

Ofcom Consultation on Key Commitments Reporting – Briefing Paper

Dr Rob Watson, 11th April 2024

robwatson@decentered.co.uk

<https://decentered.co.uk>

Ofcom is proposing to [streamline and simplify Key Commitments for analogue community radio stations](#) in the UK. Through its consultation on Key Commitments for analogue community radio, Ofcom is seeking views about its current approach to Key Commitments, which are service descriptions recorded in community radio licences based on proposals made during the application process for the licence. These commitments include quotas on programming types, original output broadcast hours, locally produced output, and language requirements. The proposal aims to give community radio stations greater flexibility to focus on delivering social gain for their target communities by removing specific quotas on these aspects. The consultation covers the background of community radio, the statutory framework, the evolution of Key Commitments, the impact of the current approach, and proposes a new approach along with next steps for consultation and implementing changes.

Specifically, Ofcom is looking for views on:

1. Removing specific quotas relating to the types of programming broadcast, including music and speech output, to provide stations with greater flexibility to respond to their communities' needs without being bound by prescriptive requirements.
2. Eliminating requirements for the number of hours of original and locally produced content broadcast each week, aiming to relieve stations from the pressure of meeting these quotas and allowing them to focus more on content quality and relevance to their community.
3. Adjusting language broadcast requirements, particularly for stations required to broadcast in languages other than English. Ofcom proposes removing specific language quotas but will retain certain language requirements where they are crucial to a station's character of service, especially for Welsh language broadcasting, in alignment with Welsh Language Measure obligations.
4. Standardising the wording in character of service descriptions to ensure consistency across licences, which will facilitate a clearer understanding and easier compliance for community radio stations.

Ofcom is inviting stakeholders to respond to a series of questions laid out in the document related to these proposals. The consultation aims to gather insights, evidence, and opinions from community radio stations, listeners, and other stakeholders to evaluate the impact of the proposed changes and decide whether to implement them. Following the consultation period,

Ofcom will review the responses to make a final decision on adopting the proposed streamlined approach to Key Commitments for community radio licences.

1 Defining Key Commitments

Key Commitments in the context of community radio licences issued by Ofcom are defined as service descriptions recorded within these licences, based on the proposals made by the licensees during their application process. These commitments outline the character of service the community radio station intends to provide, ensuring the service delivered aligns with what was proposed at the time of application. Specifically, Key Commitments cover aspects such as:

- The types of programming to be broadcast, including both music and speech content.
- The amount of original output broadcast each week.
- The amount of locally produced output.
- The languages in which broadcasts are made.

The purpose of these Key Commitments extends to ensuring that community radio stations provide social gain to their target communities. "Social gain" is broadly understood as the delivery of benefits to the public or specific communities through broadcasting services, beyond mere entertainment or commercial interests. This includes:

- Catering to tastes and interests not typically served by commercial or mainstream media.
- Facilitating discussion and expression of opinion within the community.
- Providing education or training opportunities, especially for those not employed by the station.
- Enhancing understanding and strengthening links within the community.

The consultation underscores Ofcom's view that the primary focus of Key Commitments should be on maintaining the character of service and delivering social gain. This is based on feedback suggesting that overly prescriptive Key Commitments can detract from these core objectives, prompting the proposal to streamline them to give stations greater flexibility to serve their communities effectively.

2 Competitive Awards

The specific Key Commitments agreed upon when community radio licences were awarded through a competitive application process serve several critical purposes:

- **Defining the Service Character:** They clearly define the character of the service the station proposed to provide, ensuring that the station adheres to its original mission and objectives. This includes the types of programs to be aired, target audience, and thematic focus, ensuring that the service remains relevant and beneficial to its intended community.
- **Ensuring Social Gain:** A core objective of community radio is to deliver social gain, which includes providing services to underserved communities, facilitating discussion and expression of opinion, offering education and training opportunities, and enhancing community cohesion. Key Commitments are tailored to ensure that each station contributes to these social gains in ways that are relevant to its specific community.
- **Maintaining Diversity and Plurality:** By setting out specific commitments, Ofcom ensures a diversity of voices and content in the radio landscape. This helps to cater to a wide range of tastes and interests not covered by commercial and BBC services, thereby broadening the choice available to listeners and supporting the cultural and democratic life of the UK.
- **Facilitating Accountability:** Key Commitments provide a framework against which stations can be held accountable, both by Ofcom and their communities. They offer a transparent basis for evaluating whether stations are delivering on their promises and meeting the needs of their listeners.
- **Promoting Local Content and Participation:** By requiring a certain amount of original and locally produced content, Key Commitments encourage stations to focus on local issues, involve community members in station activities, and provide training opportunities. This promotes a sense of ownership and participation among the local population.
- **Ensuring Sustainability and Compliance:** Through the application process and the agreement on Key Commitments, Ofcom assesses the viability and sustainability of proposed services. This ensures that licensed stations have a clear plan for maintaining their service throughout the licence period, in compliance with regulatory requirements.

