be using a second screen (phone, tablet or laptop) at the same time. This may be to follow news items of particular interest online that get mentioned on TV, but more often it was just for habitual online routines such as social media and shopping. It is this routine nature of viewing that leads to audiences valuing presenters they “have known for years” and those that show more personality and warmth.

Location was seen as being important to making local news relevant to audiences across all platforms. Audiences preferred coverage which was close to where they live as this felt more interesting and relevant, particularly in less urban locations. As BBC TV news is regional it received some negative feedback for trying to cover too large a geographic area. However there was an understanding from audiences that other BBC local media could be used to deepen or extend the TV news coverage. This is where older audiences (60+) saw radio playing a role, and younger 40-59 year olds saw online as being crucial.

Audiences felt that BBC Regional TV news was doing well in these areas:

- Provides accurate and up-to-date news
- Keeps me informed of news and events happening in my local area
- Gives me a better understanding of news and topical issues in my local area
- Relates national and international news to my region

There was a mixed response to the following areas for BBC Regional TV news:

- Represents my local area*11
- Provides impartial news*
- Provides high quality, independent news*
- Provides content online e.g. video clips
- Provides additional content on social media

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*11ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Performance Gaps from the quantitative research, September 2015
There was a belief that BBC Regional TV news could improve on:

- *Helps me understand politics and decision making in my local area*

As previously, those statements with an asterix represent the areas with the biggest performance gaps in the quantitative research phase of the service licence review.

The most important areas for BBC Regional TV news to be delivering for audiences in the qualitative groups were impartiality, independence, and up-to-date and accurate news – these were important across all groups, as with BBC Local Radio.

5.2 **Areas where audiences thought the service was performing strongly**

**Helping audiences feel up-to-date and reliably informed on topical local issues**

Audiences believed that the BBC Regional TV news was performing well in **providing accurate and up-to-date news** - this was an important area for audiences, and one that was considered essential for the BBC to provide. In addition, it was also felt to be performing well in the areas of: giving audiences a better understanding of news and topical issues in their local area; and keeping them informed of news and events in the local area.

Many said that the BBC Regional TV news in their area was ‘professional’ and ‘smart’ and it was widely felt to be a good quality service: up to date, informative and accurate, consistent with perceptions of BBC (national) news, meeting audience expectations. However, it was felt by a few that it was not as high in quality as the national BBC news in terms of production values (e.g. set, graphics, as well as the presenters and perceived depth of journalism). However this was generally accepted due to it being a local, versus national, service. Audiences did not feel this detracted from its ability to deliver accurate, up-to-date news, keep audiences informed, and to help them understand topical local issues.

> The journalistic standards are obviously very professional, it is pretty accurate

40-59, C2DE, Reading

> I personally wouldn’t expect it to compare to national news

60+, C2DE, Walsall
Relating national and international news to the regions

Overall, the Regional TV news bulletins are felt to do a good job of relating national and international news to the regions. However, the desire for this is dependent on national and international events being relevant to the region – if not, audiences prefer to see coverage of local topics that do not duplicate what they have seen on the main news.

BBC Regional TV news is believed to strike a good balance in applying this where required. A couple of examples during the research included: nurses and doctors tackling ebola (Devon) and British steel (Teesside).

It’s up to date news… Sometimes it takes a national news story and investigates it even further… because it may involve your local area

40-59, C2DE, Liverpool

We watch it because it keeps us informed, like how the migrant crisis and British Steel closures will affect this area

40-59, ABC1, Middlesbrough

Some of the national television news they just skip over it quickly, so you’ve got to watch either Westward or Spotlight and if you go to Spotlight most of their reporters live in Devon or Cornwall and they know the areas they talk about

60+, C2DE, Kingsteignton
5.3 Areas that received a mixed response from audiences

Online content is seen to have a role in supporting broadcast, but some feel its purpose could be made clearer.

