

Strengthening Local Journalism: The Future Relationship Between the BBC and Local News Providers

Executive Summary

The BBC's Royal Charter is due for renewal in 2027, at a moment when the BBC, along with the whole news industry, is facing a combination of political, economic, social and technological challenges.

The opportunity creates a pivotal moment for the BBC to reconsider its relationship with local journalism, to collaborate with truly local news providers and content creators who are operated by, for and with the communities they serve, and put the information needs of local communities before all other interests.

The BBC's strengthening of local news ecosystems could be the modern equivalent of the construction of the transmission towers, shoring up access to trustworthy information for generations to come. Building new relationships with professional local outlets will allow the BBC to connect with a far greater range of audiences and engender trust in a way that is becoming impossible for national news brands.

Reframing the BBC's role as partner and facilitator of the local news ecosystem will rebuild public trust, revitalise local democracy and ensure a sustainable future for public interest journalism in the UK.

Introduction

The BBC's 2016 Charter expires on 31 December 2027, and the new Charter, taking effect in January 2028, will likely retain the BBC's core mission to inform, educate and entertain all audiences in the UK.¹ However, the details of this mission are yet to be determined. The UK Government is preparing to launch a process of Charter review, and while the Terms of Reference for the process have not yet been published, the Secretary of State has indicated that they will include a focus on the BBC's role as a partner to other media providers. Speaking at the Deloitte and Enders Analysis Media and Beyond 2025 Conference in June 2025, the Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy remarked:

*"We need more collaboration within your sector and especially between our public service broadcasters, to tackle these great social and economic challenges, working together in a number of areas, particularly tackling mis- and disinformation and promoting high quality news by investing in your journalism arms, **partnering more rather than competing with or undercutting local news publishers**, improving media literacy by helping consumers find and*

¹ See: https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/charter.pdf.

recognise accurate and impartial news reporting, supporting initiatives like BBC Verify and the Local Democracy Reporting Service.”²

A unique opportunity is available to the Government, the BBC and other stakeholders to craft a new vision for the BBC, not simply as a provider of local news, but as a cornerstone of the local news ecosystem, ensuring that everyone benefits from high-quality local journalism without depending on the BBC as the sole provider.

The current Charter sets out five ‘public purposes’ for the BBC, which have remained fairly consistent since their inception. As we will explore, three of these purposes are directly related to local news:

- To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them.
- To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services.
- To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all the United Kingdom’s nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom.

The BBC’s principal activities are described in the formal Agreement between the Culture Secretary and the BBC (‘the Agreement’) and the ‘List of UK Public Services’ (‘the List’).³ Together, the Charter, the Agreement and the List form the BBC’s constitutional framework.

The List of public services includes the following local services:

(3)(g) **BBC Local Radio:** a number of local radio services for audiences in different parts of England and the Channel Islands, providing a mixture of music and speech output.

(4) As online services designed for users across the UK, **BBC Online:** a comprehensive online content service, with content serving the whole range of the BBC’s Public Purposes and including the BBC’s news and sports websites and BBC iPlayer.

In 2017, the BBC also launched the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), which it describes as ‘a public service news agency: funded by the BBC, provided by the local news sector, and used by qualifying partners.’⁴

² See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/lisa-nandy-speech-at-media-telecoms-2025-and-beyond-conference>

³ See: <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/managementstructure/structureandgovernance/list-of-uk-public-services-mar-2024.pdf>; https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/agreement.pdf.

⁴ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/lnp/ldr>.

The BBC is not immune from the combination of political, economic, social and technological challenges facing the whole news industry. These are making it increasingly difficult for the corporation to fulfil its public purposes without significant change in the way that it operates.

In 2023-24, the licence fee generated £3.66bn for the BBC.⁵ This figure has not increased since 2012-13. In a period of high inflation, this flat income represents a significant drop - £1 billion a year - in the real value of the licence fee for the BBC.⁶ The BBC is not alone in this situation: funding for public service media across Europe has fallen by 10.9% in real terms since 2014.⁷

At the same time public trust in news is falling. While the BBC brand is still among the most trusted in the UK, trust in news as a whole is continuing to decline.⁸ Only 45% of British adults who follow the news say that they are most likely to turn to the BBC for news they trust.⁹ In its recently released survey, of 870,000 responses, a quarter of BBC users say that the BBC is not effective at reflecting the UK.¹⁰

PINF's research has shown that the British public are much more likely to trust local news provided by a locally based organisation than local news provided by an organisation based outside the area.¹¹ Truly local news has a net positive trust rating of +27%, versus a net negative rating of -24% for local news that is parachuted in from elsewhere.

