

BBC Trust Service Review:

BBC Local Radio and Local News and Current Affairs in England

Summary report

Key themes

The BBC's local radio and news and current affairs services are a very important part of the BBC's overall news and radio offer to licence fee payers in England. They deliver the BBC's public purposes to a large number of people who value the services and see them as high-quality, informative and trustworthy.

The BBC's local and regional output is part of a broader local media market across the UK, including commercial radio, local and regional press, and local and regional TV. We have found that the BBC services play a different role to commercial and other local media, and we consider that BBC Local Radio and regional current affairs are unique within UK public service broadcasting.

The evidence we have gathered for this review has shown that the BBC's local and regional services are highly valued. We heard widespread praise from users for the quality of these services, and there was a strong sense of loyalty to them. Audiences feel the services are a trustworthy source of information on local news and events and feel they provide relevant and reliable information, day to day, as well as in extraordinary circumstances, such as when there is severe weather and local emergencies. We conclude that the BBC's local and regional output is a vital part of the BBC's news offer to audiences in England.

The BBC's local and regional services on TV, radio and online reach a large number of people each week: nearly half of all adults in England watch the BBC's regional TV news, making it one of the most popular programmes on BBC One. BBC Local Radio is listened to by 23% of its target audience of adults aged 50 and over; regional current affairs programme *Inside Out* is watched by around 9% of adults in England, and BBC Local News online is used by 9.3 million 'unique browsers'. However, the services are much less likely to be used by black, Asian and minority ethnic audiences than they are by white audiences. This challenge will become greater, as the UK population of all ages becomes more diverse, so we have asked the BBC to address this across all of its local and regional services, with a focus on localities with the most diverse populations.

Increasing political and fiscal devolution within England means the BBC's services have more responsibility to keep audiences informed about local matters that may affect them. Audience expectations are not entirely being met in this area, despite improvements made by the BBC since our last review in 2012, such as the introduction of political reporters at each Local Radio station and editorial changes such as monthly "Hot Seat" programmes. The BBC will need to consider how it can address a growing need for information about local politics as regional devolution continues.

We believe that it is increasingly important for the BBC to provide its local content online in order to deliver its public purposes to a broad audience. Audience reach of the BBC's local and regional output on TV and radio has fallen in recent years, although it remains high. Meanwhile, use of online and social media is increasing, and the BBC is increasingly making its local news and current affairs content more widely available online and on social media, as well as on TV and radio.

The BBC's online local news is valued by users, but there is a long-standing issue over audience expectations not being met by the speed and breadth of the BBC's online local news reporting.

In response to similar concerns being raised in our last service review of BBC Online in 2013, we asked the BBC to provide a better local news offer. It responded by rolling out 'Local Live' streams alongside the main BBC Local News pages. These provide more dynamic and up-to-date local news, by combining short news updates with links to longer form content from the BBC and other local news providers. While audiences feel that Local Live has made BBC web pages feel more up-to-date, awareness of them is low and the main BBC pages continue to be seen by some users as slow in reporting and offering a small volume of stories.

We agree with BBC management that Local Live is a positive development but that it is part of an evolution of the BBC's local news offer and not an end in itself. In concluding this review, we have asked the BBC to improve its local web pages further in order to keep pace with audience expectations and needs. We support the growth of the BBC's online activity, but it needs to be distinctive and the BBC must be mindful of its potential market impact and make the most of opportunities to partner with other local news providers.

The BBC is considering how its local and regional offer may need to be more varied in the future across different regions in terms of the mix of TV, radio and online output. We have seen the challenges already faced by many BBC local and regional services in covering large and diverse regions, and we agree that in future the BBC may need to reprioritise different types of output across different regions. However, given the deep concerns regarding the potential impact of the BBC on local news markets, we are clear that there is a need for ongoing regulatory oversight of BBC's scope in local news. The system of service licences will need to evolve in order to provide the right balance of flexibility for the BBC and clarity for other operators. This is a task for the BBC's regulator in the next Charter period.

Alongside the BBC's own online offer, social media plays an increasingly important role in delivering BBC content to less well-served audience groups. As this activity grows, we think that future regulation of BBC services should also consider how best to cover output offered on third-party platforms.

The BBC is working with other providers of local journalism on some online initiatives already and it is discussing how broader partnerships can be forged in this area. We are clear about the importance of the BBC working with other local providers in order to sustain a plural and high-quality local news market and are encouraged by its commitment to developing partnerships.

The BBC's 2010 licence fee settlement required it to make a range of efficiency savings and cuts to the scope of its services. Spending on the BBC's local and regional output has fallen in real terms since 2011-12 as a result of savings, which have left budgets very tight in some areas. However, its savings are proportionally lower than some other parts of the BBC because of the Trust's decision in 2012 to protect the funding of Local Radio and regional

current affairs, due to their unique value to audiences. We believe that the scope of the BBC's local and regional output should be protected where possible from further budget cuts due to its high public value and unique contribution to UK public service broadcasting.

The following sections of this summary cover our conclusions, which are specific to each BBC service.

BBC Local Radio

BBC Local Radio reaches a large proportion of its primary target audience of adults aged 50 and over and is clearly focused on serving this audience. However, listening levels have fallen and, in response, the BBC has revised its editorial approach to local radio news, which it aims to make more engaging for listeners through greater warmth and personality. This does not reduce the stations' focus on news, nor does it imply any change to the remit of BBC Local Radio.