As with BBC Local Radio, audiences expect social media and online content to support the main broadcast and those who have used it like it. However they also felt that, in contrast to BBC Local Radio, the availability of BBC content online and on social media to support BBC Regional TV news was not as obvious and could be highlighted within, or at the end of, the programme more often. Younger audiences (40-59) in particular suggest that this would be beneficial as they are often using additional devices whilst the BBC Regional TV news is on. They thought that by promoting the availability of more information or video content online it may help instigate an online onward journey.

Those who had engaged with the extra online content liked the ability to watch more clips and dig deeper into stories from the news bulletins. Given audiences were evaluating the BBC Regional TV news they felt that such online content was more of a ‘nice-to-have’ than an essential part of the offer. Younger viewers were more interested in this, but generally audiences felt this was of less importance than other areas highlighted. Older audiences (60+) saw this as an area that was probably important for the BBC to be in, but were sometimes unclear what the value was and thought it could be made clearer.

> They inform you about where you can get further information, for instance with outside interviews, they might say that you can get a full report on this video online

60+, ABC1, St Helens

> They seem to do that on Tyne Tees quite a lot and at the end of the programme (promote social media), but I don’t see it as much on Look North

40-59, ABC1, Middlesbrough

> I wouldn’t know about the Facebook and Twitter and online… there isn’t enough said about it

40-59, ABC1, Exeter
The regional focus can mean audiences feel their area is not always represented

Audiences recognise that the geographical area that their BBC Regional TV news covers is large. However, some audiences, typically those in more rural areas, felt that proportionately not enough coverage is given to their location. This was the case for audiences in Stockton and Middlesbrough (vs. Newcastle), as well as Shrewsbury and Telford (vs. Birmingham). This meant that audiences in these places did not always feel the regional news was relevant or representing their local area enough. This is in line with the quantitative research, which identified a performance gap around ‘represents my local area’.12

However, audiences recognised that this was because the BBC TV regions covered are large, and felt that online and radio could play (more of) a supporting role to provide additional / supporting local detail and content.

“We’re the poor relation to Newcastle… if there’s something happening here, it’s secondary to whatever’s going on in Newcastle”

60+, C2DE, Stockton

“It doesn’t give us enough coverage, it’s not local enough … It’s hard isn’t it, because they’ve got half an hour and were looking at it from our point of view”

40-59, ABC1, Shrewsbury

“It’s not relevant to me, because it’s not very often about this area”

60+, ABC1, Thatcham

“It makes you realise what is happening, not just in the Teignbridge area… makes you feel as if you know what is going on in the whole of Devon”

60+, C2DE, Kingsteignton

“They have to fit it in a short time so you may not get everything… They’ve got to give everyone a fair shout”

40-59, C2DE, Reading

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12 ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015
Striving for impartiality and independence: an ideal for all media

Audience views on impartiality and independence for BBC Regional TV news were the same as those expressed for BBC Local Radio. Most respondents regarded impartiality and independence as aspirational values to strive for, especially for the BBC as a public service broadcaster, but ones that are not necessarily achievable by any media organisation. There were some who felt that the BBC’s local services must strive to be more impartial than its national output, and more who believed that the nature of local news meant that it would necessarily have a bias towards the local area, and that was permissible. This is consistent with the parallel quantitative research, which has highlighted performance gaps for BBC Regional TV news for ‘providing impartial news’ and ‘providing high quality, independent news’.13

It aspires to provide impartial news. I mean I’m not sure any news is impartial

40-59, C2DE, Reading

I think the news here is more impartial at this level than it is at national. If you watch the national news regularly, you can see biases coming in from certain parties, and I don’t think this manifests itself quite as much at this level

60+, ABC1, St Helens

BBC Regional TV news is seen to be professional, but not necessarily distinctive, as similar programmes are available elsewhere; some feel it could be more relaxed

Audiences feel BBC Regional TV news is good quality, but it is not considered distinctive in the way that BBC Local Radio is. BBC Regional TV news is perceived as being similar in format and look to BBC national news and ITV regional news. A potential area of distinctiveness for BBC Regional TV news was that it is seen as more professional than its ITV counterpart. This was thought to come across via the language used and detail for each story. In this sense, local stories were seen to be presented in a similar style to the BBC national news. This perceived professionalism also helped audiences to trust what the BBC regional news presenters told them.

