

## How Ofcom regulates the BBC

### Response to Ofcom's consultation from the Local TV Network

1. The Local TV Network (LTVN) is the trade association representing the interests of the 34 Ofcom-licensed local television services in the UK. Launched in 2013, local TV covers localities from Belfast to Medway, Aberdeen to Bristol, delivering locally-focused news bulletins on Freeview. There are a range of operating models in the local TV sector – from commercial entertainment channels, to non-profit community services – but each is dedicated to providing a core service of professional, high quality, accurate and impartial local news. Additionally, local TV has proved to be a valuable training ground for a new generation of journalists and TV production staff. Major newsrooms, including the BBC, Sky, ITN and Al Jazeera include staff who received their training or early work experience in local TV. The local TV sector also includes stations with formal ties to universities or arrangements with other news outlets, including the BBC, to provide training.
2. LTVN recognises that Ofcom's role in regulating the BBC entails a balancing act. On the one hand, the BBC is expected to maximise its impact in the delivery of its public service obligations and in reaching the widest possible audience. But on the other, Ofcom must remain aware of the BBC's impact on the markets in which it operates in order to maintain plurality in the provision of services. LTVN's hope is that, in the area of local news, this balance will be maintained.
3. The BBC has significantly changed its strategic approach to local news. Ofcom's third annual report on the BBC, published just under a year ago, notes that "with its unparalleled local and regional newsgathering resources, the BBC should be able to represent the whole country authentically."<sup>1</sup> Ofcom expressed concern at the BBC's plan, announced in July 2020, to make spending cuts of £25m in its regional and local TV and radio services, achieved in part through 450 job losses. Ofcom sought reassurance that "the BBC will ensure that it maintains a high quality local and regional news and current affairs offer" and "that audiences have a clear sense of how their needs will continue to be met as the BBC evolves its services."<sup>2</sup> Ofcom's concern about significant cuts to an important aspect of the BBC's services is understandable, but what was missing from Ofcom's analysis at the time was a view on the BBC's impact on the local news market.
4. In March 2021, the BBC published its 'Across the UK' plan. Gone were the spending cuts and job losses and, in their place, was a commitment that "the BBC will cumulatively spend at least an extra £700m outside London by 2027/28"<sup>3</sup> in "the biggest creative and journalistic rebalancing of the BBC's footprint in our history"<sup>4</sup>. Included in the BBC's new plan are:

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<sup>1</sup> Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC 2019/20, November 2020, p26

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p33-34

<sup>3</sup> The BBC Across the UK, March 2021, p4

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p13

- “For the first time, bringing local news and content to the heart of our online portfolio” with “increasingly personalised online products, with a greater focus on video storytelling”<sup>5</sup>
  - “A new generation of more than 100 [digital community] reporters based in towns and areas that have never benefitted from any regional TV presence”<sup>6</sup> (by which LTVN assumes they mean BBC or ITV regional TV)
  - “Six new peak-time BBC local radio services” and “BBC local bulletins for more than fifty areas across the UK on BBC Sounds”<sup>7</sup>
  - A doubling of the BBC’s commitment to apprenticeships, with “1,000 apprentices in any year across the UK”, “an Apprentice Training Agency in the West Midlands” and “a tailored apprenticeship and training programme” in Northern Ireland.
5. Nowhere is plurality more important than in the provision of news. Plurality and diversity of voices and opinions is vital to maintaining a healthy democracy. It is in no one’s interests to have a single dominant news provider, at any level.
  6. The BBC notes that the covid pandemic has “accelerated the decline in local media business models”<sup>8</sup> and that “sources of high-quality local content are reducing as commercial pressures continue to bite.”<sup>9</sup> LTVN’s concern is that the proposals in ‘Across the UK’ appear more likely to hasten the demise of other local media outlets than help them. LTVN recognises the BBC’s commitment to the Local News Partnership and appreciates the BBC’s willingness to discuss further opportunities for co-operation, collaboration and content-sharing. Nonetheless, it is easy to see how the commitment of resources on the scale proposed by the BBC might allow it quickly to dominate, and hugely distort, the markets for local news provision, as well as for the recruitment and training of local reporters, to the detriment of all other local news providers, including local TV.
  7. LTVN members seek constructive relationships with the BBC in areas including training and apprenticeships, licensing of programming, technical collaboration and provision of local audiovisual news services. More generally, LTVN seeks to ensure that the BBC takes account of local TV in its joint ventures with other public service media operators and works to ensure that connected TV platforms which it funds (such as Freeview Play and Freesat) make provision for the delivery of local TV.
  8. The potential benefits that the BBC could bring with a more seriously and pro-actively collaborative focus are significant. LTVN hopes that both the BBC and Ofcom will consider if their desire to “help support the local news industry and a plurality of local provision”<sup>10</sup> could be made a much higher priority, in the public interest.
  9. Local TV projects and initiatives, including training and work placement, have a role to play in news delivery and can add to the plurality of voices and perspectives presented in broadcast news. There are examples of towns and cities where the BBC has had limited prior presence and potentially risks crowding out the work of others. An approach that sets out with an ethos of partnership rather than dominance would allow the BBC to support, and build on, the experience of others.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p7

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p7

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p8

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p3

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p7

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p8

10. It is unclear if the proposals in 'Across the UK' will be subject to Ofcom review, or any kind of market impact assessment by either Ofcom or the BBC Board, but LTVN is hopeful that they will be. LTVN trusts that Ofcom will restore some equity to its approach to the BBC's regional and local strategy, recognising that delivery on public service objectives should be balanced against the potential threats to fair competition and plurality of voice.

The Local TV Network  
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