

Review of local media in the UK

Terms of reference

[Welsh version available](#)

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1. Terms of reference

- 1.1 Local media plays an important role in the lives of consumers and citizens across the UK. It provides audiences with news and information about what is happening in their local areas, helps build social cohesion and engagement among communities and supports local democracy. However, as more people have turned online for local news and information, local media providers, including the BBC, are having to adapt their local offerings beyond traditional broadcast and print.
- 1.2 Part of Ofcom’s role in regulating the BBC is to oversee the BBC’s performance in delivering its Mission and Public Purposes and to protect fair and effective competition. In performing this role, we must apply our principal duties to further the interests of citizens and consumers, as well as a broader set of duties to maintain sufficient plurality of providers of different TV and radio services and to secure the availability of a wide range of high-quality broadcast services. We also have a duty to promote the fulfilment of the purposes of public service broadcasting, in addition to duties relating to local TV, local commercial radio and community radio services. It is within this context, that we are looking at the provision, role and value of local media in the UK.¹
- 1.3 We are commissioning research to build on our current understanding of what audiences need and value from local services.² Our work will also look at current local media provision and how it is evolving as audiences are consuming more information online, as well as the value local media delivers to consumers and wider society.
- 1.4 This work will be used to inform our regulatory decisions with respect to changes the BBC makes to its local services, competition assessments in relation to local news and information services and, where appropriate, in relation to local TV, local commercial radio and community radio services.
- 1.5 This document sets out the background to why we are looking at local media, including the important role it can play for people across the UK and how local media providers are adapting to changing audience behaviours. We also set out our plans for the review in more detail, including for our consumer research and plans for stakeholder engagement, as well as our future publications.

The importance of local media

- 1.6 Local news and information is important to people in the UK. Half of adults say that knowing what is going on in their local area is a reason they follow news.³ [Preliminary research](#) we commissioned earlier this year found that 92% of adults used local news or information, including weather and traffic.
- 1.7 Greater access to the internet and availability of new online services has made accessing up-to-date local news and information easier and has also broadened the choice of local services for audiences. In 2008, just two-thirds of adults had internet access at home, falling

¹ Section 3, Communications Act 2003.

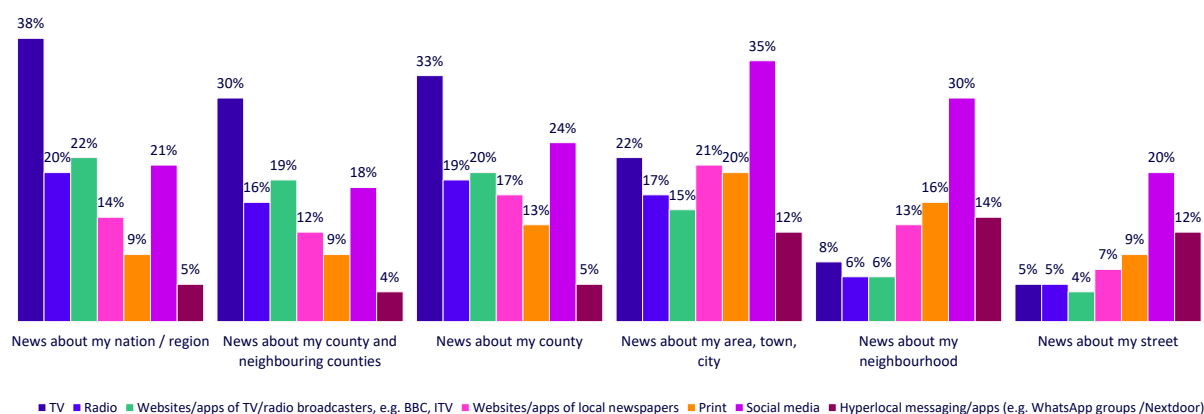
² As set out in our [statement on modernising the BBC’s Operating Licence](#) (see paragraph 4.35).

³ [Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2023](#); 50% of respondents identified ‘to know what’s going on in my local area’ as a reason they followed news.

to 37% of those aged 65 and over.⁴ Of those with internet access, around a quarter said they used it for news (similar across age groups). In 2023, 92% of homes now have internet access⁵ and 68% of adults access news online.⁶ Our research earlier this year showed that the most common way to access local news was online (89%), including social media and websites of broadcasters and newspapers, followed by TV (53%), radio (34%) and print newspapers (22%). On average, people used around two different sources for local news and information.⁷ This varies by type of local news and information with fewer sources used for the most common such as weather (average of 1.3 sources) and traffic and travel (1.5 sources) and a greater range for the less used types of local information such as documentaries about a local area (2.3 sources) or local campaigns (2.5 sources).