However, overall audiences seemed to prefer local news that displayed warmth and had a relaxed style. While some viewers told us that they welcome the more informal, relaxed tone of BBC regional news compared to BBC network news, others preferred ITV’s even more down to earth approach. For this reason, C2DE audiences in particular often preferred the ITV local news which they see as more down to earth and approachable. Likewise, in areas where the BBC presenters were felt to be more relaxed, the BBC programmes were very popular and well received. Audiences suggested that BBC Regional TV news does not always need to be serious and that presenters could be allowed to show more personality.

13 ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015
Areas where audiences felt BBC Regional TV news could improve

Audiences felt more could be done to help clarify decision-making in their local area

Amongst audiences there was a desire for more coverage on the regional BBC TV news of issues that have broad relevance and affect the whole news region (e.g. stories about hospitals, policing, housing etc.). Across regions they felt that the that could be more coverage of these types of issues, although audiences do not use the word ‘politics’ themselves to describe such local issues.

Since regional news follows the BBC national news, it inevitably drew direct comparisons with that programme’s treatment of news stories. This meant that audiences felt BBC Regional TV news could do more to help them understand politics and decision making in their local area. They did not feel they always understood local matters and issues to the same degree that they did national ones, or that their BBC local news helped them to do so as much as the national programme.

On the other hand, due to its regional rather than specifically local focus, BBC Regional TV news was to an extent not always expected to be able to do this. Additionally because the bulletin lengths are a maximum of 30 minutes audiences recognise there is not sufficient time to go into
detail about local politics for every area in the region. Thus, audiences felt it was important that other BBC platforms and programmes ‘extend’ the regional news and provide further detail. We consider this further later in this report when we look at audience attitudes to the BBC’s regional current affairs programming on TV and local news online content.

So, whilst this was a relatively important area for audiences, it was not the most important specifically for BBC Regional TV news. This is because other platforms can play this supporting role (e.g. radio, online, TV regional current affairs programmes). Instead, representing the audience’s local area, as well as the ideals of independence and impartiality, were seen as the most important for the BBC to focus for their Regional TV news coverage.

“I think it helps you understand politics, but decision making in my local area, no

40-59, C2DE, Liverpool

“It’s much more general on the TV (news)... it’s not as good as Radio Shropshire (for explaining decision making in local area

60+, C2DE, Telford

“If you’ve got a local politician... I think they let him off too easy. Whereas, if it’s ten o’clock (national news), they’ll put the questions to him. It’s a bit soft at certain times of the day

40-59, ABC1, Birmingham

“I think on the radio, it’s extending your local news a little bit, because then you’ve got your presenters debating the point"

60+, C2DE, Walsall
6 BBC Regional TV current affairs on TV

6.1 Overview

Regional current affairs programming on the BBC includes Inside Out and a section of Sunday Politics; audiences evaluated both of these programmes. Awareness was low for both programmes among those we spoke to, and this affected how well BBC Regional TV current affairs programming was perceived to be performing.

Those who had seen Inside Out were very positive about the show, they liked and enjoyed it. It was felt to be different to the BBC Regional TV news – a bit more relaxed and edgier in its presenting style. It was judged to be delving into issues and delivering interesting, balanced points of view, and audiences felt it did so in an entertaining way. On viewing clips and hearing about Inside Out from others, those who had not seen the show expressed interest in watching it.

