

# New rules needed to protect British radio output on smart speakers

- Makers of smart speakers could face new measures to protect listener access to radio services
- Follows review of UK radio to benefit future audiences and continue sector's success
- Review also concludes there should be no FM switch-off until at least 2030

The [Digital Radio and Audio Review](#) found that smart speakers such as Amazon Echo and Google Home are owned or accessed by a third of all adults and now play a central role in many of our lives – despite only being available for around five years.

The report recommends new measures to protect UK radio stations' accessibility so that their content is carried on platforms via connected audio devices such as smart speakers and car 'infotainment' systems. This will mean they can continue to reach loyal audiences as radio is increasingly listened to via tech platforms rather than traditional radio sets.

The review, commissioned by the government and undertaken with a broad cross-section of industry stakeholders including commercial radio groups, the BBC, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders and techUK, looked at the challenges radio services are likely to face in the future from changing listening habits and new technologies.

Other recommendations include that there should be no mandated switch-off of analogue radio until at least 2030 – meaning that FM radio broadcasts can continue for at least another decade so the elderly, vulnerable and people in remote communities can access essential news and entertainment.

The government will consider the review's recommendations as it prepares a Broadcasting White Paper and develops a new pro-competition regime for digital markets.

Media Minister Julia Lopez said:

British radio showcases some of our best creative talent and played a vital role in the pandemic bringing news and entertainment to those in need.

We must make sure this treasured medium continues to reach audiences as listening shifts to new technologies and that we have a gradual transition away from FM to protect elderly listeners and those in remote areas.

We will not have a digital switchover until at least 2030 and will consider new rules to keep our thriving radio sector at the heart

of the UK's media landscape.

Radio listening habits have changed markedly over the past ten years, with more listener choice than ever before thanks to the increasing availability of on-demand audio and the successful development of DAB digital radio.

There are now more than 570 stations available on DAB across the UK, in addition to thousands of online stations and more than 300 stations on analogue. Around 60 per cent of all radio listening is now via DAB or another digital platform, and the review concludes that DAB will underpin listening well into the 2030s and beyond. New small scale DAB networks are coming on air giving more and more small local stations the ability to broadcast digitally.

The review found that the ability of the UK radio industry to thrive in the long term is increasingly dependent on listeners having free access to the hundreds of different UK radio stations on connected audio devices.

Sixty four per cent of audio consumed on a smart speaker is live radio and the review predicts that live radio will still account for more than 50 per cent of UK audio listening in the mid-2030s.

Amazon, Google and Apple currently provide more than 95 per cent of voice-activated smart speakers and the review notes there is nothing within the current regulations to prevent tech platforms from being able to limit or restrict access to UK radio services or to charge stations for carriage.

Other research undertaken for the review found analogue radio listening will account for just 12 to 14 per cent of all radio listening by 2030, but FM in particular remains highly valued by many listeners, especially those who are older or more vulnerable, drive older cars or live in areas with limited DAB coverage.

The review recommends there should be no formal switch-off of FM services before 2030. AM services, accounting for less than 3 per cent of all listening, should develop a plan to retire national medium wave services, given the cost of running duplicate networks.

Other recommendations from the review include:

- The government moving forward with its plans for deregulation of commercial radio services to reduce burdens on the sector from outdated regulation;
- Further measures to support and develop the audio sector, including making it more diverse and representative of the UK;
- New measures to support national commercial AM licensees who want to retire medium wave services;
- And further work relating to other distribution channels for radio content, including mobile and to increase the rollout of DAB+ to offer listeners better quality and more services.

Rhona Burns, Director of Operations, BBC Radio said:

Radio plays a unique role in people's lives. This review recognises that and proposes important steps to keep radio listening strong as audience habits change, ensuring brilliant content is easy to find and access across all platforms. It also challenges the BBC and the whole industry to keep innovating and evolving our audio offer, whilst keeping linear listening alive for the many millions who love it.

We welcome the review's focus on making sure radio remains relevant to all audiences, including increasing diversity, skills and representation both on and off air, and we look forward to working with the industry to achieve these goals.

