

RADIOCENTRE RESPONSE TO OFCOM CONSULTATION ON CHANGES TO BBC RADIO FOYLE AND BBC ASIAN NETWORK

OVERVIEW

1. Radiocentre welcomes the opportunity to respond to Ofcom's consultation¹ on the BBC's requests to reduce the news and current affairs quotas on BBC Radio Foyle and BBC Asian Network.
2. We note that Ofcom is proposing to approve the BBC's request which would result in the news output being reduced by 44% on BBC Asian Network (from 1,224 hours to 675 hours per year) and 32% on BBC Radio Foyle (from 1,043 hours to 710 hours each financial year), alongside broader scheduling and editorial changes. The BBC has explained that the proposed changes are driven by its desire to better serve audience needs and as a result of investing more in online and digital services at a time of significant financial constraints.
3. However, we do have concerns about these proposals, which represent an ongoing dilution of the BBC's public service obligations and continued mission drift across several of its radio services. Most notably it follows a similar downgrading of news and current affairs provision from the BBC, highlighted by the BBC's proposed new brand extensions for Radio 1 Dance, Radio 1 Anthems and Radio 3 Unwind, where the BBC opted to forgo the provision of news entirely. Ofcom noted² in its provisional determination on the proposals that it was disappointing that the BBC did not grasp the opportunity to deliver news in a distinctive way to the younger and C2DE audiences targeted by these new stations.³
4. The BBC plays an important role in the UK radio and audio sector. Its best and most distinctive programming provides a significant range of high-quality content for audiences. Due to the extremely privileged position it holds in terms of funding, broadcast spectrum and cross-promotional opportunities, it is particularly important that BBC radio services provide public value and are distinctive from the commercial sector.
5. Delivering distinctive output is an area where the BBC has the opportunity and responsibility to excel, providing audiences with content that is not catered for elsewhere in the market. This is central to the mission, purposes and governance framework for the BBC.
6. The BBC's latest proposal appears to run directly counter to that mission. Instead of strengthening its unique speech and news-based offerings, the BBC has sought to reduce them in favour of more mainstream (likely music-led) programming that competes more directly with commercial operators.

¹ [Changes to BBC Radio Foyle and BBC Asian Network, Ofcom, May 2025](#)

² [Consultation: Proposed new BBC DAB+ radio stations and proposed changes to Radio 5 Sports Extra, April 2025, p4.26](#)

³ [Ofcom urged to enhance public value of new BBC radio stations - Radiocentre](#)

BBC ASIAN NETWORK

7. The proposed changes to the BBC Asian Network are particularly concerning and will negatively affect both the British Asian community and the specialist commercial radio stations that serve this important audience. Reducing the news quota by 44% and replacing the substantive weekday afternoon drive-time news programme (the Ankur Desai show) represents a significant loss of public value for the station's audience.
8. The BBC's key justification – that it needs to appeal to younger audiences who are moving online – is not compelling. It is unclear whether a marginal increase in music programming will be successful in reversing the broader drop in the 15-24 age bracket (a trend across all radio listening). Furthermore, Ofcom notes that the audience for 25-34-year-olds on the station has remained "*relatively stable*" while the audience aged 35+ has grown⁴.
9. The BBC is therefore proposing to cut valued speech content for an audience that is demonstrably engaged, in pursuit of a younger demographic with no guarantee that it will be successful in attracting these younger listeners who are, as Ofcom notes, "*increasingly turning away from radio*"⁵.
10. This reduction in linear broadcast news is not adequately compensated for by a general commitment to digital news. Instead, it deprives a significant audience of vital and culturally relevant trusted speech content. Ofcom notes⁶ that this reduction "*would mean there would be less news and current affairs output made for British Asian audiences*", a situation compounded by the BBC's decision to merge its news operations with BBC Radio 1Xtra, which means the station no longer provides its South Asian audiences with a dedicated Newsbeat bulletin. Decommissioning the Ankur Desai show as proposed would further exacerbate this shortfall in current affairs output.
11. Specialist, in-depth news and current affairs programming is precisely the kind of distinctive content that the BBC should provide to audiences, who expect this type of content. These proposed changes represent a clear reduction in output meeting the BBC's Public Purpose 1 (to provide impartial news and information) and Public Purpose 4 (to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities).
12. Furthermore, this proposal also has the potential to impact fair and effective competition. By replacing the substantive afternoon drive-time news programme with a music-focused show, the BBC is making a strategic choice to compete more directly with commercial Asian radio stations. Increasing music output during a daytime slot places additional pressure on commercial operators that cater for Asian communities, who already operate on tight margins and must compete with a publicly funded, ad-free service with national broadcast coverage and powerful promotional support from the BBC.

⁴ Figure 2, p16

⁵ Para 5.16

⁶ Para 5.20

13. Ultimately, by reducing its specialist speech output, the BBC Asian Network will become less distinctive. The station's core purpose should be to provide content for the British Asian community that is not readily available elsewhere. These proposed changes cast doubt on the continued relevance of the BBC Asian Network and suggest a departure from its core public service commitments in favour of competing with commercial rivals.

BBC RADIO FOYLE

14. We also have concerns with the proposed changes for BBC Radio Foyle based on the fundamental principle that the BBC should not be retreating from local news provision.
15. The reduction in the BBC Radio Foyle news quota represents another step back from the BBC's commitment to local programming, following the controversial changes to BBC English Local Radio in January 2023.
16. While Ofcom notes the BBC has increased investment in digital local news for Northern Ireland, it is not clear that these formats can (or should) be substituted on a like-for-like basis. Broadcast radio news is highly trusted and particularly effective at reaching audiences passively, often while they carry out other activities, and it is especially valued by those who may not actively seek out news elsewhere.⁷ Ofcom also notes that Radio Foyle remains a more popular source of local news than other BBC local radio services across the UK.⁸
17. The proposal is also supported by limited evidence, with Ofcom noting that while the BBC states that the performance of BBC Radio Foyle has fallen in relation to BBC Radio Ulster, *"it is not possible to say whether the reduction in news and current affairs output on BBC Radio Foyle has contributed to these changes in listening."*⁹ Ofcom also notes that older audiences tend to rely more on linear broadcast services than younger audiences.
18. We also note that the BBC's proposal for BBC Radio Foyle is effectively retrospective. That this change was requested only after the BBC had already breached its existing operating licence condition due to an "internal miscommunication" sets a somewhat concerning precedent, with Ofcom now effectively formalising a breach that has already occurred, rather than holding the BBC accountable for delivering on its existing public service obligations.

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⁷ radiocentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Commercial-radio-Beyond-the-Bubble.pdf

⁸ Para 4.14

⁹ Para 4.17