Due to being part of a national show, the regional section of Sunday Politics drew comparison against the national portion and some felt it not as hard hitting as it could be as a result. Notably, when talking about local matters, politics was rarely a word that audiences used, even though the issues they were discussing were political in their nature. In fact, some explicitly drew attention to the word ‘Politics’ in the title of the show as being off-putting.

Scheduling was felt to be an issue for both programmes, but principally for Sunday Politics. Audiences suggested that they have fixed Sunday rituals and routines so watching a ‘Politics’ show during the daytime on Sunday, particularly for those with children, was seen as inconvenient.

Audiences felt that BBC Regional TV current affairs was doing well in these areas:

- Covers a wide range of topics and subject matters
- Gives me a better understanding of topical issues in my local area
- Reflects local issues and concerns
- Highlights important social issues

There was a mixed response to the following areas for BBC TV Regional current affairs:

- Explains complex issues*14
- Investigates and scrutinises issues and institutions*
- Puts issues into context
- Covers the important political stories in my local area
- Provides political analysis

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*14 ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Performance Gaps from the quantitative research, September 2015
There was a belief that BBC TV Regional current affairs could improve on:

- **Holds local decision makers to account**

As previously, those statements with an asterix represent the areas with the biggest performance gaps in the quantitative research phase of the service licence review.\(^{15}\)

There was some variation in terms of what audiences felt was most important for the BBC to be delivering on for regional current affairs, but the majority believed it was important for BBC Regional TV current affairs programmes to be covering a **wide range of topics and holding local decision makers to account**.

> You like to think that, if the local politicians are doing it all wrong, then somebody’s going to hit them on the head

60+, ABC1, Thatcham

Other important areas audience identified in this qualitative review included: reflecting local issues and concerns; and giving a better understanding of topical issues in the local area.

### 6.2 Areas where audiences though the service was performing strongly

**Highlights a range, and assists understanding of, local topical issues and concerns**

Inside Out and Sunday Politics are felt to help audiences to understand local issues in more depth. Audiences said that Inside Out and Sunday Politics were performing well at covering a **wide range of topics and subject matter; delivering a better understanding of local issues; highlighting important social issues; and reflecting local issues and concerns**.

Viewers saw both programmes as informative and relevant. They believed that they help to provide a good understanding of what is going on locally. Audiences felt there was no direct equivalent on ITV, so it was considered distinctive content as a result.

> ITV don’t do anything like that, so that’s different

40-59, ABC1, Birmingham

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\(^{15}\) ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015
Audiences felt Inside Out is informative and covers a wide range of topics – typically three per programme. The issues it covers are often felt to be topical ones that are important to the local community e.g. canals (Shropshire), care-homes and plastic dumping in the sea (Devon). Viewers also welcomed how the show focussed on parts of the TV region which can typically receive less attention on the local BBC news.

> It [Inside Out] can often be a gateway to you finding out a little bit more... there’s certainly more than you’d find in the everyday press. I like that the show goes into the smaller areas, rather than just Liverpool or Manchester

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> I think it’s a great show [Inside Out]. Because to me, it covers a lot of areas and what it does, is they go in depth, but not too deep and they basically take all the dross out of it and give you the facts

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> It’s interesting. Because I can sit back and enjoy it... I think it’s more on my level... it tells me informative things [Inside Out]

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Inside Out was a programme that some older viewers had watched on iPlayer, motivated by the topics of local interest and entertaining delivery.

> Now I’m beginning to watch things like Inside Out on the web... even though I’m not a confident user of the web

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6.3 **Areas that received a mixed response from audiences**

**Mixed views on levels of political analysis, explanation, and contextualising local issues**

BBC Regional TV current affairs on TV received a mixed response from audiences for covering the important political stories in the local area. Whilst the regional segment of Sunday Politics
was seen as covering some political stories for the local area, the quality of analysis was felt to vary compared with the main programme. Audiences also felt that this regional segment was quite ‘hidden’ within the national show. Indeed, it was not always clear to audiences that there was a regional slot within Sunday Politics at all. It was also not felt to be long enough in duration. Audiences felt that there should be a separate, dedicated local programme instead so that important local issues can be addressed and discussed. The quality and depth of political analysis was also deemed insufficient, in part because it was being compared to the main programme.

