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## Written evidence submitted by Local TV Network

### **LTVN response to the Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee Call for Evidence on the Sustainability of Local Journalism**

The Local Television Network Limited (LTVN) is the trade association for the 34 Ofcom-licensed local digital television programme (local TV) channels broadcasting on digital terrestrial television (Freeview) channel 7 or 8.

From Belfast to Brighton, Aberdeen to Bristol, local TV journalists provide daily local news bulletins in each licensed area.

Local TV services launched in 2013 and are recognised by statute as designated public service channels for the purposes of securing prominence on electronic programme guides (EPGs). The 34 local TV services are operated by 8 groups, each with their own business model – from advertiser-funded services, to non-profit, partly grant-funded services.

Whilst licence fee funding was initially allocated to launch and establish local TV, licensee groups are now self-sustaining. The services are broadcast on a Freeview multiplex, jointly owned by the local TV licensees. Revenue is generated from sub-letting spare capacity on this multiplex to deliver quasi-national Freeview channels.

### **Local TV and Local News**

Television news has immediacy. It is audio-visual and has multi-sensory impact. Outputs can be repurposed for digital distribution to meet the tastes and expectations of different consumers of news.

Linear TV remains an important news provider for a wide demographic, and not just those that are resistant to newer technology. The fact that public service channels are readily available, free at the point of access, and independently licensed and regulated, further helps to build public trust and confidence in broadcast news provision.

Local news generates important externalities. The 'levelling up' agenda highlights the importance of pride in place. Local news and information – knowing what is going on in your area – helps to build this pride and interest in active citizenship. Being able to access a platform where local decision-makers can be held to account, helps sustain that pride and promotes civil society.

The way that local news is produced and consumed continues to be subject to change. The covid pandemic and lockdowns caused additional disruption. With the pandemic, local news became more important than ever. During this time, local communities across the UK pulled together to support the lonely and vulnerable, to defend local businesses, arts venues and sports clubs, and to applaud local key workers. Local TV news has never been more important or valued – keeping local viewers informed on how their area has been affected, what support they can access locally and where they can go and get vaccinated.

The challenges to local news production remain the same as those identified in the Cairncross Review: news is expensive to produce, and difficult to monetise. Local advertising revenue is scarce and substantially siphoned off by online operations. As citizens, the public recognises the value of local news, but as consumers they are reticent to pay for it from their household budgets.

In this submission LTVN focuses on two questions in the Committee's call for evidence.

### **How are public service broadcasters, particularly the BBC, supporting or disrupting local journalism?**

Local TV services are formally recognised as 'designated' public service channels and collectively deliver local content commitments amounting to about 25,000 hours of output a year. They represent an important aspect of local journalism, supporting both their communities and the wider ecosystem, through training and development.

At the heart of local TV's service is local news. Each year, local TV operators deliver several thousand audio-visual news stories on screen, produced by dozens of journalists across the country. A high proportion of operating budgets are devoted to local news gathering and production. Many viewers place their trust in local TV news because it provides a voice to the community and is not 'metropolitan-centric'. Over 5.5 million viewers watch local TV each month on Freeview.<sup>[1]</sup>

In larger cities – including Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and all of the UK's national capitals – local TV adds to the plurality of local voices. In small and medium-sized markets, from Salisbury to Scarborough, Maidstone to Mold, local TV is often the only source of substantive daily local broadcast news, with BBC/ITV focusing on major cities, and local commercial radio stations having typically been merged into quasi-national networks with pan-regional news output.

And Local TV can deliver more than hard local news coverage. LTVN members frequently use their journalism resource to reflect and support communities that do not always feel well represented. Recent examples include community perspectives on national and international issues, such as Ukraine and Covid. There has been coverage of COP 26 by local journalists broadcasting from Glasgow. One service broadcast a 12-hour election 'special' delivering a county-wide local perspective on the 2019 general election. Three services collaborated to provide coverage of the International Women's Day Film Festival. One service has produced current affairs programming for diaspora communities in minority languages. Another has broadcast fitness programmes aimed at the digitally excluded. Daily, local TV services provide coverage for local festivals, events, council, and community issues that would be of no interest to a national broadcaster.