Paul Keenan, President of Bauer Media Audio said:

The radio industry has embraced the disruptive potential provided by connected devices, but such platforms also present long term risks as relationships with listeners are increasingly mediated by gatekeepers. To protect radio's public value, it's crucial that listeners continue to enjoy unfettered access free at the point of use, and broadcasters continue to have a secure route to market on equitable terms, so I fully welcome the Review's recommendations.

We look forward to working with legislators to mitigate the challenges our industry faces and create opportunities for increased digital audio listening and innovation over the longer term.

Seb Enser-Wight, Chief of Staff and Director of Strategy & Development of Global, said:

We welcome the move to protect FM until at least 2030, recognising the important role it plays in many people's lives. We're pleased that there are recommendations to safeguard listeners' ability to access radio services freely and easily on FM, DAB and IP platforms, including smart speakers and connected cars.

Ian Moss, Chief Executive of Radiocentre said:

This report marks a significant moment for the UK radio and audio industry. The Review has identified a set of proposals that will ensure the continued delivery of a wide range of high quality audio services for consumers. We look forward to working with the Government and the industry to implement the recommendations.

Chloe Straw, Managing Director of AudioUK said:

We are very pleased to see this important report's recognition of the creative role that independent audio producers play. We particularly welcome the recommendation to consider an audio production tax relief, to take advantage of the growing international investment in podcasting.

As the providers of specialist audio production courses via our Audiotrain programme, we also welcome the recognition of the need to address the importance of ongoing skills provision. And as one of the organisations overseeing the successful government-financed Audio Content Fund, which is coming to the end of its three-year pilot phase, we greatly welcome the report's recommendation for continued contestable funding in radio.

Shuja Khan, Chief Commercial Officer at Arqiva, said:

The review reminds us all how important Radio is to its audiences now and in the future. We are committed to taking the recommendations forward and excited about working with the industry to deliver a sustainable and vibrant future for UK radio.

Mike Hawes, SMMT Chief Executive, said:

The automotive industry and the broadcasting sector have enjoyed a long and fruitful collaborative relationship which, given historically high rates of radio listening in vehicles, has delivered for the end user – digital radio is now ubiquitous in new cars. There are now multiple ways of accessing content in vehicles, including radio and streaming, and with technology continuing to evolve, it would be reasonable to expect even more options in the future, so this review is a welcome opportunity to promote innovation.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

- [Read the report.](#)
- The Digital Radio and Audio Review was commissioned by the government in February 2020 with the objective of assessing likely future trends in listening and to make recommendations on ways of strengthening UK radio and audio.
- The review was done in conjunction with a broad cross-section of industry stakeholders and is intended to complement other work to ensure a healthy future for a thriving UK media, such as the Cairncross Review and the Ofcom Public Service Broadcasting Review.
- The review has been led by the Digital Radio and Audio Review Steering Board, composed of senior representatives from the BBC, the main

commercial radio groups (Global, Bauer and Wireless), Arqiva, Radiocentre, techUK, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT), and chaired by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS).

- The secretariat was provided by DCMS supported by resources from Digital Radio UK (DRUK) and industry, with Ofcom acting as an observer.
- The coalition government launched the Digital Radio Action Plan in 2010 to provide a clear framework to develop digital radio services. The plan resulted in a major expansion of DAB network coverage between 2013 and 2018, resolving a number of network deficiencies including local DAB.
- It also led to the launch of the second national commercial multiplex, the extension of the Digital One commercial network to Northern Ireland and the launch of further local multiplexes which since 2012 have helped to support the growth of new services over the past decade.
- The joint efforts of the radio industry, led by Digital Radio UK and the automotive sector, have resulted in almost all new passenger cars now having DAB and DAB+ installed as standard, having been practically zero in 2010. □□Digital Radio UK has forecast that 48 per cent of all UK cars in use will be fitted with DAB+ by the end of 2021, the highest in Europe apart from Norway (which switched off its national FM services in 2017).
- The Digital Radio Action Plan proposed that the earliest date that the government could consider setting a switch-off timetable for FM and AM networks was when digital accounted for at least 50 per cent of all UK radio listening. Digital listening currently accounts for more than 58 per cent of listening (Rajar Q1 2020 data – the most recent available).