The Politics show could do with being a bit longer than an hour – it never seems long enough on a Sunday morning

60+, C2DE, Kingsteignton

With Question Time, at least you feel like it’s real people… there should be a local show like that

40-59, ABC1, Exeter

In terms of political analysis audiences also expressed the view that the Sunday timeslot was not suited to the discussion of local, political matters. Evenings, when those who have children are asleep, would be more preferable. The title ‘Politics’ was also alienating for some (particularly for younger and C2DE audiences). In these groups it was not the language audiences used to describe local issues, even though these issues may be political in nature.

The problem is, you mention the word politics, people just switch off

40-59, ABC1, Exeter

I don’t think of it being particularly political always

60+, ABC1, Thatcham

I’ve got other things to do. I wouldn’t sit down on a Sunday morning and watch it’

60+, ABC1, Thatcham
Audiences also felt that BBC Regional TV current affairs programming were not always long enough to be able to go into topics in depth, and explain complex issues or put them into context. Viewers suggested that 10 minutes within a 30 minute programme (Inside Out) or a short segment within a national show (Sunday Politics) is not always long enough to be able to go into topics in enough detail or to explain complicated local issues and contextualise them. Audiences would prefer Inside Out to do a larger number of episodes that focus on one ‘big topic’ that affects the wider region, instead of three items. There was an acknowledgement that Inside Out does do this occasionally, but audiences would like to see more examples of this – especially for important and complicated local issues.

It is for these reasons that viewers also feel that these BBC current affairs programmes fall short on investigating and scrutinising issues and institutions. Audiences felt that to tackle this effectively, more airtime was needed. Also as the shows are not on air all year round this limits their ability to effectively fulfil these requirements. This area was important to all audiences, but in particular to older audiences (60+) who were more vocal about the need for BBC Regional TV current affairs programming to investigate and scrutinise more.

“I’m not sure if it explains complex issues… I don’t think it’s on long enough to explain it but it does introduce you to it… instead of doing three an episode, do one or two and get more detail into that, hence more debate”

60+, ABC1, St Helens

“Whilst they do try to remain independent, there’s nothing challenging… too gentle in interviews”

60+, C2DE, Walsall

“Inside Out is only on for a certain period (in the year). I wish it could be a bit longer, and tackle a few more subjects”

60+, C2DE, Kingsteignton

6.4 Areas where audiences felt BBC Regional TV current affairs could improve

Being more effective in holding local decision makers to account

Audiences would like the BBC’s regional current affairs output to be more effective in holding local decision makers to account. All audiences, but especially younger viewers (40-59), felt that local decision makers needed to be made more accountable and the consensus was that BBC Regional Current Affairs was not doing this as well as it could. While audiences were forgiving of
BBC Regional TV news not performing this role, it was felt that this was an important priority for regional current affairs programming. Audiences compared the approach of BBC regional interviewing against the BBC’s national current affairs content, such as Question Time and Newsnight, which they regarded as very high quality. In comparison, BBC Regional TV current affairs programming was felt to be more light touch in its approach to questioning. There was more of an expectation for Sunday Politics to fulfil this role as it is perceived as a show which interviews and interrogate politicians and decision makers.

Inside Out, on the other hand, was perceived to have more of an entertainment remit, although some viewers felt it could also hold decision makers to account for the occasions where it does interview relevant local decision makers. Few believed it was doing this as effectively as it could be currently.