The specific Key Commitments agreed upon when awarding community radio licences are designed to ensure that licensed stations fulfil their role in providing targeted, socially beneficial services to their communities, while maintaining diversity, accountability, and sustainability within the UK's broadcasting ecosystem.

3 Risk of Streamlining Key Commitments

The proposal by Ofcom to streamline and simplify the specific Key Commitments of community radio stations carries potential risks and implications for the service these stations provide and the social gain they offer to the communities they intend to serve. These risks include:

- **Loss of Specificity and Accountability:** By diluting the specificity of Key Commitments, there's a risk that community radio stations might not be held as accountable for delivering certain types of content or meeting specific community needs. This could lead to a broadening of content that, while flexible, may not directly address the unique interests or issues of the target community.
- **Reduced Diversity of Content:** Specific Key Commitments often ensure a diversity of content that caters to various segments of a community, including minority groups. Simplifying these commitments could lead to a homogenisation of content, reducing the richness and variety of programming that reflects the full spectrum of community interests.
- **Impact on Social Gain Objectives:** Social gain objectives are central to the ethos of community radio. These objectives can include providing a platform for underserved voices, facilitating community engagement, and delivering educational content. There's a concern that without specific commitments, stations might prioritise content that attracts broader audiences at the expense of these social gain objectives.
- **Challenges in Measuring Impact:** Specific Key Commitments provide clear benchmarks for measuring a station's impact and success in serving its community. Simplification could make it more challenging to assess whether a station is truly meeting its objectives, complicating efforts to evaluate and demonstrate the value of community radio.
- **Potential for Commercialisation:** While community radio stations are not-for-profit entities focused on social gain, there is a risk that the dilution of specific commitments could lead to a creeping commercialisation of content. This might happen as stations seek to appeal to wider audiences or secure additional funding, potentially moving away from their core mission.
- **Erosion of Community Trust and Engagement:** Community radio stations often build trust and engagement through their commitment to serving specific community needs and interests. Any perceived shift away from these commitments could erode trust and reduce community members' willingness to participate and invest in the station.
- **Variability in Service Quality:** With the removal of specific quotas and requirements, there could be greater variability in the quality and relevance of the content provided by different community radio stations. This might lead to inconsistencies in service delivery across the sector, affecting the overall perception and value of community radio.

To mitigate these risks, Ofcom and community radio stations would need to ensure that any simplification of Key Commitments still requires stations to adhere to their core mission of serving specific community needs and delivering social gain. This could involve setting broad

but meaningful guidelines that encourage stations to maintain diversity, community focus, and engagement while providing the flexibility to adapt to changing community needs and media landscapes.

4 Maintaining Social Gain Focus

To ensure community radio stations continue to deliver social gain and fulfil their public purpose while providing flexibility in how they operate, Ofcom could consider adopting a range of alternative approaches. These alternatives could offer a more nuanced way of measuring and accounting for the stations' contributions to their communities, focusing on outcomes rather than prescriptive inputs. Here are some suggested approaches:

- **Outcome-Based Reporting:** Shift from specifying inputs (e.g., hours of certain types of content) to focusing on the outcomes and impacts of a station's activities. Stations could report on how their content and activities have contributed to social gain objectives, such as promoting community cohesion, providing educational opportunities, or enhancing cultural understanding. This approach requires stations to articulate their goals clearly and measure success against them.
- **Community Feedback Mechanisms:** Encourage or require stations to implement robust mechanisms for gathering feedback from their target communities. This could include surveys, public forums, or social media engagement. The feedback collected would serve as direct evidence of the station's impact and its alignment with community needs and interests.
- **Narrative Evidence and Case Studies:** Allow stations to submit qualitative evidence, such as narrative reports or case studies, showcasing specific examples of how they have contributed to their community's welfare. This could include stories of individuals or groups benefiting from the station's programs, partnerships with local organisations, or the station's role in addressing local issues.
- **Performance Indicators:** Develop a set of performance indicators that are aligned with the broad objectives of social gain. These indicators could be both qualitative and quantitative, allowing stations some flexibility in how they demonstrate their achievements. Examples might include the number of community events hosted or supported, the diversity of voices featured on-air, or metrics related to audience reach within target demographics.
- **Volunteer Engagement and Training Records:** Since volunteer involvement is a key aspect of community radio, stations could be asked to report on their volunteer programs. This could include data on the number of volunteers engaged, the training provided, and the roles volunteers play in content production and station management. This information would highlight the station's role in community engagement and capacity building.
- **Partnership and Collaboration Reports:** Stations could report on their collaborations with local organisations, schools, and community groups. This reporting would

underline the station's integration into the local community ecosystem and its role in amplifying the work of other community-focused entities.