In its report, 'Regenerating Local News in the UK', published in March 2025, PINF's Local News Commission stated that the UK is facing a series of interlinked crises. Trust in democracy and institutions are falling, with misinformation causing tension, and even violence, in our communities. At the same time, local news providers are having to fight to fulfil their role in the media ecosystem amid declining print circulations and ad revenue that's been entirely co-opted by big tech.

The Commission set out a vision of a future in which every local authority district in the UK is served by local news providers that are Accountable, Sustainable, in the Public interest, Innovative, Representative and Engaging ('ASPIRE'), recommending:

⁵ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/documents/ara-2023-24.pdf>.

⁶ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/documents/bbc-annual-plan-2025-2026.pdf>

⁷ See: https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/funding/EBU-MIS-Funding_of_Public_Service_Media_2025-Public.pdf?site=ebu.

⁸ See: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf

⁹ See: https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/psm/EBU-MIS-Trust_in_Public_Service_Media_2024-Public.pdf.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/ourbbcourfuture/>

¹¹ See: <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/post/public-more-likely-to-trust-local-news-if-it-s-produced-locally>.

‘A new settlement between the BBC and local news providers, building on the Local Democracy Reporting Service to ensure that every local community benefits from engaging and high-quality journalism.’¹²

Finding that “the LDR service is a sticking plaster for the problems affecting local news, not a cure,” the Commission brought into question whether the service is may inadvertently be inhibiting plurality in local news.

Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS)

The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LRDS) was set up by the BBC in 2017. The service has created 165 journalism jobs to help report on local democracy issues across the UK. The Local Democracy Reporters (LDRs) have produced more than half a million stories since launch, which are pooled for use for free by Partner publishers.¹³

Partners can apply to access LDR content if they can demonstrate they been operating for more than 12 months and keep to a high level of journalistic standards. Publishers may also apply to be a Supplier Organisation, with the BBC contributing the cost of a journalists’ salary to the outlet to host an LDR. This means that reporters can fit into the structures of local news outlets, creating jobs for local journalists to serve the communities where they live.

Many independent local news providers see the LDRS as a crucial resource. The service has filled critical gaps in reporting left by staff cutbacks in traditional media outlets, employing journalists and boosting numbers in local journalism. Reporters are often embedded in their local communities and have generally created good relationships with other news outlets in their local areas.

In local news deserts and drylands, where trustworthy local information is very limited, LDRs play a vital role in bolstering the news ecosystem.¹⁴ The LDRs have gained recognition for their diligent reporting, posting good quality content on a consistent basis, especially when it comes to scrutinising local councils and original coverage of significant local events.

However, many have also raised concerns about the design, assessment and monitoring of the LDRS and its effect on the plurality of local news. In the third and most recent tendering process, only 8.5 out of 165 reporter positions went to just seven independent news organisations. The vast majority of LDRs, 143 journalists, are employed by the three largest publishers of local news in the UK: National World,

¹² See:

https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/_files/ugd/cde0e9_2c1dcda04b144203bc7f3c00b60a4ffd.pdf

¹³ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/articles/2025/half-a-million-stories-the-local-democracy-reporting-service>.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/map>.

Newsquest and Reach plc, meaning that a majority of the funding per year flows to these companies.

For the avoidance of doubt, we are not suggesting that every LDR contract should be held by an independent local news provider. However, independent providers are significantly underrepresented in the current portfolio. PINF has carried out an anonymised consultation of independent local news providers that applied for contracts to understand why, finding that professional independent outlets are often precluded from an equal chance of hosting contracts due to their size. Tweaks to the design, assessment and monitoring of the service would allocate resources more fairly across the whole local news sector, resulting in a more plural ecosystem consisting of hyperlocal, local and regional titles for communities to depend on and trust.

As a public body, the BBC should ensure that the procurement process for the LDRS is accessible to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In line with the 2023 Procurement Act, the National Procurement Policy Statements instructs authorities to give SMEs a fair chance at public contracts by removing or reducing barriers to participation. The Act came into effect in February 2025, when applications for the most recent tendering process had already begun. We hope that learnings can be taken from the following analysis to ensure that the next tender process breaks down barriers for SMEs.