Amongst the participants, there was a degree of cynicism regarding politicians and whether any public figures or institutions were championing ordinary people. One of the reasons Inside Out was well-liked was because it was “more about the people, than a political point of view”. This consensus was shared by audiences across the case study regions. In contrast some audiences (especially C2DE) struggled to connect with the Sunday Politics. As a result there were some suggestions that a programme with a format like Question Time for local current affairs matters, where the audience could air their concerns, would be more interesting and increase their likelihood to watch.

“There’s no point in watching it, it’s just a lot of suited men arguing… private school boys

40-59, ABC1, Exeter

“I don’t think it holds local decision makers to account… local decision makers don’t go on TV

60+, C2DE, Stockton

“If you want to hold people to account, a format like Question Time, focussed on local issues, that would be of interest to me

40-59, ABC1, Birmingham

“With Question Time, at least you feel like it’s real people

40-59, ABC1, Exeter

“I don’t think it holds decision makers to account, it just tells you about them, but they’re not going to change local issues

40-59, C2DE, Liverpool
Reaching audiences

It should be noted that among these groups, awareness and viewers of both Inside out and the regional section of Sunday Politics were low. Audiences felt these shows were not reaching out to them, due in part to scheduling; being embedded within a national show (Sunday Politics); brand awareness (Inside Out) and the name of the programme (Sunday Politics).

Inside Out follows The One Show, instead of local news, and is sometimes mistaken for it. This would suggest that branding and associations with local content are not always cutting through to audiences. In addition, 7.30pm (Inside Out) was felt to be a difficult time, particularly for those with children, to engage with a current affairs show, as was Sunday daytime (Sunday Politics). There was also confusion over the local portion of Sunday Politics being embedded within a nationally focused programme. As identified, they felt it was ‘hidden’ and would prefer a dedicated programme.

Audiences evidently value the type of content that is being covered by Sunday Politics, but do not always relate these issues to being political. The name can be off-putting – it is not the type of content they typically associate with Sunday viewing, and they do not necessarily identify local issues as ‘political’.

“I’ve never seen that, or that. I didn’t even know it existed!”
40-59, ABC1, Middlesbrough

“I think they’re missing the point, personally, is when they’re doing it and how they’re promoting it. Because I have seen Inside Out advertised, but obviously not enough"
40-59, ABC1, Exeter

“They’re either not appealing to us, or its not on at the right time… I prefer to read the newspaper on a Sunday"
60+, C2DE, Telford

“Yeah, I’d be interested but it would have to be outside of the children’s wake time, maybe later in the evening when everyone’s in bed"
40-59, C2DE, Reading
7 BBC Local News Online

7.1 Overview

Audiences commented that their consumption of local news and information online is (generally) increasing and becoming a part of everyday life. Within this, the BBC website for their local area was a highly regarded source for accurate, immediate information on sport, weather and local stories. Tablets and smartphones were more prominent with younger audiences (40-59) and older ABC1 audiences. Some older (60+) and C2DE audiences said they had the equipment, but were less confident and lacked the knowledge of how to use it. Despite often having such devices and new ways of accessing local media, older audiences were more likely to still use print, radio and TV for local news. For them, online tended to supplement, rather than replace, other platforms.

Younger audiences (40-59 years) were often finding out about news and events in the local area via their newsfeeds on social media (primarily Facebook), but this was more a by-product of usage – which was primarily for communicating with family and friends. They were not usually visiting Facebook to find such news, it instead came to them and was being consumed passively. As such, not many had used or actively sought out BBC content on social media for their local area, but some had experienced it – mainly when friends had shared news articles.

The non-BBC local news and information sources on social media that were valued tended to be hyper-local, so providing information that they couldn’t get elsewhere. Such sources were ‘followed’ on Facebook or Twitter because of recommendations by friends, or because they had seen articles of interest in their newsfeeds that their friends had posted. One example of this was Breaking News Teesside for audiences in Middlesbrough and Stockton.

