

# LISTENING LOCALLY



2/18/2022

A study into the impact of local radio

This report looks at the social impact of local radio in Northampton in terms of how it influences social resilience and individual well-being. It was conducted from January to November 2021 and involved an online questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The author is Dr Alison Hulme who conducted the research in conjunction with NLive radio and the University of Northampton. It was funded by the University of Northampton's Business Ideas and Innovation Grant (BIIG).

# listening locally

## A STUDY INTO THE IMPACT OF LOCAL RADIO

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local radio is an important part of the lives of those who listen to it. Very few listen ambivalently; most are already invested in their local community or become much more invested as a result of their listening. The majority of listeners to local radio feel it heightens their sense of connection to others in their community and helps them understand the perspectives and behaviours of different groups. There is a strong sense amongst listeners that it has enabled them to feel more personally resilient, i.e. better to cope with periods of stress or anxiety. The relationship between this resilience and the sense of local connection became particularly poignant due to the lockdown conditions of COVID – factors that lead to greater community resilience.

### PROJECT CONTEXT AND PARTNERS

The Business Ideas and Innovation Grant (BIIG) is a University of Northampton initiative which specifically operates to pair up academics with local business partners. NLive Radio is a not-for-profit community radio station that is operated by University of Northampton Enterprises. NLive teamed up with Dr Alison Hulme whose background is in anthropology, but who also spent ten years working as a radio professional.

NLive's target audience is everyone who lives, works, studies and plays in Northampton, with a core target audience of those in their 30s and 40s. It has a varied range of programming to keep listeners entertained, engaged, and informed about local issues and local community groups, organisations and businesses. It has entertainment shows with local features, specialist music shows that includes highlighting local bands and artists, and specialist interest shows including some dedicated to the performing and creative arts, local business and enterprise, and faith and beliefs. Additionally, it works to support and provide opportunities to students at the University, especially with links to their studies. NLive has a full-time station manager, two part time support staff, and over 40 volunteers. All presenters are voluntary roles.

For the purposes of this research community radio and local radio were both referred to as 'local radio' as the stakeholders were aware that very few listeners understand the difference between the two and may not always realise that what they are listening to is community radio as opposed to local radio.

### RESEARCH CONTEXT

The community radio sector is over 15 years old in the UK and has over 300 licensed and broadcasting stations across the country (316 at the point this report was completed). There is much anecdotal evidence that community radio has hugely positive impacts for local communities, such as mitigating against social isolation

and division and reducing certain types of crime. Despite this context, there has been little research into its social impact. One notable exception to this is the 2016 Hospital Broadcasting Association (HBA) impact study and subsequent report which proved how hospital radio has numerous positive impacts for patients. (See [HBA Impact Report | Hospital Broadcasting Association \(hbauk.com\)](#) from where a copy can be downloaded.) So far though, community radio has no equivalent. This project set out to begin to resolve that situation. It therefore provides a first step towards developing an impact tool for community radio nationally – one that could be rolled out across the UK. Measuring the impact of community radio was and is particularly urgent in the context of COVID-19 and the increasing social isolation of various demographic groups.

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES

### Aim

To explore the impact of local radio on the everyday lives of its listeners

### Objectives

To gather and analyse data on the impact local radio listening has on social isolation (the degree of connection to others in the local community)

To gather and analyse data on the impact local radio listening has on social division (the extent to which it promotes better understanding of different groups within the local community)

To gather and analyse data on the impact community radio listening has on personal resilience (the extent to which it makes people feel better able to cope with periods of stress or anxiety)

To gather and analyse data on the impact community radio listening has on employability (the extent to which it provides skilling opportunities)

To analyse this data as a whole in order to understand the relationship between community radio and social resilience.

## METHODOLOGY

### Project design

The project was conducted in two phases – an online questionnaire and online interviews. (See appendices for details of these.) The online questionnaire had four parts – initial demographic info, listening habits and patterns, feelings about what was gained by local listening, and experiences of the extent to which local radio helped in periods of stress and anxiety. The questionnaire was designed to take around ten minutes to complete. It was both disseminated, and the results analysed, via secure online University of Northampton technology.