Changes would also support one of the BBC's key public purposes to support the creative economy across the United Kingdom. The purpose sets out a commitment to 'invest in the creative economies of each of the nations and contribute to their development'. A fairer share of the LDRS contracts would be a huge boost for the burgeoning independent local news sector, dispersing funds across dozens of different local news providers rather than predominantly supporting only three homogenous corporations.

1. Design and assessment

Outlets must provide supporting evidence proving that they can: manage and support an LDR, publish content consistently, train non-LDR staff to check material, be impartial, access council meetings, cover other related institutions, handle Partner relationships, engage their communities, be open to feedback from audiences, promote the LDRS brand, provide multi-media content, run a diverse recruitment process, provide anti-bias training and run an environmentally sustainable newsroom.

Our evidence shows that due to the high level of bureaucratic detail potential Suppliers must currently provide, the LDRS tips in favour of larger corporate organisations that have access to shared resources across training, resourcing, HR functionality and HR policy. Corporates more often score 'excellent', because they can go into complex levels of detail and policy, which are out of reach for most independent outlets, but don't tangibly add to the delivery of the service. The independent publishers who shared their

feedback with PINF got an average of 1.7 ‘excellent’ scores, whereas the big three got an average of 6.3.

Independent outlets are criticised across application feedback for not providing enough information about regular training plans, both under questions about management and support for the LDR themselves, training for their other non-LDR staff and impartiality training. The growing independent sector is disjointed, with little opportunity to share services, whereas corporates can invest in shared training resources across dozens of titles. Despite independent publishers being marked as ‘good’ on average across questions around training, they are unable to consistently compete with the exhaustive level of detail provided on training by corporates.

Independent outlets are also criticised for the lack of training around multimedia content. Small, independent outlets don’t always have access to expensive recording equipment to create this content. Given that LDR content is rarely multimedia at present, it appears out of proportion that it is the focus of two out of 15 questions. These are also mid-ranked questions, meaning they are given a fair deal of weight in scoring.

They are also penalised for not giving extensive details of HR policies - for example in terms of council access, TOIL and flexible working. Corporate news providers employ between 1000-3500 employees, so naturally require dedicated HR departments responsible for recruitment and retention of staff. In comparison, independent publishers have low turnover and employ on average 1.9 full time equivalent staff, so are less likely to employ professional HR services.¹⁵ In terms of bias training, appropriate equality and diversity initiatives (EDI) in smaller publishers with a handful of employees are necessarily going to look very different from EDI in organisations with thousands of employees.

Meanwhile, corporate HR departments can pull from large numbers of staff to facilitate diverse hiring panels, pay extra for charities and multiple job boards to host ads, use software that removes bias in ads, and host databases that allow for anonymous tracking of staff and candidates – all factors that count against independents. It’s unreasonable to expect that small organisations can facilitate the features of a large HR team and it’s not clear from the feedback what impact these corporate processes would have on the results of LDRS coverage.

Finally, independent outlets were marked harshly on sustainability practices. Common reasons given for indies being marked down on green targets include not providing evidence for their sustainable paper, not having net zero targets, tracking or reporting emissions or having energy efficiency measures. Such strict targets and policies make

¹⁵ See: https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/files/ugd/cde0e9_dea9347daea84ce8b57e441fae54c5ae.pdf

sense for larger news organisations with thousands of employees. However, holding independent outlets with one or two employees to the same standards sets barriers that they cannot overcome. The environmental footprint of local outlets is relatively far smaller and can be managed without needing to get accreditation from a national standards body, for example. Again, it is unclear what impact these policies would have on resulting LDRS coverage.

2. Monitoring

Inconsistency is also revealed in how chosen Suppliers are implementing their plans. Application questions request detailed plans regarding consistent delivery of content, meetings with Partners, community engagement and audience engagement. While independent outlets' scores on these questions were generally equal to corporates, there is inconsistency in the delivery of contracts that isn't taken into account at the tendering stage.

PINF has received evidence that some corporate news publishers post to their own site first before uploading to the LDRS wire and do not consistently byline LDR work. We have also heard that complaints are regularly ignored unless escalated to the BBC, at which time mistakes may be rectified without acknowledging the independent journalists that raised them. While some contract holders are very good at engaging with local Partners, many do not hold regular meetings to receive feedback or suggestions for content.

There is scepticism among independent publishers that some of the corporates are delivering as much community and audience engagement as they set out in their plans. While contract holders may have committed to regular engagement with communities and audiences, independent publishers have not seen much evidence of these plans being carried out in practice. Independent publishers have called into question the legitimacy of the open offices promised in applications – while organisations may have a physically registered address, in many areas most LDRs are in fact working from home.