Audiences felt that BBC Local News Online was doing well in these areas:

- Provides information of local interests, such as sport, heritage and events
- Links to content on social media e.g. Facebook, Twitter

There was a mixed response to the following areas for BBC Local News Online:

- Provides me with up-to-date news about my local area*¹⁶
- Reflects news from my local area*
- Provides high quality, independent news*
- Provides impartial news
- Provides clear links to other local media and information providers

*¹⁶ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Performance Gaps from the quantitative research, September 2015
• Encourages me to get involved through online discussion of important issues

As previously, those statements with an asterix represent the areas with the biggest performance gaps in the quantitative research phase of the service licence review.¹⁷

Consistent with other BBC Local platforms, audiences wanted BBC Local News Online to strive to provide impartial, high quality independent news. Once again, other than the high quality aspect, this was more of an aspiration for the BBC to meet. Equally important to most audiences was that BBC Local News Online provided up-to-date news that reflected their local area. Online was seen as the quickest way of accessing news information so it was felt important the BBC was providing local news and information that was accurate and timely. Younger audiences (40-59) also felt that use of social media was important if there was a need to interact with a story (e.g. a missing child). Older audiences (≥60+) typically gave less importance to content on social media, although they understood it has value and was important for the BBC to engage younger audiences now and for the future in local matters.

7.2 Areas where audiences thought the service was performing strongly

Providing information of local interests, such as sport, heritage and events

BBC Local websites were found to offer relevant local information on news, weather, traffic and sport in particular; but to a lesser extent on culture and events in the local area, depending on the time of year and what was going on. BBC Local News Online users found the presentation clear, the website easy-to-use, trusted the information they were finding, and found it to be generally up-to-date. Older audiences (≥60+), if active online, were more likely to be positive about BBC websites than younger respondents who tended to visit more sources online, although they still valued the BBC.

Audience interaction with their BBC Local website was often at a consistent time of day. Some examples from audiences included: looking at the website on a laptop with breakfast; checking the news on the PC at work during lunch hour; looking at it on a tablet in the evening whilst watching TV; coming home and spending time in the evening looking at it on a smartphone to catch up on news missed during the day.

I use all of it – sport, entertainment, health, what’s on… It’s just like the national news (online), it goes into local. It’s all under the same banner, BBC News gives me high quality information

⁴⁰-⁵⁹, C2DE, Liverpool

¹⁷ ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015
Linking to social media content

We asked audiences for their views on BBC Local News Online providing links to content on social media, e.g. Facebook and Twitter. Audiences told us they believe the site does link to content on social platforms – this is considered relatively prominent on the right hand side of the homepage, plus articles provide the ability to share stories and a few had used this feature.

This was a more important area for some younger audiences (40-59). They were primarily using Facebook, with some also using Twitter. The information they tended to find out on social media was typically serendipitous, stumbling across articles within their newsfeeds (both BBC and non-BBC). These tended to be shared by other people within the social media space they were in, as few actively followed BBC social media accounts themselves.

Older audiences (60+) told us they were less inclined to think of social media for local news and information. Although they felt it was something the BBC should be doing, they did not necessarily see it as being that important to them. Those who use social media are typically using it to connect privately with family and friends rather than for information seeking. However, older audiences did recognise that it may be of more value to younger generations.

I’ve saved it to my favourites, so it automatically goes to the Birmingham and Black Country page… I check local weather about three or four times a day

40-59, ABC1, Birmingham

It’s a trusted field. You read it and say ‘there must be something in this’. It’s just a worthy medium

60+, ABC1, St Helens

I’ve seen links on there to Facebook – you have to these days

60+, C2DE, Stockton

I never do go on the Facebook page. I don’t use Facebook or Twitter

60+, C2DE, Telford

Yes, if people go missing it’s quite good. If everyone’s tweeting and it goes mad, it’s quite good… and when the child was found they told everyone and I thought ‘thank God’