Once the questionnaire phase was complete, the interview phase began, using those questionnaire respondents who had indicated they would be happy to be interviewed. The interviews picked up the

emergent themes of connectedness, understanding, and resilience and asked interviewees to provide much deeper context around their responses and share their experiences of the role listening to local radio plays in their everyday lives. Interviews were carried out online, again via a secure University of Northampton platform. Each interview lasted from 20 minutes to 40 minutes and all were recorded with the interviewees permission for the purposes of analysis only.

The project gained full ethical approval from the University of Northampton ethics committee, meaning it complies to recognized standards when it comes to aspects such as anonymity, data protection, and safeguarding.

## Sample

The project found participants via on-air announcements on NLive and the social media pages of various local community radio stations – including NLive and Inspiration. A link to the online questionnaire was promoted via these means. As the number of listeners to local radio is not known and the means of contacting listeners are limited, the project sought to involve *anyone* who listens to local radio in its initial survey questionnaire phase, in order to gain as many responses as possible.

The questionnaire gained 44 responses; 24 of those were men and 20 were women. The sample contained a wide age-range with 9% aged 18-30, 23% aged 31-40, 18% aged 41-50, 29% aged 51-60, 16% aged 61-70, and 5% aged 70+. See figure 1 below.

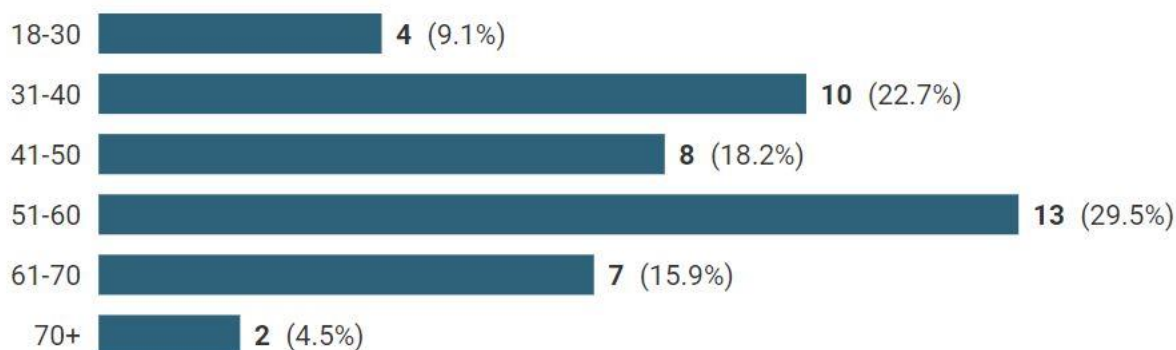


Figure 1: The age of respondents

In terms of ethnic background, 40 respondents identified as White (including English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, any other White background), 1 as Asian or Asian British (Including Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, any other Asian background), 1 as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British (Including African, Caribbean, any other Black, African or Caribbean background), and 2 as from 'any other ethnic group'.

18% (8 out of the 44 respondents) considered themselves to have a disability; 82% saying they did not consider themselves to have a disability. This percentage of listeners with a disability is slightly higher than the national picture in which around one fifth of the UK population considers themselves to have a disability.<sup>i</sup> Although a greater number of respondents would be required to test whether those who consider themselves to have a disability are more likely to listen to local radio as opposed to other types of radio, it is worth noting that local radio may have a particular appeal to those with a disability.

Educationally, the largest group of respondents had a Bachelor's degree as their highest qualification (36%). 27% stated A-Levels as their highest qualification, and 25% GCSEs. 12% had higher degrees.

When it came to employment, education was the most common sector for respondents to work in. Eight people (18% of the sample) were 'currently not in employment'. See figure 2 below. Even accounting for those over the age of employment this percentage is quite high compared to the national unemployment rate at the time of writing which is 4.5%.<sup>ii</sup> It may suggest that community radio is particularly important to those out of work and/or seeking employment, although a larger sample would be needed to test this.

