

# Better Media Consultation Sessions Review

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## 1 Introduction and Scope

The Better Media consultation sessions were convened on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2026, to develop a coherent, practitioner-led response to two live UK policy processes: Ofcom’s review of radio broadcast licensing<sup>1</sup> and the DCMS Radio Review<sup>2</sup>. Their purpose was to test whether local, independent and community media stakeholders can articulate a shared public-interest position that challenges consolidation, strengthens contestability, and reconnects broadcast policy with democratic and civic outcomes.

The approach combined structured facilitation with open discussion. Participants were guided through a set of thematic prompts covering:

- Spectrum and analogue resilience, platform access and discoverability.
- Economic entry conditions.
- Plurality and the BBC’s civic role.
- The relationship between media provision and public needs such as trust, wellbeing, citizenship and social cohesion.

Alongside identifying practical barriers and reform options, the sessions also explored how the sector can work more effectively with aligned fields, including local journalism, community arts, education, wellbeing networks and civic society bodies. The intent was to move beyond fragmented, single-issue lobbying and towards an integrated policy narrative capable of informing credible submissions to regulators and government.

The transcripts and associated chat logs from the Better Media consultation sessions indicate four interrelated policy and strategic themes:

### 1.1 Policy Reform

First, there is sustained discussion of UK broadcast policy reform. Participants reflected on the Ofcom consultation on radio licensing and the DCMS Radio Review, with attention given to spectrum management, analogue and digital licensing, market consolidation, and the future balance between state, commercial and community provision. The BBC’s role within this ecol-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/analogue-radio/ofcoms-proposed-strategic-approach-to-broadcast-radio-licensing>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ministers-kick-off-review-to-safeguard-radios-future>

ogy was discussed in terms of accountability, regionalisation, Charter renewal, and whether current structures support pluralism or reinforce centralisation.

## **1.2 Diversification of Supply**

Second, there was a strong emphasis on diversification of supply and structural reform. Contributors examine whether the regulatory framework encourages new entrants, place-based services and civic innovation, or whether it privileges incumbent providers. Questions were raised about on-demand licensing, efficient use of FM and AM spectrum, the removal of protectionist thresholds, and whether digital distribution has been shaped in a way that limits genuine local participation.

## **1.3 Social Value Outcomes**

Third, the sessions explored civic and social value outcomes. These include health and wellbeing, reduction of isolation, informed citizenship, democratic participation, media literacy, intergenerational exchange, and social cohesion. Participants consider whether such outcomes should be explicitly recognised within licensing objectives and funding criteria, and how they might be measured. The idea of trust, accountability and meaningful community engagement recurs throughout.

## **1.4 Operations and Engagement**

Fourth, the exchanges reinforced operational and engagement concerns. These include practical questions about consultation structure, capturing evidence, stakeholder inclusion, follow-up advocacy, and ensuring that independent and community media have a coordinated voice in national policy debates. There was attention to ongoing consultation design, feedback capture, and the need to move from discussion to structured policy submission.

Across both consultation sessions, the unifying topic was:

How to reposition local, independent and community broadcasting within a changing regulatory and technological landscape so that it supports pluralism, civic accountability and long-term social value rather than consolidation and homogenisation.

## **2 Consultation Sessions - Thematic Narrative Account**

### **2.1 Purpose, Frame, and What the Sessions Actually Did**

Across both consultation sessions the discussion functioned less as a conventional “responses workshop” and more as a rapid alignment exercise. Participants were testing whether the com-

munity, local and independent media field can articulate a coherent public-interest narrative that speaks to Ofcom’s licensing regime and the DCMS Radio Review, while also confronting a harder question:

Whether the sector can intervene as a joined-up civic infrastructure proposition rather than as a set of disconnected special interests.

The facilitation structure helped by keeping the conversation anchored in the tension between consolidation and plural supply, and between industry metrics and citizen value. The discussions repeatedly returned to how policy defaults, procurement assumptions and platform economics quietly decide outcomes long before any formal “decision” is announced.

## **2.2 Consolidation, Gatekeeping, and the Structural Direction of Travel**

A consistent theme was that consolidation is not only a content problem, but a distribution and ownership problem. Participants described a system in which multiplex ownership, capacity management, and upgrade decisions (particularly around DAB+) can be used to constrain entry and growth.

The practical claim was that where multiplex operations are aligned with incumbent broadcast groups or aligned commercial interests, there is reduced incentive to expand capacity, lower prices, or treat carriage as a public service function. This creates a situation where “local radio” becomes a branding claim rather than a locally accountable practice, while new entrants remain locked into small-scale coverage, fragile economics, or online-only distribution.

This was not framed as an abstract critique. It was discussed as a live market dynamic in which access decisions, pricing structures, and platform technical standards can be shaped to protect incumbents and limit competition. Several participants characterised this as a risk to the long-term viability of diversified supply, including commercially oriented local services as well as community services.