Audiences have very positive perceptions of BBC Local Radio regarding its quality, accessibility and ability to engage them. Our evidence has shown that BBC Local Radio is not just distinctive, but unique in many respects – the BBC's local stations are often the only ones in their area offering local content across the daytime schedule. The stations are distinctive in other respects too: their focus on serving older listeners, their high level of news and speech, and their provision of many opportunities for listeners to have their say.

Listeners told us they trust BBC Local Radio's news and feel it is informative and relevant. They value the opportunity to contribute and get involved with their station. Our research highlighted that BBC Local Radio's role as a companion and friend to many listeners is extremely important.

Sports coverage on BBC Local Radio is highly appreciated by many listeners, although listening levels are declining, as many people follow live sport online. BBC Local Radio is performing well in supporting local arts and music, and in supporting new and unsigned local musicians.

BBC Regional News

The BBC's regional news on TV continues to reach a very large number of people: it is watched by 47% of adults in England each week and the weekday 6.30pm programme is the BBC's most watched news programme – on some days, it the most watched programme on BBC One overall. Reach is highest among older viewers, reflecting the increasing interest in local news as adults get older. However, reach has fallen slightly in the last few years.

Audience perceptions are very positive for BBC regional news being up-to-date, accurate and impartial. While audience expectations are even higher still, we have concluded that the quality of the BBC's regional news output is high. Viewers told us that the programmes keep them well informed about news and events in their local area, they consider them a reliable and impartial source of news, while being friendly and accessible.

BBC Regional Current Affairs

The BBC's regional current affairs strands in England are *Inside Out* and a regional 'opt' in *Sunday Politics*. There are also some one-off programmes each year.

Inside Out is the BBC's most watched current affairs programme, despite reach having fallen slightly in the last five years. Reach of *Sunday Politics* has fallen significantly, but it remains important as the BBC's only TV programme with a dedicated regional politics slot.

The BBC's regional current affairs is highly valued by audiences and is now a unique part of UK public service broadcasting, as there is no comparable offer from other UK broadcasters.

Our research showed the majority of viewers feel the BBC's regional current affairs is relevant to them. Viewers told us they welcome the fact that it can focus on parts of the region that can receive less attention in the news. However, budget cuts mean there are now more items on *Inside Out* that are shared between regions, although joined-up editions – where each region covers the same national issue from a local perspective – can be high impact and perform well. We think the BBC could do even more to focus on political and other serious issues in its regional current affairs programming.

BBC Local News Online

BBC Local News online attracts a large number of users. Research indicates that use tends to be highest amongst men and ABC1 adults, with a fairly even spread by age.

The majority of users do not use the BBC Local News "index" pages (e.g. www.bbc.co.uk/news/england/merseyside), instead finding local stories either via another BBC news page or linking directly from an external (non BBC) website. Users are increasingly accessing BBC Local News from mobile devices and via the BBC News app.

Audiences view the BBC's local news online as informative and of a high quality. Our audience research and consultation showed the pages are valued as a trustworthy source of easy-to-access local news and information. The BBC's online local news is distinctive by virtue of its high editorial values, and the audience recognises and values this.

Use of the new 'Local Live' online pages is low, but is growing steadily as the offer is rolled out across all regions. As set out above, we have asked the BBC to improve its local news web pages further in order to meet audience expectations.

Actions and recommendations

These are the actions we are asking the BBC to take as a result of this review:

Action 1: The BBC should continue to improve how it explains local political and policy issues and holds local decision-makers to account. As regional devolution grows, this is becoming increasingly important.

Despite recent editorial improvements, audience expectations are still not being met by the BBC's output in this area. As regional devolution grows, the BBC will need to do more to ensure its coverage of regional politics and policy issues meets audience needs.

Timing: The BBC should report back to us on its plans to address this issue in 6 months.

Action 2: The BBC should improve its local web pages further in order to meet audience expectations.

The BBC's local news is a core part of the overall BBC News offer and key to the delivery of the BBC's public purposes. Online is an increasingly important platform for delivering local news to audiences and, despite some recent improvements, the BBC will need to continue to improve the speed of its local news reporting and flex the ways in which stories are made available in order to meet changing audience expectations.

As it does this, it is important that the BBC continues to work collaboratively with other local news providers and is mindful of its potential to impact the market negatively.

Timing: The BBC should report back to us with its plans to address this issue in 6 months.

Action 3: The BBC should increase the appeal of its regional and local output to a wider range of audiences, particularly black, Asian and minority ethnic adults.

Use of the BBC's regional and local TV and radio services is much lower than average among black, Asian and minority ethnic audiences. This challenge is set to grow, as the UK population of all ages becomes more diverse, so it is important that the BBC finds more ways to improve performance of its local and regional services in this respect. We think this is particularly important in localities where the population is more ethnically diverse, but that the BBC should consider this issue across all of its regional and local output.

Timing: The BBC should report back to us on its plans to address this issue in 6 months.

We are also setting two recommendations for future regulation of the BBC. These should be considered as part of planning for the next Charter period:

Recommendation 1: Future regulation of the BBC should consider how best to regulate the changing scope of BBC news across TV, radio and online.

The Trust or a future regulator of the BBC will need to consider how best to regulate a changing mix of BBC news across TV, radio and online, in order to allow the BBC to evolve its offer and continue delivering the public purposes while ensuring sufficient accountability to stakeholders, particularly the other providers in the markets in which the BBC operates.

Recommendation 2: Future regulation of the BBC may need to include oversight of BBC output offered on third-party platforms.

The amount of BBC content (local and other) available on social media sites is growing fast, but this is not currently covered by the Trust's service licence framework. Future regulation of BBC services may need to include oversight of this activity in order to give proper accountability for the scope of the BBC's content offer.

Timing: To be considered as part of planning for the next Charter period.