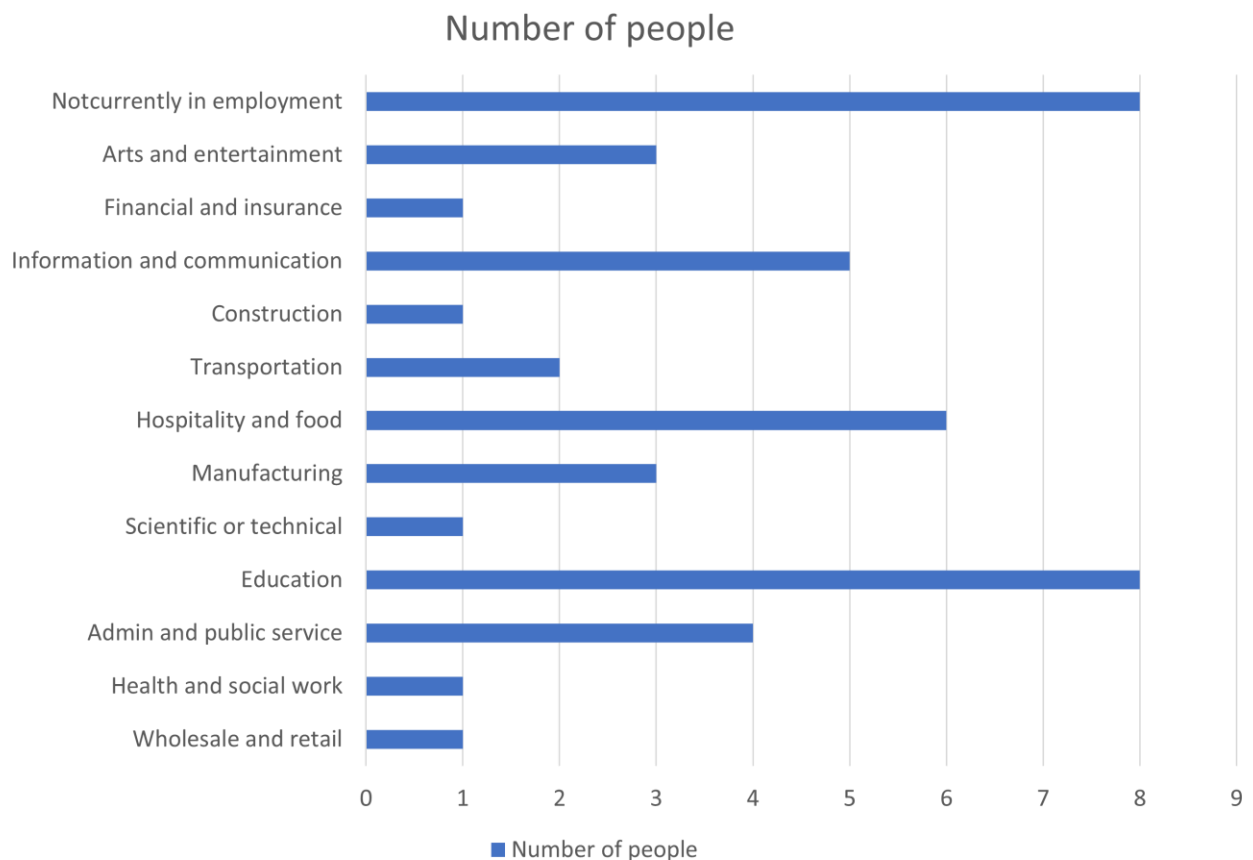


Figure 2: The employment of respondents

Finally, in terms of income, the majority of respondents (51%) earned 16-30K per annum. A sizeable group earned 0-15k per annum (24%).