1.8 Our research also indicated that people prefer different platforms for different types of local news. TV and radio are typically used to get news about wider geographic areas, such as news about the 'nation or region' or 'county'.⁸ Local newspapers (print and online) and social media are typically used to get news about smaller geographic areas like the 'area, town or city'. Hyperlocal messaging apps are more commonly used to get local news about peoples' neighbourhood or street.

Figure 1: Platforms used for different types of local news



Source: Ofcom Local News Survey 2023. Q2b. Which of these types of local news and information do you get from the platforms you use? Base: All respondents (2,778).

1.9 In addition to its importance to individuals, research also suggests that quality local news has benefits for society. For example, a study published in 2020 showed that local newspaper circulation is positively correlated with local election turnout, supporting the democratic process.⁹ Another study concluded that where communities lose dedicated local coverage, its absence can create information vacuums.¹⁰ In some cases, these gaps are being filled by

⁴ Ofcom, August 2008. [Communications Market Report](#).

⁵ [Ofcom Technology Tracker 2023](#).

⁶ Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2023.

⁷ Ofcom Local News Survey 2023. This included 2,660 online respondents, plus an additional 118 via telephone. Note: the number of sources is likely to be higher as a number of different specific sources could be included in a category selected by participants such as 'Local groups or accounts on social media'.

⁸ Ofcom Local News Survey 2023.

⁹ Plum Consulting, May 2020. [Research into recent dynamics of the press sector in the UK and globally](#), p.7.

¹⁰ David Ardia, Evan Ringel, Victoria Ekstrand and Ashley Fox, 22 December 2020. [Addressing the Decline of Local News, Rise of Platforms, and Spread of Mis- and Disinformation Online: A Summary of Current Research and Policy Proposals](#) p.19.

the rise in community-created social media groups on platforms like Nextdoor, Facebook and WhatsApp, which act as disaggregated sources of local information.

Local media providers continue to face significant challenges with digitisation

- 1.10 The increase in use of online media has put pressure on more traditional platforms, including those that offer local news and information, to tailor how they provide access to their services. These challenges are not new and local media providers have had to reconfigure their product offerings and business models for the digital age.

Regional news bulletins and local TV channels

- 1.11 TV news bulletins for the nations and regions continue to reach significant audiences, although, along with TV consumption more broadly, these have seen declines. In 2022, 44% of UK adults on average watched news bulletins for the nations and regions on BBC or ITV channels each week; 35% watched these on the BBC and 22% watched the ITV1 equivalent. These were both lower than in 2019 when 39% watched the relevant bulletins on BBC One and 26% watched them on ITV1.¹¹
- 1.12 Despite their availability on Freeview and prominent EPG slots, local TV channels have struggled to gain reach and viewing share since they launched. A [report by Enders Analysis](#) estimated in 2018 that local TV reached fewer than 1 million households each week (with London Live accounting for over half).

Local radio

- 1.13 The latest industry data show that 53% of adults in the UK listened to any local radio each week in Q3 2023, though there are differences by sector in audience sizes: 13% of adults listened to BBC radio for the nations and English regions while local commercial radio reached 49%.¹² Though the audiences to local radio as a whole have been relatively stable, the BBC's stations have seen declines while local commercial radio has experienced recent increases. However, there can be differences in the amount of local content and programming provided by BBC radio and commercial stations. BBC radio stations for the nations and English regions typically provide a higher proportion of local news and other local speech content (which is required under the BBC's Operating Licence) than commercial local radio stations. There are also over 200 community radio stations broadcasting to small local areas throughout the UK.

Local and regional print and online news outlets

- 1.14 Print outlets such as local newspapers and magazines have seen the greatest impact from changes in the local media landscape – since 2005, there has been a net loss of at least 271 print local newspaper titles.¹³ A recent [report by Enders Analysis](#) indicates that, over the past five years, circulation of regional weekly titles has declined 19% per annum and

¹¹ Barb, adults 16+, all transmissions, 28-day consolidated, Average weekly reach 3+ mins %, Genre: nations/regions news.