## **2.3 The Question of Local - Why it Still Matters**

A defining moment across the sessions was the explicit question “*does local still matter?*” and whether attachment to local provision is simply nostalgia. The response was substantive rather than sentimental. Local was framed as a distinct civic function:

- Contextual knowledge
- Accountable relationships
- A sense of belonging

None of which can be reproduced by regionalised or nationalised output.

Participants argued that centralisation reduces scrutiny, narrows editorial diversity, and increases the likelihood of a single narrative environment. This was linked to both social risks, such as fragmentation and misinformation, and practical risks, such as the loss of skills pathways and the collapse of training grounds for new technical developers, content producers and creative innovators.

Local content was also framed as economically functional. The reduction of local sales capacity and the shift toward national advertising markets were presented as a mechanism that disadvantages local businesses and weakens the local economic ecology, even when “local” branding continues. Local was therefore described as simultaneously cultural, civic, and economic infrastructure.

#### **2.4 Public Purpose: Civic Worth Versus Market Metrics**

The sessions repeatedly noted a structural imbalance:

The policy environment privileges scale metrics and mass audience narratives, which favours large corporate groups and makes it hard for community and independent actors to be heard.

Participants described the sector’s contribution as “*civic worth*” delivered at low cost because much of the labour is voluntary, underpaid, or sustained through precarious organisational models. However, the group recognised that civic worth is not self-evident to decision makers, and that the sector often fails to describe its contribution in forms that map to government priorities such as wellbeing, cohesion, civic literacy, employability, and resilience.

A central point here is that audiences are not only consumers. Participants stressed that public value is not reducible to consumption volume. It includes *trust*, *belonging*, *participation*, and the *quality of civic life*. This became the basis for the policy argument that radio and local media should be treated as part of democratic infrastructure, not merely an entertainment commodity.

## 2.5 Costs, Sustainability, and the Real Barriers to Entry

The discussions identified several interacting cost drivers:

- Platform carriage
- Rights costs
- Indirect burdens of compliance
- Staffing and production

A recurring claim was that for many smaller services, rights costs can be a decisive barrier even when carriage is affordable or supported. The group also discussed how poor technical practices and older encoding standards can inflate required bitrates, which in turn limits the number of services carried and raises costs. This was framed as a solvable technical issue, but one that becomes political when technical choices are used to restrict supply.

The sessions also drew a clear distinction between the sustainability challenge of community radio and the sustainability challenge of local commercial services. Community radio was described as structurally constrained in monetisation, and as often dependent on volunteer labour, which is valuable for participation, but limits the ability to sustain high-quality output at scale without additional support. Local commercial operators were described as facing a different problem: *structural gatekeeping on platform access and a market model that rewards centralisation and national sales.*

The shared conclusion was that entry barriers are not simply a question of whether licences exist. They are shaped by the full stack of platform access, rights regimes, technical standards, and institutional economics.

## 2.6 The BBC, Plurality, and Partnership Models

The BBC was not treated as a simple antagonist. It was treated as a structural actor whose choices shape the ecology, and whose local footprint has been reduced in ways that create gaps in civic provision. Participants explored whether the BBC could operate as an enabling institution in a plural system rather than as a dominant supplier.

Two lines of thinking emerged:

- The first was a **partnership and commissioning model**, where community and independent providers can produce local content with BBC support, or where BBC schedule capacity and production resources could be used to enable local supply in meaningful ways.
- The second was a “**local journalism layer**” concept, drawing comparisons with the Local Democracy Reporting model in print and asking whether a comparable approach could exist for broadcast, while recognising the sensitivities around BBC-funded journalism and the different regulatory constraints on broadcast versus print.

This discussion also exposed a structural tension. Broadcast regulation limits monetisation options that are available to print and online news. Participants argued that any serious local journalism expectation within broadcast must therefore come with proportionate support mechanisms; otherwise it becomes an unfunded mandate that accelerates licence surrender or further consolidation.

## 2.7 Evidence, Measurement, and the Sector’s Weakest Point

If there was one area of near-consensus, it was that the sector’s ability to evidence its public value is underdeveloped relative to the demands of contemporary policymaking. Participants described two linked gaps:

- Unreliable or disputed audience measurement for community radio.
- Insufficiently deployed impact measurement approaches.

The discussion of existing impact tools became a concrete case: good work has been done to develop frameworks, but there has been limited uptake, limited training, and no consistent national infrastructure to aggregate and scale the data into a policy-grade evidence spine.

This matters because the policy environment is dominated by organisations that can provide large, clean numbers and market narratives. Without a credible shared evidence infrastructure, the community and independent field remains exposed to being treated as marginal, anecdotal, or special pleading, regardless of real-world impact.

There was also a pragmatic view of what “evidence” should include. The group saw value in case studies, lived experience accounts, and outcome narratives, but recognised that these need to be structured in a way that can be aggregated, compared, and translated into policy claims.