All respondents to the questionnaire were invited to be part of the interview phase of the research. Interviewees were therefore sourced from the pool of questionnaire respondents. Four interviews were conducted. All of those prepared to be interviewed were women, so unfortunately there was no opportunity to gain a gender balance. The interviews were conducted via the University of Northampton's secure online

platform and were audio-only (i.e. camera facilities remained switched off for anonymity). Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. Interview data was analysed using thematic content analysis in order to establish emerging common themes.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### Listening habits

In terms of listening habits, half of respondents said they listened to local radio for five hours or less in the average week. A sizeable group (25%) listened for an hour or less. See figure 3 below.

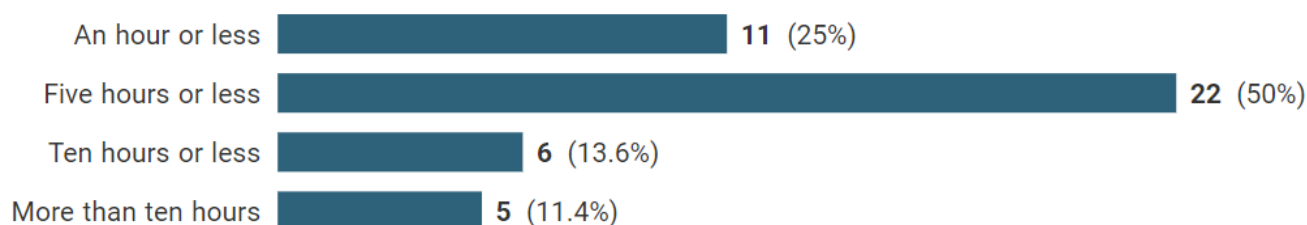


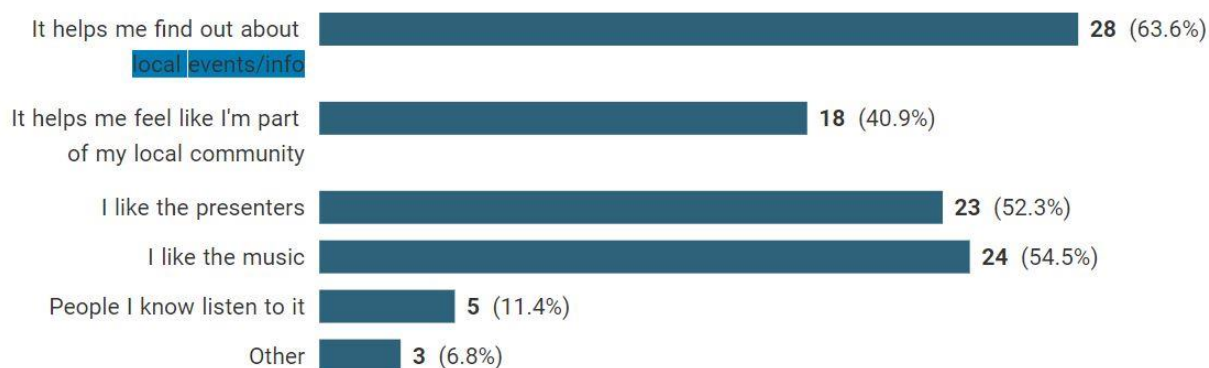
Figure 3: Number of hours listening to local radio in the average week.

Local stations mentioned were NLive, Inspiration and Revolution, but 46% also ticked the box to state they listened to 'other' local stations and when prompted by a follow-up open question this was usually the local BBC station – BBC Radio Northampton. For NLive specifically, the length of listening patterns followed those for local radio more generally (as illustrated above), i.e. the largest group of respondents listened for 5 hours or less, but for more than 1 hour.

On weekdays, breakfast (6-9am) followed by drivetime (4-7pm) were the most popular times to listen to local radio. At the weekends, daytime (9am-4pm) was the most popular time. This broadly reflects listening trends in local and national radio across the UK. (See 2021RAJAR report.<sup>iii</sup>)

### Motivations for listening

Crucially, when it came to motivations for listening to local radio, although music and presenters were important factors, finding out about local events was the main motivation by a long way, followed by feeling part of the local community. Considering these two community-led motivations together, a clear picture emerges as to the importance of local radio as part of a sense of knowing about and belonging within the local area. See figure 4 below.



*Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)*

Figure 4: Motivating factors in listening to local radio

These motivations were backed up by the qualitative interviews with comments such as “I like listening to the local radio and knowing what’s going on” being common. (Interviewee 1.)

Learning of employment opportunities was not a strong motivation for listening. When presented with the statement ‘listening to local radio has helped me gain information about employment skills or opportunities’, respondents tended on the whole to be undecided or slightly negative, 32% answering ‘neither agree or disagree’ and 27% answering that they ‘somewhat disagree’.

## A sense of connection

The importance to respondents of knowing what is going on locally was backed up by the responses to the first of the qualitative statements on the questionnaire - ‘listening to local radio has made me feel more connected to my community’. 43% ‘somewhat agreed’ with this statement, and 32% ‘totally agreed’. This strongly suggests the majority of those who listen to local radio do so specifically to gain a sense of being connected to their local community. This was backed up by the interviews with comments such as: “I do love local radio ... [on national radio] they’re not there [in your town], they’re not saying your name, you are distanced, there are millions of people listening to that... I feel a little disconnected to that.” (Interviewee 1)

Importantly, for some there was a strong link between the extent to which they felt connected to their local community and their own well-being. For example, one interviewee explained, “I’ve had a very traumatic experience and I think in those situations it can make you feel like you’re not part of the real world, so I think hearing real people on the radio, talking about places you’re familiar with ... saying your name ... it is that feeling of yes I am real, I am in the real world, and it sort of grounds you again ... things are carrying on and you have to just get on with... I think it really has helped me ... feeling part of a real community.” (Interviewee 1) This shows an important way in which local radio has a unique opportunity to enable people to be present in the moment, due to the sense of being grounded in a geographical place.

Many mentioned how simply hearing about local events and things that had happened made them feel more connected, saying “...they would tell you about something that was on in the community ... and whether you went to it or not it did make you feel very part of the Northampton community.” (Interviewee 1) Or similarly,

“It’s like a spiders web of connections ... and smaller things coming together to make one bigger thing ... that’s a sense of community that I get.” (Interviewee 4)

It is important to note that the sense of connectedness came simply from the sense of things happening locally; a sense that there were local activities and people doing things. It was not necessarily important to the participants for their sense of connectedness that they themselves took part. Therefore, this sense of connection does not necessarily translate into actual social contact between people. That said, 39% of respondents ‘somewhat agreed’, and 27% of respondents ‘totally agreed’ that ‘Listening to local radio has made me more likely to get involved in things happening in my local community’.

The picture was different when the question was about meeting new people or making new friends though. Only 16% of respondents ‘somewhat agreed’ or ‘totally agreed’ with the statement ‘listening to local radio has helped me make new friends/met new people.’ In contrast, 32% ‘somewhat disagreed’ and 16% ‘totally disagreed’. It is difficult to tell of course what impact lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions had on the responses to these questions. It might reasonably be assumed that once local events are fully up and running, this greater desire to be involved, will result in actual involvement, and indeed potentially in a greater level of understanding of others and a greater number of new friendships.

The interviews suggested that more actual social contact could probably be successfully encouraged, with comments such as: “I have been to a few of the things NLive spoke about a Saturday craft fair ... and it was partly because NLive said they were going to be there and I thought oh I’ll have a look around ... and it did make me feel like a trusted friend was there ... but it was one of those things that I felt I could go because NLive had said it was on.” (Interviewee 1)

## Improved cultural understanding

Questionnaire respondents found it difficult to state whether listening to local radio led to greater understanding of other people in their community. 48% neither agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘Listening to local radio has made me understand the perspectives of other people better than I did before’.