¹² RAJAR Q3 2023.

¹³ Press Gazette, 26 July 2022. [UK local newspaper closures: Launches in digital and print balance out decline.](#)

circulation of regional dailies has declined 15% per annum. Ofcom’s News Consumption Survey suggested the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing trend of decline, with reach of newspapers overall declining from 47% in 2020 to 38% in 2022. The reach of local and regional newspapers also declined during this period, although reach of both subsequently steadied between 2022 and 2023. In Ofcom’s 2023 local news survey, 22% of adults reported using local newspapers for local news and information.

- 1.15 Despite declines in circulation of local newspapers, local news brands continue to reach a significant majority of adults via their online presence. In 2023, 78% of online adults aged 15+ visited regional Reach plc titles, 33% visited National World titles and 28% visited Newsquest titles.¹⁴ However, the decline in print advertising expenditure was not offset by growth in digital advertising expenditure on news publishers’ websites and apps (although overall regional / local digital advertising expenditure overtook print advertising spend in 2022).¹⁵ For example, between 2012 and 2022 advertising expenditure on local / regional newspapers fell by 64%. Some local news publishers also appear to be diversifying their business strategies to cultivate multiple revenue streams, including experimentation with online subscriptions and other supplementary product offerings such as podcasts and newsletters.¹⁶
- 1.16 It is likely that the decline in traditional advertising revenue has contributed to the rationalisation of operations by local media publishers as well as consolidation in the market. For example, National World acquired [JPI Media](#) (previously known as Johnston Press) for £10m in January 2021, [The Rotherham Advertiser](#) in May 2023 and [Midland News Association](#), (which was one of the UK’s largest independent regional news publishers) for £11m in September 2023.¹⁷ In March 2022 [Newsquest acquired Archant](#), adding a further 50 weekly titles and four daily titles in addition to regional magazines, to its current portfolio of over 250 local news brands.

International context

These challenges are not unique to the UK. For example, in 2023, it was estimated that the USA had lost almost a third of local newspapers (2,886 newspapers) since 2005,¹⁸ with 1,800 communities estimated to have no local paper at all.¹⁹ There have been different approaches to try to overcome the challenges faced by the local news sector, including philanthropic funding, changing distribution, adding new revenue streams and introducing new business models. Some governments have also legislated or proposed mechanisms for state support for their local news sectors, including Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Germany, New Zealand and Canada. A recent EU-funded project – [Local Media for Democracy](#) – also aims to research and revive the local media landscape in areas termed “news deserts”.

¹⁴ Ipsos Iris, reach of 15+ online audience. Reach excludes nationals (Express, Star) but includes, for example, Liverpool Echo, Daily Record. Newsquest excludes New European, Exchange and Mart but includes, for example, Northern Echo and York press. National World includes all National World titles (was JPI media) and includes, for example, Lancashire Post, Glasgow World.

¹⁵ Ofcom analysis of AA/WARC Expenditure report data.

¹⁶ Reuters Institute, 24 September 2020. [Publish less, but publish better: pivoting to paid local news.](#)

¹⁷ For the combined acquisitions of Midland News Association and Press Computer Systems.

¹⁸ Local News Initiative, 16 November 2023. [The State of Local News: The 2023 Report.](#)

¹⁹ Rebuild Local News. [The Crisis: Research on Local News.](#)

The BBC's transformation of local services

- 1.17 As part of its plans to become a [digital-first public service media organisation](#), the BBC is modernising its local services by reducing expenditure on its local broadcast services and to reinvest this into online content. This included the [closure of the local television news programmes in Oxford and Cambridge](#) in December 2022. In addition, the BBC is increasing the amount of programming shared between BBC local radio stations in England (while protecting the most listened to programmes, local news bulletins and local sport content)²⁰ and using savings to invest in and increase local online news output across the BBC News website and app.²¹ The BBC began introducing changes to local radio in a phased approach from September 2023 and expects to complete this in January 2024. The changes to online local news have been following as the changes to each local radio area are rolled out and resource is moved from radio to online. As part of this, the BBC has launched new online local news output in Peterborough and Wolverhampton, with Bradford and Sunderland to follow. In our [latest Annual Report on the BBC](#), we said that we will monitor the impact of the changes to BBC local services to ensure that, in focussing on its local online services, it still delivers important local content to audiences reliant on its broadcast services.
- 1.18 The BBC is also in the process of [creating 11 investigative reporting teams across England](#) aimed at providing more analysis of local issues across TV, radio and online and plans to create a new fund to commission original local programmes and podcasts for BBC Sounds.
- 1.19 Last year, [we reviewed the BBC's materiality assessment](#) of proposed changes to the provision of local online news in England. Based on the information available at that time, we agreed with the BBC that the change was not one that may have a significant adverse impact on fair and effective competition, and was therefore not a material change. We said we would monitor progress and gather information from the BBC and commercial operators to consider the actual impact of the BBC's proposals on audiences. We will take forward this work as part of this project.