- **Innovation and Experimentation:** Recognise and reward stations for innovative approaches to fulfilling their social gain objectives. This could involve experimenting with new content formats, engagement strategies, or digital platforms. Encouraging innovation would acknowledge that the landscape of community media is evolving, and flexibility is key to staying relevant and impactful.
- **Independent Audits or Reviews:** Consider periodic independent reviews or audits of stations, focusing on their social gain contributions. These reviews could be conducted by a panel of experts or community representatives, providing an external assessment of the station's impact and areas for improvement.

By adopting these alternative approaches, Ofcom could ensure that community radio stations are held accountable for their social gain and public purpose commitments in a way that values creativity, community responsiveness, and tangible outcomes over strict adherence to predefined content quotas.

5 Feeding into the Consultation

This consultation by Ofcom must seek to understand the broader implications of proposed changes to community radio regulations, emphasising the need for input, not just from the stations or the regulator itself, but importantly, from the public, civic society organisations, public sector bodies, funding entities, and other stakeholders. These groups are crucial in evaluating the role and effectiveness of community radio as a tool for social engagement and development in the UK. The consultation raises questions about how community radio, as a platform, aligns with social value principles, such as levelling-up, how community radio supports human rights, encourages democratic participation, and contributes to education, skills development, community cohesion, local and social identities, as well as wellbeing and social reform.

The focus of this inquiry, therefore, must ascertain the broader societal perspective on community radio's contribution to maintaining and enhancing community life across the UK. Stakeholders must be able to contribute to discussions of whether the current regulatory approach effectively supports community radio's ability to serve as a vital platform for social development and civic engagement.

In essence, the consultation must gather diverse viewpoints on how community radio can best meet its objectives within the societal framework, seeking answers to questions such as: How

is community radio perceived by its various stakeholders? Does the current regulatory framework allow community radio stations to fulfil their potential as platforms for social value? What changes might be needed to ensure that community radio continues to play a significant role in supporting the social and cultural fabric of UK communities?

This approach underscores the importance of stakeholder perspectives in shaping the future of community radio policy, ensuring that any regulatory adjustments reflect the needs and expectations of the broader community.

6 Event Details

Community Radio Consultation Workshop - Shaping the Future of Key Commitments

Reporting

[Decentered Media](#), in collaboration with [Better Media](#), is organising online meetings to engage stakeholders in a collective response to Ofcom's consultation on proposed changes to Key Commitments reporting for analogue community radio stations in the UK. These events are designed to harness the insights, experiences, and opinions of community radio broadcasters, listeners, civic society organisations, public sector representatives, educational bodies, and other interested parties to form a well-rounded submission to Ofcom.

Dates & Times: (select one on registration)

- Thursday 18th April 1-2.30pm
- Tuesday 23rd April 6-7.30pm
- Thursday 2nd May 9-10.30am
- Thursday 9th May 4-5.30pm

Book Tickets: <https://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/6292554>

Location: Online (A link will be provided upon registration).

Agenda

- **Welcome and Introduction:** A brief overview of the purpose of the meeting, introductions from Decentered Media and Better Media, and an explanation of the consultation process by Ofcom.
- **Consultation Overview:** Presentation of the main proposals put forth by Ofcom, highlighting the potential impacts on the community radio sector and the broader community interests they serve.
- **Breakout Discussion Sessions:** Participants will be divided into breakout rooms to focus on specific themes related to the consultation. These sessions will facilitate in-

depth discussions on the implications of the proposed changes, allowing for various perspectives to be heard.

- **Plenary Session:** A gathering of all participants to share insights and key points from the breakout discussions. This session aims to identify common themes, concerns, and suggestions for inclusion in the collective submission to Ofcom.
- **Wrap-up and Next Steps:** Summary of the event's outcomes, outlining the process for compiling the group's feedback into a submission, and how participants can continue to be involved.

Participation Details

- **Who Should Attend:** Anyone with an interest or stake in the future of community radio in the UK, including broadcasters, community members, civic organisations, funding bodies, and policy influencers.
- **Accessibility:** We are committed to making this event as accessible as possible. Please let us know if you require any specific accommodations when you register.
- **Registration:** Attendance is free, but registration is required. Please visit Decentered Media's website and Better Media's website to sign up and for more information.

About the Organisers

Decentered Media and Better Media are collaborating to ensure a broad and inclusive response to Ofcom's consultation. Our goal is to ensure that the voices of those who operate, participate in, and benefit from community radio are heard, influencing the future direction of policy in a way that supports the sector's sustainability and social value.

This event represents a crucial opportunity for the community radio sector and its supporters to come together, share perspectives, and contribute to a submission that reflects the collective vision for the future of community radio in the UK. Join us in shaping a response that champions the importance of community radio as a vital platform for education, democratic engagement, and social cohesion.