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PRESS RELEASE

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MEP CHICHESTER SUPPORTS NORTH DEVON LOCAL RADIO CAMPAIGN

Members of the Voice FM campaign group have expressed fears to Giles Chichester, Conservative MEP for the South West and Gibraltar, that the passing of the Digital Economy Bill resulting in the transfer of FM to DAB radio broadcasting, will see an end in 2012 of local radio services in North Devon and Torridge. They have requested the MEP to pursue the matter with the Government and OFCOM and obtain assurances there will be a “full and genuine” public consultation.

MEP Chichester has written to Ed Vaizey MP, the Minister for Culture and Communications, about his concerns for the future of local radio in North Devon and Torridge. He notes, in the light of the Localism Bill which emphasises Government policy to support communities, that the maintenance of a genuinely local radio service is important.

A copy of the letter sent by Giles Chichester MEP on 21 May 2011 to Ed Vaizey, the Minister for Culture and Communications is attached.

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For further information contact Press Officer, Tom Maughan
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Conservatives in the European Parliament

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Mr Ed Vaizey MP
Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries
Department for Culture Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street, LONDON SW1Y 5DH

21st May 2011

NORTH DEVON LOCAL RADIO CAMPAIGN

The Voice FM have raised with me their concerns about the future of local radio in their part of Devon. I share their concerns. I am not convinced that the move to Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) has been a success and I have further concerns about the Digital Economy Bill (DEB).

The Voice FM is campaigning for the reintroduction of genuine local radio for N Devon and Torridge. In August last year Heart (owned by Global Radio) ceased the N Devon local broadcast and since then have broadcast a regional service from Exeter for 7 hours a day with the rest of their coverage being broadcast from London. This can not be described as local radio for the N Devon area which is geographically a large part of the county with predominantly rural communities and its own distinct needs for information and for a voice of its own. The Voice FM campaign has tremendous local support from residents, businesses, local authorities and the Police.

The licence to broadcast local radio in the region expires in October 2012 and the renewal process for the FM licence was due to be advertised at the beginning of April, but was at short notice postponed until the beginning of this month. However, I understand that at the very last moment Heart submitted an application for an extension of the existing South Devon digital multiplex to service the North Devon region. The North Devon campaigners have real fears that if this extension is granted and once DAB transmitters are installed across N Devon and the FM service switched off, the opportunity for truly local radio in N Devon will be lost for ever as the N Devon transmitters will only be an extension of those in South Devon.

The latest proposal under consideration is to make coverage of local DAB transmitters equivalent to 90% of existing FM coverage. This is aggregated to 90% on a UK wide basis, so in some local markets it could be comfortably less than 90%. This could well be the case for North Devon and Torridge when you consider the nature and geography of the region. It will mean that some parts of N Devon will not receive any regional digital signals, and will lose not only local commercial radio services but also BBC Radio Devon, which is extremely popular with many people.

I understand there is to be public consultation on this issue and that this closes in July. Please reassure me that OFCOM will listen carefully to the genuine concerns of the N Devon campaigners, residents, authorities and business communities. It surely cannot be the intention of OFCOM to deprive the N Devon and Torridge area of the chance of a genuinely local radio service for all time, especially when one of the current governments key policies is "Localness" and communities and its *Localism Bill*.

GILES CHICHESTER MEP