Despite their lower level of resourcing, independent outlets evidence lots of local engagement, such as participation in Indie News Week, organising local hustings and co-creating media with citizens. While the work may be more ad hoc and grassroots than formal partnerships such as charity events or business awards, these are journalists who are deeply rooted in their local area, who live and work in the communities they serve.

Concerns have also been raised about the overall quality of reporting, including inaccuracies and over-reliance on press releases without sufficient independent investigation. For example, an LDR might post a 200-word story on food hygiene ratings without following up with councils and businesses. Publishers also say that in some

areas LDRs are stretched too thin and some contract areas are too large to service properly. Some independent publishers have pointed to examples of misuse of resources, in which LDRs cover non-democratic events like fires and restaurant reviews. LDRs themselves made this claim at a National Union of Journalists (NUJ) meeting in October 2024.¹⁶

In conclusion, the LDRS process is resulting in a disproportionate number of contracts awarded to corporate over independent outlets. While independent outlets have shown in their applications that they are able to deliver contracts, the process is not currently allowing for wide participation from SME applicants.

Two main improvements could be incorporated into the BBC Charter review to remedy these issues: more funding and more transparency. Further investment into the service would allow for more capacity to design an inclusive tendering process for all applicants and for closer oversight of Suppliers to ensure they are upholding the commitments made in their applications.

Increased transparency, including clarity in the marking scheme and identification of assessors would rebuild trust between the BBC and local news providers. Setting out the difference between a 'good' and 'excellent' answer in public marking guidelines would establish how an 'excellent' response tangibly improves the output of the LDRS. While the LDRS states that the tender assessment is done by an independent body, there is no public information about who these individuals are. Making the assessors' identities public and ensuring that a representative for the independent sector is included would go some way to restore trust with local outlets.

Local News Framework Agreement and Commissioning Fund

Returning to the three key public purposes that pertain to the BBC's relationship with local news, the first is **to provide impartial information to help people engage with the world around them**. Specifically, the objective is **to support audiences to participate in the democratic process at all levels**. The LDRS plays this role to a certain extent, in that it has provided a great deal of extra capacity to cover the day-to-day running of councils. While LDRs do a great job in reporting on council meetings, the time needed to simply cover the huge amount of work dealt with by councils doesn't allow for deeper investigations that hold power to account. The service doesn't go far enough to hold our democratic institutions genuinely accountable.

The second relevant public purpose focusses on **demonstrating creative, high-quality output, including taking creative risks, and developing fresh approaches and innovative content**. Independent local news providers are on the forefront of cutting-

¹⁶ See: <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2024/news/publishers-using-ldrs-for-dubious-purposes-says-union/>.

edge journalistic methodologies in the UK. For example, newsrooms are increasingly looking to meaningfully engage local communities in co-producing news together. They are using tools like the Co-Creational News Media Toolkit to bring citizens into the news production process, building trust at the same time as improving the quality and diversity of outputs.¹⁷

The final public purpose related to local news is **to reflect the diversity of UK nations and regions and support the creative economy across the country**. This ambitious objective covers three key areas: **to accurately portray the lives of people in the UK and ensure that content meets the needs of UK communities; bring people together in shared experiences and contribute to social cohesion; and invest in the creative economies of each of the nations**.

Considering the lower levels of trust covered in the introduction, the BBC faces a big challenge in accurately portraying and meeting the needs of communities across the country, as these objectives can only be achieved with the support and trust of the majority of the population. Given that people are more likely to trust independent local news providers, these outlets would appear to be in a better position to meet these aims.

With BBC news coverage focussed on serving large regional areas, it seems unlikely that journalists are able to facilitate meaningful community engagement or bring people together at the local level to provide shared experiences and social cohesion through news production.¹⁸ At a time when communities are more fractured than ever, with disinformation leading to tension and even violence among neighbours, this is an essential function for a public service corporation to deliver. Finally, the BBC could do more to invest equitably in the local creative economy, as we have seen with most of the LDRS investment channelled to the three big news corporations.

The flipside of the challenge for the BBC is an opportunity to collaborate with truly local news providers and content creators that are rooted in the communities they serve and put the community's information needs before any other political or commercial interests.

We propose two initiatives to be adopted into the new Charter that would reset the BBC's relationship with local news. Firstly, a high-level agreement between the BBC and the local news industry, co-signed by the relevant membership bodies and independent publishers, that gives the BBC the mandate to provide minimum-level service provision in all areas of the UK and sets out the BBC's relationship with these providers.