Other related work

- 1.20 DCMS is making a number of changes to the regulatory frameworks across many of the local media sectors. The [Media Bill](#) will introduce wide-ranging reforms to public service broadcasters and commercial radio. Separately, DCMS is considering [licence renewals](#) in local TV beyond 2025, and we expect it to legislate for this in 2024, with a view to licence renewals being completed by the end of the year. It is also considering changes to the community radio framework.
- 1.21 We are also undertaking a programme of work on the [future of media plurality](#) including considering whether changes are required to the framework. Following our discussion document, we are considering next steps.

²⁰ BBC Local Radio is a network of 39 radio stations that collectively cover England, Jersey and Guernsey.

²¹ BBC, 31 October 2022. [BBC sets out plans to transform its local services to deliver greater value to communities across England](#) and BBC, 18 January 2023. [BBC moves forward with plans to modernise local services](#).

Scope of our review

Consumer research

- 1.22 Building on the research we undertook earlier in the year, as well as existing data from previous research, ongoing trackers and industry data, we have commissioned further primary research. We aim to explore audience motivations, understand the decision-making process behind the selection of local media providers, and gain greater insight into areas including social value and what makes something ‘feel’ local. Our consumer research will be carried out in Spring 2024.
- 1.23 There are five core areas we aim to cover through the research:
- a) **Attitudes and perception** – to understand audience expectations of local media and how well these are being met as well as the impact of changes to the sectors;
 - b) **Trust** – to understand what makes providers trustworthy, how perceptions differ between providers and how trust impacts audience expectations;
 - c) **Representation and portrayal** – to understand what makes something ‘feel’ local and how important it is to audiences that content is sourced and broadcast from the local area, as well as the extent to which audiences believe they are represented and authentically portrayed;
 - d) **Local news preferences and substitution between providers (focusing on news)** – to understand how people discover and consume local news, why they use the routes they use, and reasons for preferences between the BBC and commercial online sources and the extent they are substitutes; and
 - e) **Social cohesion and local engagement** – to understand how local media contributes to a feeling of community and belonging and to what extent it leads to increased engagement with local community.

Stakeholder engagement

- 1.24 We plan to engage with stakeholders over the coming months as we continue to build understanding of the local media landscape in the UK, including evidence of the BBC’s impact on local news. Specifically, we plan to gather views on the following areas:
- a) **Challenges and opportunities facing the local media sector** – insight into recent, current and expected challenges and opportunities faced by local media providers, including the implications for providers’ business models, and how providers have responded;
 - b) **Audience attitudes** – to complement our audience research, insight into the type of local content that audiences value and consume, including any demographic or regional variations, and how this may differ by media type (for example, newspaper versus radio);
 - c) **Impact of BBC on local news** – insight into and evidence of the impact of the BBC across different local media sectors, as well as on the ‘distinctiveness’ of the BBC’s offering and any future concerns or expectations based on the BBC’s published plans;
 - d) **Consumption behaviour** – insight into how and where audiences are accessing and consuming local media content, including how this has changed over time and any observed differences regionally or demographically; and
 - e) **Role of local media** – views on the value that local media provides to individuals, society as a whole and the wider economy, how this has changed over time and whether this

varies by platform, as well as to what extent the role of local media has been impacted by changes to the media landscape.

- 1.25 As part of this engagement, we also plan to talk to academics to gain insights from the research that has been undertaken into the sector in recent years.

Next steps

- 1.26 We plan to publish an initial report in May 2024 setting out our preliminary findings from our consumer research and stakeholder engagement, and discuss the additional work we are undertaking. We will publish a final report in November 2024. We also intend to use subsequent annual reports on the BBC to update our views on the BBC's position in the local news sectors, as well as the audio and audio-visual sectors.