

Ofcom Annual Plan 2021/22 - Leicester Community Radio

Leicester Community Radio can directly trace its roots to 1974, and has been providing forms of community radio to Leicester using the most applicable technologies of the time. This has included AM, FM, Rediffusion Cable, Acoustic Loop audio systems and Internet radio.

The reason that the concept has survived for so many years and gone from strength to strength is because excepting September 1981 to October 1983 (Centre Radio), Leicester has never had a local radio station that fully embraces wider inclusivity and reflects the unique demographics of the area. The failure of Centre radio perhaps demonstrates that this has been a very challenging environment for many years and that it is not commercially viable to service such an audience, but it is possible on a voluntary not-for-profit model committed to social gain, as per LCR.

Leicester Community Radio, as confirmed by Ofcom, is the only radio station for over-35's, in English only, across the Greater Leicester Urban area. We are committed to community cohesion across an area that for several years has carried the highest rate of racial hate crime in the UK. We also have a firm connection and commitment to the Afro-Caribbean community in Leicester, who have strongly indicated they want to be treated as equals on a larger platform, not put into a "ghetto" on a 'minority' radio station where the issues they face are only heard by those who already know their story. Many different groups across Leicester firmly support our concept of equality and inclusivity.

Leicester Community Radio has had a chequered history. We have applied for a number of licences throughout the years under different station names and management structures, but the basic service and premise has always remained the same. Passions in Leicester run high that after 47 years LCR still has no full-time license that is sustainable.

All LCR wants is a license that has affordable fees and is permanently available. There can be no doubt that the support for the service is extremely strong, producing over 110 hours per week of original content during the first lockdown when many community stations around the country simply "closed down". The interaction and response from listeners via social media, text messages, telephone and even "snail mail" show that the service is invaluable.

LCR fully supports SSDAB and the Ofcom workplan as written, but feels there is clear scope for a small, localised round in Leicester to award LCR a FM community license. We feel SSDAB is an excellent technology, but as with all technologies, adoption is always slow in deprived audiences. LCR deliberately aims to serve the most deprived communities in an extremely deprived area of the country. Leicester has been in the longest COVID lockdown of anywhere in the UK. DAB take-up, however, is extremely poor in this area. A local commercial station on AM and DAB has reported that 80% of their listening is on AM and less than 10% on DAB. We have schools in our target area with 100% free school meals, so DAB radios are just not affordable. Another indicator of economic inequality levels in Leicester is indicated by the age of vehicles on the roads, being over 15 years old on average. The EU mandate for all cars to have DAB as standard from 1st Jan 2021 will not take effect therefore in Leicester for many years. Most cars still have cassette players.

We therefore implore Ofcom to recognise the unique exceptional circumstance in Leicester and carry out an FM community radio license round as soon as possible such that LCR has the opportunity to commence broadcasting under a full community license as soon as possible but absolutely no later than 1st June 2021. LCR should not have to keep fighting with Ofcom and needing to prove our worth to stay on air every 55 days. We are paying over £14000 license fees for the year, when other community stations are paying £600 per year. Furthermore as Ofcom is aware the license conditions set by them bar LCR from accessing most grant funding. Much of these fees has been paid by private donors who are effectively paying to provide a public service.

To not issue a full-time community license to LCR, we believe, directly discriminates against people of a protected characteristic living in one of the most deprived parts of the UK population. The number of BAME people living in Leicester is well over the National average. We believe we have consistently and clearly demonstrated there is a public health need in Leicester for our service, as Leicester has had an extremely poor COVID challenge to date. As a trusted media source with a population often hostile to the vaccine, it is essential we stay on air to support this public messaging.

Ofcom is already fully aware of our support from local authorities, NHS, MPs, etc, etc, and we have been in dialogue with senior managers at Ofcom on this matter for quite some time now, but it has really come to the forefront since COVID, as our service now is essential to help save lives, especially as our audience is some of the most adverse to having the vaccine.

If we go off air it is certain more deaths from COVID will occur, which our service could have helped to prevent, as for many people locally we are the only media source they trust for COVID information. This is in addition to the public information, mental wellbeing and many other unique benefits our service brings, as Ofcom is already acknowledged.