Local TV services play a significant role in training and developing new talent: helping to plug the gap in the shortage of skills in both journalism and multimedia production. Hundreds receive

training and work placements every year, often as part of a formal apprenticeship or study programme for an industry-recognised qualification. There are partnerships with universities to train young or newly qualified journalists and production staff. Many journalists develop their skills with local TV services. The nature of local journalism means that they must be adept at the full spectrum of video journalism tasks in a way that the largest established broadcasters, with their more siloed responsibilities, cannot generally match. Local TV journalists frequently move on to roles with national or international TV services, including the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Sky, Al Jazeera and CNN.

The heritage Public Service Broadcasters, including the BBC, clearly make a significant contribution to local news delivery around the UK, though these are typically based on regions and large conurbations outside London, rather than the truly local. The BBC also has its (mostly county-wide or larger) local radio services, and the inclusion of some regional news on the BBC News website. This gives it a strong position in the market – in terms of not just production but also marketing, recruitment, and training. The resources that it brings to bear and the ability to provide ‘ad-free’ local news poses a challenge to other local news providers and has the potential to risk plurality in the provision of local news if not carefully considered.

There are other challenges in the market. Many elements of the ecosystem, such as BARB (for audience measurement) and Digital UK (for some Freeview technical services), were not originally designed with local TV in mind. LTVN also believes that there is a case for public service channels (including local TV) and Ofcom working holistically to ensure that services can fully exploit commercial opportunities in the future, including on the developing digital advertising platforms.

### **How can the government support local news outlets to develop sustainable business models?**

The public service media debate has tended to focus on national and international concerns, such as the future ownership of Channel 4, the BBC licence fee and the threat from global online streaming services. Local broadcasting potentially risks being under-valued and overlooked, especially by London-based policymakers. Localism matters.

LTVN firmly believes that the most important action that the Government can take to support the future of local TV journalism in the immediate future is to provide existing licensed operators with licence extensions (the current licence term formally expires in 2025). Whilst renewal of licences was anticipated at the time of licensing, and LTVN sees no viable alternative to implementing this promptly, material delay jeopardises the ability of local TV operators to plan their long-term future and puts at risk further investment - for example in future digital applications such as Freeview Play.

Further, local TV news is substantially subsidised by revenues from non-news activities. Local TV’s current access to Freeview and prominence on the EPG is not only a signal of the importance attached to localism but also helps sustain revenues. The Government is due to review the options for securing the future provision of public service television – for example by ensuring that public service channels are guaranteed access to all major platforms and due prominence on EPGs and device menus. LTVN believes that it is imperative that Ofcom is tasked with assessing and securing the access and prominence required by local TV services to sustain their local news origination over the coming decade.

Collaboration between PSBs and public service channels could further materially support local TV business models, and hence local journalism, in the future, particularly in such areas as content

and technology-sharing and advertising sales cooperation.

The BBC-funded Local Democracy Reporting Scheme (LDRS) is an existing source of indirect assistance. Many local TV services take part in this by distributing stories and (more recently) by some applying for news delivery contracts. LTVN contends that this is a valuable scheme, but it should pay more attention to the needs of audio-visual as well as print journalism.

In the event that the Government were to choose in the future to provide further support for local news and local journalism, (including, for instance, by introducing tax reliefs or other funds), arrangements should be designed so that local TV services can also apply in a fair and open manner.

David Powell

Chair  
Local TV Network

31 March 2022

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[1] Most local TV services (33 out of 34) measure viewing through TV Analytics (TVA) which has a return path to a panel of internet-connected TV sets. TVA data shows that local TV services in the UK reach over 5.5 million viewers per month (source: TVA minimum 3-minute consecutive viewing, February 2022).

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