In the qualitative phase, one interviewee did recognize the way reporting on local radio spoke to diverse groups, saying “I think they do a lot of diverse reporting, it’s not just about the White community, it’s not just about the Asian community...” (Interviewee 1). However, interviewees tended to feel the community was relatively cohesive, with no major examples of specific cultural groups who remained totally separate and no big issues with social divisions. One interviewee typified the responses, saying “I would describe the local community as pretty together ... there are not many occasions when I feel we’re really divided.” (Interviewee 1) They therefore did not tend to feel there was a huge necessity to better understand those from different cultural groups to themselves. In fact, interviewees tended to focus more on the idea of understanding and empathy more generally, and all mentioned how local radio was excellent at talking about mental health issues and making people aware of the mental health cafes.

## Personal resilience

The final part of the questionnaire specifically focused on respondent’s well-being and the role of local radio listening in this. The results pointed strongly to a correlation between listening to local radio and improved



mental health and well-being. When asked on how many occasions they had felt highly stressed or anxious over the past year, the majority of respondents answered ‘at least once a week’ (39%) or ‘most days’ (23%).

When asked whether listening to local radio helped them feel calmer and helped them feel they were not alone, the responses overwhelming suggested it did. See figures 5 and 6 below.

16.1 ‘Listening to local radio has helped me feel calmer’.

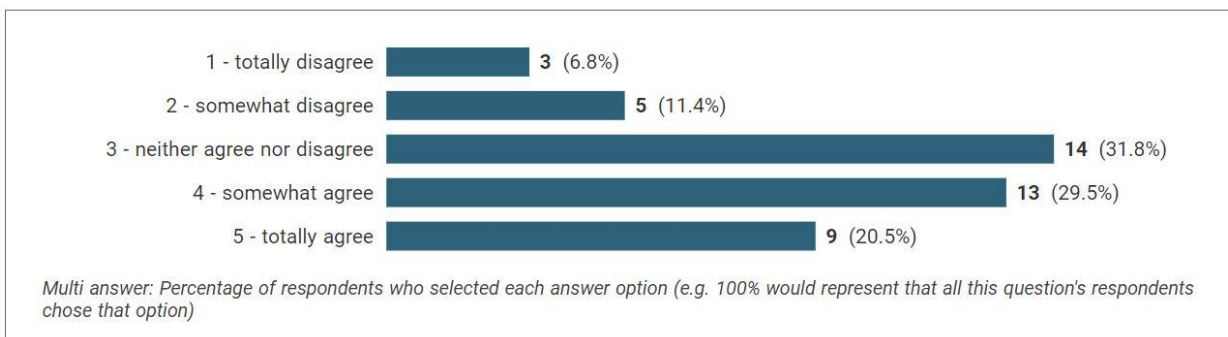


Figure 5: Extent to which respondents agree or disagree that listening to local radio has helped them feel calmer

16.2 ‘Listening to local radio has made me feel I am not alone.’

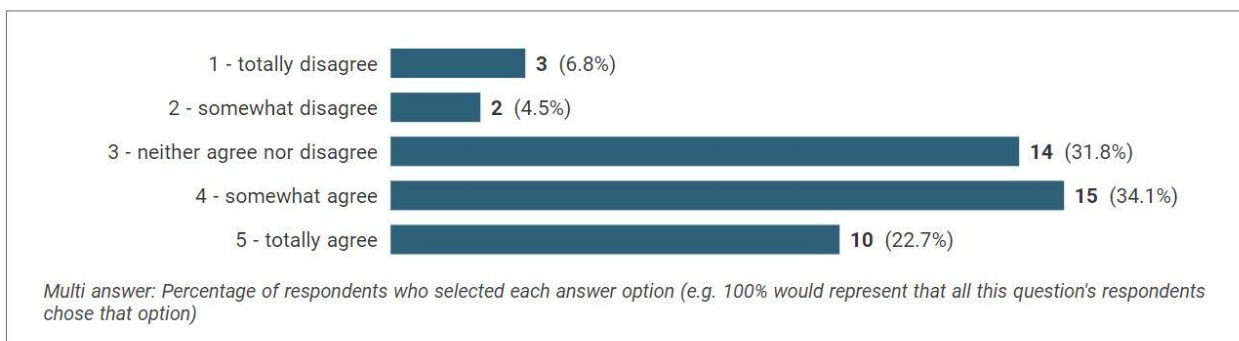


Figure 6: Extent to which respondents agree or disagree that listening to local radio has helped them feel they are not alone