¹⁷ See: <https://toolkit.publicinterestnews.org.uk/>

¹⁸ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/regions>

The BBC's strengthening of local news ecosystems could be the modern equivalent of the construction of the transmission towers, shoring up access to trustworthy information for generations to come. The model could take inspiration from the Post Office's mandate to serve rural areas, providing a community hub and lifeline for our most vulnerable communities.¹⁹

Rather than aiming to provide local news directly to everyone in the UK in competition with existing outlets, the BBC must work in partnership with local news providers where they are already operating. This will help to engender trust with communities in a way that is almost impossible for the BBC as a monolithic national institution.

A framework agreement to facilitate this new relationship may include agreements not to lift content without attribution or link backs, a visible contact person in each region available to local news providers and a division of responsibilities between hyperlocal, local and regional news providers in which the BBC plugs gaps in local news without acting as a competitor.

Secondly, we believe that as well as a strengthened LDRS, a Local News Commissioning Fund would support existing professional local journalists to step up their public interest news provision. Outlets could be supported to produce longer form investigations in the public interest, covering public bodies including health boards, coroner's courts, prisons, youth justice institutions, school boards and more.

Whereas the LDRS takes a rigorous public procurement approach - entering into a rigid three-year relationship with local news companies - an equal size commissioning fund would provide more flexible resources dispersed between a wider range and greater number of local news providers and content creators. The Fund could be managed by existing Regional Commissioning Editors who could work with outlets to frame pieces of public interest journalism. A lighter touch approach than the LDRS would enable content to be commissioned on a shorter-term and therefore more frequent basis. Content can be shared between platforms to maximise reach and serve local audiences that may not be usual BBC readers. PINF's Tenacious Journalist Award serves as a useful proof of concept for this proposal, showing that relatively small amounts of money (between £5000 - £20,000) can have huge local impact.²⁰

We understand that there are challenges in terms of cultural and perceived regulatory constraints, although the current editorial and commissioning policies do not seem to rule out co-productions between media outlets. There are many examples of the BBC and other corporations working in partnership with smaller outlets to serve audiences. For example, in 2014 Channel 4 launched the much-celebrated Indie Growth Fund,

¹⁹ See: <https://corporate.postoffice.co.uk/cy/london-economics/anchoring-economics/sustaining-thousands-of-local-rural-economies/>

²⁰ See: <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/post/one-year-on-the-impact-of-the-tenacious-journalist-awards>

supporting the UK independent production sector by providing access to funding. We invite feedback on what barriers might be in place that prevent the co-production of news content between the BBC and local news providers.

Recommendations

1. More investment in the LDRS to allow for a fairer tendering process and monitoring of Suppliers against the commitments made in their applications.
2. Increased transparency of the LDRS, including named assessors and public marking guidelines to level the playing field for SMEs.
3. Create a framework agreement between the BBC and the local news sector establishing a new and better way of working together to serve communities.
4. Establish a Local News Commissioning Fund to support longer-form investigations and more diverse, community-rooted journalism.

Conclusion

The renewal of the BBC's Royal Charter in 2027 represents a critical opportunity to spark much needed innovation in journalism that will rebuild ever-dwindling trust in UK audiences. While the LDRS continues to deliver real benefits to local democracy, it is a sticking plaster to the deep crisis faced by massive lack of trust in our institutions. Independent providers are trusted by their communities but struggle to compete in the BBC's current partnership model.

To meet its mission and public purposes, the BBC must shift to become a genuine partner and enabler of a diverse local news ecosystem. By investing in the LDRS, creating a new Local News Commissioning Fund and working openly with independent news providers, the BBC can strengthen local democracy, increase trust in journalism and truly reflect the voices of all UK communities. With the right settlement, the BBC can help ensure that every community has access to reliable local information and benefits from accountable, sustainable journalism.

About PINF

The Public Interest News Foundation (PINF) is working to regenerate local news across the UK. By 2035, we want every local community to be served by news that is Accountable, Sustainable, in the Public interest, Innovative, Representative and Engaging (ASPIRE). We believe that everyone should benefit from local news that speaks to them, for them and with them.

Local journalism plays an essential role in informing local communities, holding power to account, boosting local economies, creating a forum for debate and debunking the myths and rumours that lead to polarisation. PINF's advocacy and research is shaped by our network of over 100 local public interest news providers from all corners of the UK: from Devon to Shetland, Newry to Caerphilly.

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