## **2.8 Integration With Aligned Fields - What the Sessions Point to Next**

Both sessions implicitly argued that community and local media cannot win a policy reform argument by speaking only as “radio” or only as “community radio.” The conversation repeatedly touched adjacent disciplines that could strengthen the civic infrastructure proposition: local and independent journalism, community arts and cultural participation, education and training routes, wellbeing and social prescribing ecosystems, and wider civil society networks.

The underlying logic was clear. These allied fields have already accepted frames for participation, outcomes, and public value:

If community and local media can form working alliances that generate shared programmes, shared measurement, and shared civic narratives, then the sector can move from being a set of providers asking for protection, to being a delivery system that government can recognise as useful for multiple policy goals.

## **3 Strategic Readiness Assessment - Integrated Versus Fragmented Response**

The sessions revealed meaningful strengths. There is a coherent diagnosis of consolidation risk, a practical understanding of platform and economic barriers, and an emerging shared language for public purpose that goes beyond sector self-interest. There is also evidence of cross-sector curiosity, particularly around journalism partnerships, civic resilience, and participation models drawn from the arts.

However, the sessions also noted readiness weaknesses that are likely to limit effective intervention unless addressed:

- First, the sector lacks a stable shared evidence spine that can support a unified submission narrative across different organisations and regions.
- Second, the sector remains structurally fragmented, with different subgroups pulling toward their own immediate pressures, which makes it easier for government and regulators to hear only the loudest incumbents.
- Third, there is limited capacity for sustained policy work, meaning that responses risk becoming reactive, rushed and incremental rather than strategic and cumulative.

In short, the sector appears conceptually ready to argue for reform, but operationally under-resourced to deliver an integrated, holistic intervention without ongoing facilitation and development support.

#### 4 Response Priorities for DCMS And Ofcom Submissions

The consultation discussions point to a small set of priority arguments that can hold the system together as a single narrative:

- I. The first priority is **contestability and diversified supply** as a public interest requirement, not a market preference. Policy should treat distribution access, multiplex governance, and capacity decisions as civic pluralism levers.
- II. The second priority is “**local as civic infrastructure.**” Local provision should be justified in terms of trust, resilience, belonging, accountability and skills pathways, not nostalgia. Centralisation should be framed as a risk vector for scrutiny deficits and narrative monoculture.
- III. The third priority is **proportionality in obligations and cost regimes.** If policy expects local journalism, civic reporting, and meaningful local service, then cost stacks and regulatory constraints must be aligned so that compliance does not accelerate exit or consolidation. Rights costs and platform economics must be acknowledged as part of the policy problem, not treated as externalities.
- IV. The fourth priority is the enabling role of the BBC and other institutions within a **plural ecology.** The argument should not be reduced to “BBC good” or “BBC bad.” It should be framed as: *what institutional arrangements increase plurality and public value while protecting independence and avoiding capture?*
- V. The fifth priority is **evidence infrastructure** as a reform lever. DCMS and Ofcom should be pressed not only on licensing decisions, but on whether they will support a national impact and audience measurement framework for community and local services, with training, rollout, and aggregation capability. Without this, the public value argument remains structurally weak.

#### 5 What Needs to Change in the Facilitation and Development Process

The sessions indicate that the next phase should move from discussion to synthesis and assembly. That requires ongoing facilitation designed around three functions:

- The first is building a **shared evidence spine**, including lightweight templates for case studies, consistent outcome categories, and an aggregation approach that can produce policy-grade claims.
- The second is **alliance-building** across aligned fields, not as a networking exercise but as a delivery and legitimacy strategy. The goal is to show that local media is an enabling layer for journalism, arts participation, wellbeing, education and civic society, and to demonstrate this through joint initiatives and shared outcome narratives.
- The third is **maintaining narrative discipline** so that every technical or regulatory proposal is explicitly tied to democratic plurality, sustainable civic value, and contestability of supply. This is what prevents fragmentation and keeps submissions coherent across organisations.

## **6 Recommendations**

Better Media will incorporate these policy priorities into its submissions to DCMS and Ofcom, grounded in the core principle that the broadcast media market must be reformed to diversify supply rather than further entrench consolidation. This requires an explicit localism test in policy and regulation. If the French can regulate cheese, the UK can define and protect what “local” means in broadcast provision, including minimum expectations for accountability, distinctiveness, and meaningful presence in place.

It also requires investment in a plural mix of civic, community, commercial and other providers, so that trusted radio services are not treated as legacy residue but as a living component of democratic and social infrastructure. The objective is to extend the supply of trusted media to citizens by harnessing the decentralising potential of contemporary technology, rather than using technology to centralise control, homogenise output, and narrow routes to entry.

Better Media will continue to promote further discussions, podcasts and policy forums to broaden the scope of this work. This will draw in aligned colleagues across journalism, arts, education, wellbeing and civic society, and strengthen the shared capacity to intervene constructively in the next stages of the policy process.