When prompted for further information respondents made comments such as local radio being ‘a welcome distraction and a safe happy place to escape to’, or that it was like ‘a local friend’. This role of local radio in aiding personal resilience was strongly born out in the qualitative evidence gained through the interviews with comments such as, “It’s like having another friend [the radio]... the radio does combat loneliness for people.” (interviewee 3). Others felt local radio was key to combatting stress, saying “... there have been days where you’ve had a really bad day ... and you can go and hide in it [the radio] ... I can just go and forget about the outside world ... whatever’s happening out there ... you can just go and listen to some nice pop songs ... that was a real escape and a real help.” (Interviewee 4)

For everyone, this sense of local radio helping their well-being was heightened due to the social conditions of lockdown. Typical comments were:

“In lockdown you never really felt that you were on your own when you were listening ... You feel connected within this kind of bubble that he’s [the presenter] created ... and lots of the time they’re local people so you might find out about something you didn’t know about.” (Interviewee 4)

“In the first lockdown everybody was frightened ... and it was good at that time that you had local radio saying you know ‘we’re here’”. (Interviewee 2)

However, it is important to note that despite participants across the study agreeing local radio helped their personal resilience, this did not mean they necessarily felt local radio listening made them more able to seek help. 34% neither agreed or disagreed with this statement, and whilst 16% totally agreed, and almost equal percentage – 14% - totally disagreed.

## CONCLUSION

The impact of local radio on the everyday lives of listeners is overwhelmingly positive. There is clear evidence that local radio is uniquely able to combat social isolation in ways that other radio is not. There is also clear evidence that it fosters a greater sense of connection to others and to the community than other radio outputs could do.

Although there is no strong evidence to suggest local radio is able to promote better cultural understanding between groups, there is much evidence to suggest it creates a greater general level of empathy for those experiencing challenges.

There is strong evidence that local radio aids personal resilience and is absolutely key in enabling people to cope with periods of stress, anxiety, and depression. It grounds people and provides them with a sense of normality that less localized radio offerings cannot.

There is no real evidence at the moment that local radio is having an impact on skills or employability. It is not recognized as a place where such opportunities are talked about.

Overall, the combination of local radio’s positive influence in the areas of isolation, connectedness, social cohesion, and personal resilience provides enough evidence to see its important existing role in creating and maintaining community resilience. In addition, the evidence gathered in this study shows the huge potential local radio has to build further upon these positive outcomes and become an invaluable part of everyday life for huge numbers of people.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering that a sizeable group felt local radio helped them find out about events, and that a notable group of listeners are seeking employment, it may well be the case that if employment-related opportunities

were promoted on local radio a sizeable group would appreciate and act upon this. As it stands, participants were generally not aware of many skills or employment opportunities being promoted on local radio.

Considering the clear evidence that local listening aids mental health and well-being yet does not necessarily enable people to feel they can seek help, actions might usefully be considered that address this gap. Local radio might consider how it can best encourage and help people to seek help.

It was apparent that local listeners enjoy the idea of radio-station organized events, even if they do not always want to attend. They also enjoy their online interactions with other listeners. Some of those who were part of the study said they would be more likely to go to events if they already 'knew' others who would be there from having met them online. Therefore, it could be advantageous to create more of a link between the online and offline radio 'worlds' and to facilitate people making new friends.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Thank you for choosing to complete this short questionnaire which will take no more than 10 minutes. Your answers are really important to us and we are grateful for your time.

All your responses will remain anonymous.

By completing this questionnaire you are giving the researcher your informed consent and any information you provide will not be able to be withdrawn after completion.

