

Please find below my responses to your Consultation with respect to Community Radio. I represent a Community broadcaster who deliver a service called FromeFM. We have been operating as an internet only service for the last 2 years whilst we wait for OfCom to complete the 2nd round of community radio licence applications and have spent that time developing our skills and services through on-line broadcasting and occasional RSLs.

Our Community Interest Company (Frome Community Productions CIC) has about 80 volunteers (and growing). We are passionate enthusiasts from all parts of the local community, but find much of the regulatory framework within which community broadcasting is governed the biggest disincentive. The majority of volunteers want to make great radio without the degree of 'ifs and buts' that currently exist. At the same time we want to see a framework that adds value to what we are all doing and accept a degree of the necessary 'evil' if it leads to improved community radio services.

Here are my responses as a Director of Frome Community Productions CIC, to your consultation.

Questions

1. Do you agree with the proposed criteria for Ofcom to apply when considering a 5 year extension?

In principle I fully support this proposition.

The argument articulating that a community broadcaster takes around 5 years to become established is valid, as is the argument that financial planning needs a longer term view. There is another point that should also be considered for the case and that concerns the broadcaster's capacity to develop earned income from value added services. A 5 year cycle will deliver a station that provides benefits to the community and it will probably be funded through a range of sources – donation, sponsorship, advertising and grant funding being the most obvious. However, in my experience, Local Authorities and Grant Funding Agencies want to see a community station going further in establishing their independence. In the current financial climate (and looking ahead to 2011 and beyond where public funding will be under considerable pressure), grant funders increasingly ask how community stations can develop their own income streams. Many community stations have opted to concentrate on delivering training in order to close the gaps between budget pressure and funding, however it is my belief that Community broadcasters have a wonderful opportunity to develop other services as well – especially where other local providers already satisfy the market with media training (as is the case on our doorstep where we have a Media Specialist College and an established Community Radio station just across the County border). I believe that community broadcasters could develop revenue streams by producing content that other commercial providers may wish to rebroadcast under licence – in effect Community Radio needs to exploit its own IPR. For most of us working towards this we know that we will need to improve our quality and capacity and, with volunteer based organisations, that takes a lot longer than in a fully commercial environment. A 5 year extension would provide the window of opportunity for a community station to plan, develop and implement a programme that could deliver an income stream from its own IPR. This would also, of course, help support the artists, writers, musicians, producers, performers etc who are at the core of the creative process and encourage a creative renaissance in some parts of the country.

With respect to the criteria, I would like to see further rigour applied to the 2 considerations proposed.

Consideration a) :- This consideration talks about maintaining the service. I think it should also oblige the broadcaster to demonstrate their plans for developing both the service and their organisation's capacity to deliver. The public will not support the maintenance of a sub

standard service that does not offer a distinctive flavour – or merely delivers a lower standard version of either commercial or public service radio. There should be a challenge to the provider to demonstrate how they are going to improve and reflect the changes in local appetite. It is very easy for a core group of enthusiasts to lose sight that their main purpose is to deliver engaging, informative, imaginative local content that reflects the community. The community itself is constantly changing, so the broadcaster needs to change too and my contention is that this ‘test’ should challenge the broadcaster to demonstrate how they will develop their services.

Consideration b) :- This consideration talks about the broadcaster’s record in complying with regulations and the likelihood that they will breach in the future. Breaches themselves are simply a matter of record, but I would like to see a more fundamental consideration of whether the delivered service still exhibits the characteristics of the one that was proposed in the original application. As I mentioned above, a community station is an organic creature that needs to change and adapt, but it should still look, feel and smell like the entity that was originally proposed – albeit with more or less bells and whistles. If there is a significant difference between where it has come from and where it is proposing to go to that fundamentally changes the basis upon which the original licence was granted, then I think that a new application or a change should be requested, so that the next 5 years can be judged on a level playing field.

2. Do you think the 50% funding restriction from any one source should be lifted?

I absolutely agree with this proposal. The consultation document makes it very clear that the 50% limit on advertising/sponsorship will not be changed, so we are talking here about a Station’s opportunity to develop earned income or be funded from Local Authorities. I argued above that Local Authorities are less likely to be forthcoming with grant funding in the future, but there is of course a wide range of caveats. Local Authorities are also very keen to work with third parties to deliver shared goals and that may well lead to funding opportunities that could span several years or be front loaded to deliver resource and capacity for the 3rd party. The lifting of this restriction would make some of those opportunities possible. It is also extremely difficult to articulate this restriction to anyone outside of the Community Radio village – they simply don’t get it and that sometimes leads them to switching off from the conversation. The generally accepted business view is that you draw up a budget that will deliver your goals and then establish the revenue streams to satisfy that budget. However almost no-one understands how you can set a budget and then have to artificially target income from a range of sources/types of source to meet only a % of the whole. If you are lucky enough to hit upon a business model that could deliver your entire annual budget, so that as a Station you had no requirement for advertising, then it could be argued that the Commercial Stations benefit since their income is not eroded, the listeners benefit because they don’t have to put up with irritating adverts and the programme makers can simply get on with making great community radio.

I often try to draw parallels with a Parish Magazine. If Central Government insisted, by law, that a Parish Magazine had to run itself according to the same rules that apply to Community Radio, there would be public outcry. I’ve never heard anyone articulate the argument that advertising in Parish Magazines should be restricted in income terms because it may adversely affect the local newspaper, or that it should have further restrictions imposed on how it funds itself. I do accept that a ceiling on advertising and sponsorship for community radio is a reality that we will have to live with, but lifting the restriction on other forms of income would go some way to redress that issue.

3. Do you think that the rule prohibiting a community radio station from being licensed if it would overlap with an existing local radio service whose MCA is no more than 50,000 adults, should be lifted?

Yes. Local Radio and Community Radio are very different from each other and there is plenty of room for both. On our internet based community station we conduct hour long interviews with local people, artists and entrepreneurs who would only get 3 to 5 minutes on the local Commercial Station. We delivered 3 one hour shows featuring candidates in the Local Elections, whereas the Commercial station almost ignored the event in favour of covering the MP expenses scandal. Commercial Stations are very good at delivering rolling news and traffic sandwiched with entertainment, whereas we concentrate on features. I would argue that where a community broadcaster can articulate through their application how they will be distinctive and where that strategy is maintained, then there should be no reason why commercial, BBC and community radio should not co-exist. In our neighbourhood people want to choose which type and style of broadcasting they tune into and that may well change between morning, afternoon and evening. It's all about what you are doing, why you are listening and when, so I could easily listen to a commercial station whilst driving to work, tune into Radio 4 in the late afternoon and listen to Community Radio in the evening or at weekends.

ii) If so, should the advertising and sponsorship restriction be applied to community radio stations that overlap with local radio services of up to 150,000 adults?

No. mainly because the other local radio services are resourced to secure advertising and sponsorship to meet their budgetary requirements and very few (if any) community providers can take that on, given that most are volunteer based. If local businesses choose to advertise or sponsor a community station then they are doing so for a very good reason, which presents a quality or content challenge to the commercial provider. I appreciate that this is also the same argument as to why there should be no restrictions at all. However the key issue here is that the costs of delivering community radio are not heavily dependant upon the size of the population served, so more draconian restrictions for stations in larger areas with overlapping local radio services seems to lack any logical basis. If anything it is more likely to lead to the failure of those services.

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