

Decentered Media Policy Briefing

Title: Strengthening Community Radio: Advancing the Foundation Economy Model for Sustainable Local Media

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1 Executive Summary

Community radio stations across the United Kingdom represent a vital expression of local culture, civic engagement, and grassroots media participation. These not-for-profit entities serve geographically defined or interest-based communities by producing local content that reflects their distinctive identities, challenges, and aspirations. Through their contribution to media plurality and democratic discourse, these stations play a vital role in reinforcing cohesion, trust, and representation in public life. The Community Radio Fund (CRF), administered by Ofcom and funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), enables these organisations to continue operating despite significant financial pressures.

As societal expectations evolve and economic conditions place additional stress on civil society infrastructure, it is necessary to re-express the purpose of the CRF through a more strategic and future-facing lens. This briefing makes the case for aligning the CRF with the principles of the Foundation Economy model. This shift would not only secure the sustainability of the community radio sector but also reaffirm its status as a core pillar of the social economy, contributing directly to public purpose, wellbeing, and participatory governance.

2 Introduction

Community radio in the UK is one of the clearest expressions of devolved and participatory communication. By their nature, these stations provide locally rooted and often volunteer-led content that is tailored to the needs and interests of specific communities. Their service area might cover only a few miles, but the impact they have can be profound. In contrast to commercial providers, community radio stations operate with public value rather than profit as their central mandate. They offer essential access to media production, civic dialogue, and cultural expression, particularly in regions where media consolidation has eroded local journalism and representation.

These stations often function on extremely limited budgets, with many reporting incomes under £20,000 annually. The CRF has long provided critical support to bridge financial gaps, but the challenges now faced by the sector—including rising operational costs, complex digital transitions, and shifting regulatory expectations—demand a reimagining of both the scale and purpose of the fund. Recasting the CRF within the Foundation Economy framework provides a means to more securely embed community radio into public policy goals focused on social resilience, cultural equity, and participatory democracy.

3 The Role of Community Radio in the Foundation Economy

The Foundation Economy refers to the essential infrastructures and services upon which everyday life depends. As articulated by the Foundational Economy Collective, this includes sectors such as health, education, utilities, and increasingly, communication and media. Community radio clearly belongs within this ecosystem. Its focus on care, dialogue, inclusion, and access rather than commercial return positions it as a medium of social utility. Recognising community radio within this frame affirms its status not as an optional or peripheral activity, but as an integral part of our public service infrastructure.

Stations like Bradford Community Broadcasting, with its multilingual programming, or Angel Radio, with its specialised service to older listeners, show how community radio addresses specific needs that commercial broadcasting ignores. These efforts are not indulgent or niche; they represent tailored cultural responses that foster wellbeing, belonging, and inclusion. In a media landscape increasingly shaped by globalisation and disinformation, the role of locally accountable, place-based communication is indispensable.

By amplifying local voices, promoting civic understanding, and enabling participatory expression, community radio not only builds cultural capital but strengthens the conditions for democratic engagement and collective resilience. It is within this conceptual framework that policy support should be understood: not as charity or subsidy, but as an investment in long-term social infrastructure.

4 Community Radio as a Generator of Social Value

Empirical data supports the case for this investment. The 2024 University of Northampton report, "Listening Locally Across the UK," presents robust findings that illustrate the sector's measurable impact. A significant majority of listeners reported improvements in health as a

result of programming content. Many cited community radio as a source of skills acquisition or employment information. Others noted how local stations improved their understanding of other cultures and perspectives. These outcomes are not marginal; they mirror the objectives of health promotion strategies, education policies, and integration frameworks.

Such results demonstrate that community radio generates outcomes comparable to those delivered by other foundational sectors. For example, Radio Cardiff's youth-focused programming and Wythenshawe FM's community-based training initiatives illustrate how stations act as hubs of informal education, peer support, and local leadership. In contexts underserved by national media or public services, community radio frequently steps in to fill the gap. These stations offer a space for dialogue, learning, and solidarity that cannot be replicated through centralised or top-down communication models.

5 Policy Alignment and the Opportunity of Devolution

The Government's Plan for Change and broader commitments to Levelling Up offer a valuable opportunity to reassess the role of community radio in local governance and economic participation. Community media platforms can and should be positioned as instruments of devolved communication infrastructure. As policies move towards greater regional empowerment, localised service provision, and place-based investment, community radio emerges as a natural partner in delivering inclusive and accountable outcomes.

In this context, the CRF should be expanded and restructured to function as a tool of civic regeneration. Social value legislation obliges public investment to deliver tangible benefits to communities. Community radio is demonstrably equipped to meet this test, offering cultural, educational, and democratic returns on investment that are aligned with national and regional policy priorities.

Moreover, community radio fits squarely within devolved governance models. It is operated, owned, and stewarded by local actors. It reflects local diversity, addresses local needs, and connects people to services and civic institutions. In doing so, it exemplifies the kind of pluralistic, participatory culture that government policy increasingly seeks to promote.

6 Strengthening the Community Radio Fund as Social Infrastructure

Repositioning the CRF through the lens of foundational services means redefining its scope and operation. Rather than being distributed in fragmented and short-term rounds, the fund should be established on a long-term basis with a minimum annual value of £1 million, indexed to inflation and adjusted in light of technological and demographic shifts. This would allow stations to engage in strategic planning, strengthen their organisational models, and pursue innovation without the constant threat of closure.

Funding criteria must move beyond economic metrics and instead foreground social, cultural, and civic outcomes. Stations should be supported for delivering content that enhances public health awareness, civic literacy, cultural heritage, or community safety. Investment in capacity-building, training, and inter-organisational collaboration should be treated as essential development, not ancillary activity. Partnerships with local schools, libraries, voluntary organisations, and anchor institutions should be prioritised.

A modernised fund should also include targeted support for digital transition, enabling stations to invest in DAB carriage, streaming services, and accessible platforms. Given the policy emphasis on digital inclusion, community radio must be recognised as a critical gateway for digital engagement, particularly among groups who are underrepresented in mainstream media.

Evaluation mechanisms should be grounded in the principles of the Foundation Economy and reflect the realities of community media work. Metrics should capture levels of trust, inclusion, representation, civic knowledge, and community participation. The assessment of value must go beyond audience size or advertising revenue to consider the deep social bonds and public service functions that community radio fosters.

7 Conclusion

Community radio represents one of the most resilient and responsive forms of public communication in the United Kingdom. Its continued presence and growth depend on a policy and funding model that recognises it as essential civic infrastructure. By adopting the Foundation Economy model as the framework for the Community Radio Fund, government and regulators can secure the sector's future while simultaneously meeting broader policy goals related to public service delivery, social justice, and democratic renewal.

Rather than treating community radio as marginal, supplementary, or nostalgic, this approach acknowledges it as a central node in the network of social value. It affirms the power of decentralised, participatory media to build trust, inclusion, and belonging—qualities that are increasingly vital in our fragmented and mediated public sphere. Investing in community radio is not merely a cultural gesture; it is a strategic act of public policy.

8 References

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