



BBC local radio

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There are currently 40 BBC local radio stations in England. As a result of the freezing of the licence fee, the BBC is looking to make cost savings of 20% in the years to 2017. Under the title *Delivering Quality First*, the BBC has now published a consultation document on how it proposes to make these savings. For English local radio, the main proposal is to focus spending on peak-time programmes, with increased sharing of content across regions in off-peak slots. There is a public consultation on the proposals which closes on 21 December.

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Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	“Delivering Quality First”	3
3	Latest developments	4

1 Introduction

In order for the BBC to fulfil its mission to “inform, educate and entertain”, the Royal Charter and Agreement sets out six public purposes. The BBC Trust has set remits for these public purposes, and BBC management has responded with its plans for delivering each purpose. One of these is “[representing the UK, its nations regions and communities](#)”.

There are currently 40 BBC local radio services in England, plus opt-out services covering Dorset (Solent), Milton Keynes (Three Counties), Peterborough and the Fens (Cambridgeshire), Swindon (Wiltshire) and Plymouth (Devon). The BBC has made the following [commitments](#) to local radio listeners:

60% speech content on BBC Local Radio in core hours (06.00-18.00).

100% speech content on BBC Local Radio at breakfast peak time.

85 hours each week for each station of original, locally made programming in line with service licence stipulations.

In a Westminster Hall debate on BBC local radio in April 2011, Dr Therese Coffey quoted these statistics:

The BBC spends about £600 million on radio—just under a fifth of the licence fee income—of which about £137 million is spent on local radio in England. That equates to about 3.2p per user hour, half that for Radio 3 and less than for Radio Scotland, Radio Wales, Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle. I am not complaining about the amount of money spent on Radio 3 or the nations’ radio stations, but I reflect that BBC local radio in England is rather good value, reaching the number of listeners that it does.

BBC local radio reaches about 7.4 million listeners across its various stations, including—for the particular attention of Members—2.5 million people who do not listen to any other BBC radio station. It is reaching out to that 40% of listeners who do not listen to Radios 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5, and it is important to remember that.¹

Decisions about the future of BBC services and programming will be taken in the context of the BBC’s funding settlement for 2013-14 to 2016-7. This requires the BBC “to achieve a 16% cash-releasing efficiency target, net of implementation costs, over the four years to 2016-17”.² Full details of the settlement are available in a [letter](#) (dated 21 October 2010) from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Jeremy Hunt, to Sir Michael Lyons, the then Chairman of the BBC Trust.

¹ [HC Deb 5 April 2011 c187WH](#)

² [HC Deb 26 October 2010 c173-4W](#)

2 “Delivering Quality First”

In January 2011, BBC Director-General [Mark Thompson](#) launched [Delivering Quality First](#) (DQF), a “wide-ranging consultation with all BBC staff on how it can best deliver the highest quality programmes and content to audiences until the end of the Charter in 2017.” The BBC also conducted an [audience research consultation](#) into public views on potential changes. Further background appears on the BBC [Delivering Quality First website](#):

Delivery Quality First follows the licence fee settlement agreed with the Government in October 2010, which sees the licence fee frozen to 2017, and the BBC assuming new funding responsibilities, including for the World Service, S4C, BBC Monitoring and local TV and broadband. To fulfil this settlement, Mark Thompson set a savings target of 20%. (...)

The BBC Trust will be consulting the public about proposed changes to services. You can voice your opinion about this area of Delivering Quality First on [the BBC Trust's website](#) until December 2011.

BBC staff will be consulted on proposals about changes to productivity and organisation over the next few weeks. This consultation will be carried out internally by the BBC and not by the BBC Trust.

In a [Delivering Quality First blog](#), the BBC's Chief Operating Officer, Caroline Thomson, wrote (on 16 March 2011):

We won't be giving a running commentary on every speculative idea - but I want to be clear that our commitment to quality content as well as value for money is running right through this process.

On the subject of local radio, it's important to remember that representing the UK's regions and communities is one of the [BBC's six public purposes](#). With the rest of the local news sector at increasing risk of market failure, the BBC's contribution to local journalism is more important now than ever. However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't be looking at the most effective way of delivering it.

As part of last year's [strategic review](#), we looked hard at our local services, making our networks more distinctive, increasing the amount of news and speech programming and investing in local journalism. Reach for our local services has risen recently and the question now is, how can we take this further within a [flat license fee settlement](#)?