49-59, C2DE, Reading
7.3 Areas that received a mixed response from audiences

BBC Local News online can be seen to be lacking in depth of content

One of the most important areas for BBC Local News Online for audiences was to provide up-to-date news about their local area. A related area, also identified as important, was to reflect news from the local area. There was a mixed response on how far the BBC Local News Online sites were succeeding in doing this. This is in line with the quantitative research findings which identified performance gaps for these two areas.\(^{18}\)

The standard of journalism of BBC Local News Online was felt to be high quality and informative, although audiences did highlight that it did not always feel like there was enough content on the websites. As a result audiences commented that they supplemented their BBC Local news online consumption with other online sources, such as local newspaper websites. In addition, regular users of BBC Local websites felt there had been recent changes to design and content on the website that had impacted slightly negatively on their perceptions. Their impression was that there were now fewer news items and that stories were staying up for longer. Looking at web pages live during the research sessions, some noticed the same stories they had seen a day or two ago. This left them with the feeling that it was perhaps not as up-to-date as it could be. Sometimes audiences told us they were seeing stories happening around them, but were not always seeing these reported on the BBC website.

In addition, the BBC Local websites are not always felt to be local and relevant enough, which was cited as another reason why they do not use this exclusively and also use other local news and information sources online. Audiences told us they would ideally like to be able to drill down on their BBC Local website to a hyper-local level. Younger audiences felt that more could be made of the BBC’s Local content on social platforms with this, so that the website does not become too busy or difficult to use.

Audiences in areas with ‘Local Live’ sites\(^ {19}\) felt that this helped make the BBC online site feel more up-to-date, although there was generally low awareness and some felt it was more suited to major events locally as opposed to everyday events.

\(^{18}\) ICM Unlimited, BBC Trust Local Radio, Regional Television News and Current Affairs and Local Online News Review: Findings from the quantitative research, September 2015

\(^{19}\) Local Live is a regularly updated live news and information module on certain BBC Local websites that displays short updates of local news, sport, travel, weather, user comments and links to external sites and sources.
Striving for impartiality and independence: an ideal for all media

When discussing BBC Local News Online and whether it provides high quality independent news and impartial news, audiences brought up similar issues to those covered during evaluations of BBC Local Radio, TV and current affairs.

Their comments on impartiality were not specifically directed at the BBC in most cases. It was considered by most that impartiality and independence were values to strive for across all media outlets, and more especially for the BBC as a public service broadcaster. It was widely believed that no media organisation could be impartial or independent and that, across platforms, it was difficult to achieve this for local content, which would be, by its nature, favourable towards the local area.

It tries to be [impartial], but whether it does is a completely different matter

49-59, C2DE, Reading
Links to non BBC sources

There was some awareness (and welcoming) of links to other local media – especially for further detail or another perspective. Audiences felt it was beneficial for the BBC to use other local media content to supplement their own. It was seen to help make life easier for audiences as they do not have to visit multiple websites to find all of the local news and information they might be seeking. However there was some debate about how clear these links were and awareness of their inclusion on BBC Local websites was mixed.

Involvement in online discussions

On the whole, most did not feel they were being encouraged to get involved in online discussion of important issues. A minority referenced Facebook posts, but few could recall how / where BBC has encouraged online discussion of important local issues.

Audiences were not overly motivated to get involved in online discussions and so did not feel it was essential for the BBC to encourage this. Some felt that this it can lead to online discussions with ‘trolls’, or ‘keyboard warriors’, and it was not viewed as positively as phone-ins on radio. However, when talking generally, being able to interact with a story on social platforms was seen to be of value, for those that liked to engage in this manner – typically younger audiences (40-59). Thus, audiences felt that the BBC should be focussing on how they can engage audiences with BBC Local content on social media platforms, should they wish to debate important local issues online. However, this was not seen as a high priority.

I don’t know if it encourages me to get involved through online discussion of important issues… and I don’t want to get involved in online arguments

60+, ABC1, St Helens