#### Section 1 - Demographic info

First of all we would like to know a few general details about you...

1. Which age category do you fall into?
2. What gender are you?
3. What income category do you fall into?
4. What is your maximum level of education?
5. Which of the following best represents the sector you work in?
6. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?
7. Which of the following ethnic groups would you say you are from?

Thanks. Now, we would like to know a little bit more about your listening habits...

#### Section 2 – Listening info

1. How frequently in the average week would you say you listen to any given community radio station?
2. Which one?
3. How frequently in the average week would you say you listen to NLive?

4. What is your key motivation for listening? Multiple choice answers will be provided (including an open response for 'other').

That's really helpful – thank you. Next we want to understand what impact, if any, listening to community radio has on the following aspects of your life...

### Section 3 – Connectedness and understanding

On a scale of 1 'totally disagree' to 5 'strongly agree' to what extent do you feel these statements are true for you... [Likert scale statements]

1. 'Listening to local radio has made me feel more connected to my community'.
2. 'Listening to local radio has helped me make new friends/meet new people'.
3. 'Listening to local radio has made me understand the perspectives of other people better than I did before.'
4. 'Listening to local radio has made me more likely to get involved in things happening in my local community.'
5. Listening to local radio has helped me gain information about employment or skills opportunities.'

Thanks very much. We're nearly done! We would just like to understand a bit more about what impact, if any, listening to community radio has on your ability to cope with stress or anxiety...

### Section 4 – Coping with personal stress or anxiety

1. How many occasions on average would you say you have felt highly stressed or anxious over the past year? (Range of answers: most days, at least once a week, at least once a month, etc.)

Now, on a scale of 1 'totally disagree' to 5 'strongly agree' to what extent do you feel these statements are true for you... [Likert scale statements]

2. 'Listening to NLive/community radio has helped me feel calmer'.
3. 'Listening to NLive/community radio has been part of/would be part of making me feel I can seek help.'
4. Are there any other ways in which listening to community radio has helped with any stress you may have felt over the past year? [open-ended answer]

END OF SURVEY

Many thanks indeed for completing this questionnaire. To say thank you we would like to enter you into a prize draw to receive Amazon vouchers. If you would like to be entered please be advised that we will need to ask you your full name and email address in order to send out the vouchers to you and that you will therefore be waiving some rights to anonymity. Please indicate below whether or not you would like to be entered.

*I would/would not like to be entered into the prize draw.*

We would love to follow up your responses by speaking to you online on our secure platform. This would really help us get a fuller picture of how community radio has impacted you. Would you be happy to take part in a very informal interview/conversation? If so, please provide your email. We do not need to know your name in order to interview you, but please be aware that by providing your email you are waiving some rights to anonymity.

*I would/would not be happy to take part in a follow up online interview.*

## Appendix 2: Interview guide

First of all let's talk about the feeling of being 'connected' to other in your local community...

Would you say you feel connected to your community? Why/why not?

What helps/hinders a sense of connectedness to your community for you? Does community radio help (if not already mentioned)?

Would you like to feel more connected?

OK, now, can we talk about the extent to which you feel you understand other groups in your local community...

Would you describe your local community as divided or together or a bit of both? Why/what makes you say that/can you give an example?

What, if anything, has helped you personally understand other people better in your local community?

Do you think local radio can help people understand each other better? What does it already do and what could it do in the future to help with this?

Thanks, OK, we'll move on to talk about your sense of your own ability to cope with stress or anxiety – your emotional resilience...

Do you feel you are a resilient person on the whole or not?

What do you do in times of stress to help you cope?

Does radio listening play a part in helping you cope with stress? If so, what is it about listening that helps?

OK, and finally [only if they gave positive answers about employability in the questionnaire]... a few quick questions about work and skills...

Are there any ways in which NLive has specifically help you find work or change jobs or gain new skills...?

Many thanks indeed. Is there anything you'd like to add that I haven't asked you about?

Thanks. Goodbye.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment>

<sup>iii</sup> RAJAR report 2021