A [document](#) containing the detailed proposals resulting from the DQF exercise was published in October 2011 and is downloadable from the BBC website. These proposals would need to be approved by the BBC Trust. The document proposes reductions to medium wave transmissions for local radio in England in places where coverage duplicates FM (p24) and the following changes for local radio output (pp49-50):

Focus spend on peak-time programmes - breakfast, mid-morning and drivetime - sport, and faith on Sunday mornings.

Increase levels of sharing in off-peak slots: weekday afternoons, Sunday afternoons and evenings:

- On weekday afternoons most stations would share programming with their neighbouring stations, although a few, which serve a particularly distinct audience, would remain separate

- On weekday evenings between 7pm and 10pm, programming would be shared across England, with all stations coming together except when providing local sports commentaries
- At other off-peak periods sharing would occur at a variety of levels. Some would be akin to the regional television areas, and during the late evening in five larger areas: the North; the West Midlands; the East Midlands; the East and South East; and the West and South West
- All stations would broadcast Radio 5 Live from 1am until the start of their breakfast programme
- A number of locally split breakfast programmes would end

Within all shared programming individual stations would continue to provide local news bulletins at present, and would be able to leave the shared schedules in times of civil emergency or bad weather.

BBC London would lose a number of off-peak programmes and reduce other spend to bring the station more in line with other BBC Local Radio stations.

Figures for the estimated cost savings from these measures appear in a table on p39 of the document.

The BBC is currently running a public consultation on the DQF proposals (closing date 21 December 2011). The [public invitation](#) to respond appears on the BBC Trust website. Concurrently the Trust is running a [public consultation on BBC local radio](#) (with the same closing date). This overlaps with, but is distinct, from the DQF consultation:

Some of the proposals made by BBC management as part of Delivering Quality First concern the future strategy of BBC Local Radio. Therefore questions relating to these proposals are asked as part of both consultations. The remainder of the Local Radio consultation concerns the current performance of the services, while the DQF consultation looks at the changes proposed to all BBC services.

We will use responses to both consultations when considering the future direction of local radio.

3 Latest developments

At a Westminster Hall debate on BBC local radio on 26 October, a number of Members spoke to highlight the effect of the proposed cuts on radio stations in their constituencies; they called for cuts to be made elsewhere and urged the Minister to represent their views to the BBC.³ In his response, the Minister, Ed Vaizey, stated that, while he did not “apologise for defending the BBC in taking a strategic approach to the licence fee freeze”, these matters were ultimately decisions for BBC management.⁴

Reaction from unions to the DQF proposals has been highly critical. The major BBC unions, including Bectu and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), have balloted their members on possible strike action to defend jobs.⁵

³ [HC Deb 26 October 2011 cc73-100WH](#)

⁴ [Ibid, c100WH](#)

⁵ BECTU News, [DQF: BBC members will vote on strike action](#), 25 October 2011; NUJ Newsroom, [BBC strike ballot starts](#), 7 November 2011; “Strictly Come Dancing final could be hit by BBC strikes”, *Guardian*, 25 October 2011

At two separate events in late November, BBC executives indicated that the cuts to local radio services were not yet “set in stone”:

Caroline Thomson, the BBC's chief operating officer, has said a reversal of its planned cuts to local radio was "not out of the question" amid growing speculation over a corporation U-turn. (...)

Thomson told a Bafta event about the future of the BBC in central London on Monday: "If we had to reinstate the money, we'd have to cut something else – but it's not out of the question."

In a separate question about the BBC's Delivering Quality First money-saving plans, Thomson confirmed that the corporation had a contingency fund built into its proposals to deal with potentially higher-than-expected levels of inflation.

If inflation falls below the BBC's expectations then a significant amount of money may be freed up for other purposes.

Thomson's comments followed BBC director general Mark Thompson's appearance before the House of Commons public accounts committee on Monday, when he admitted the cuts faced by local radio "at the sharp end ... are daunting".

Thompson said if the budget savings had an impact on the quality, range and effectiveness of local radio then he would "do something about it", and added: "We don't want to preside over the decline of local radio."⁶

⁶ “[Second BBC boss discusses U-turn on local radio cuts](#)”, *Guardian*, 22 November 2011