

# The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of amateur radio in the UK

**F**ollowing the survey that was answered by around 1000 UK radio amateurs, some common themes and stand out items emerged.

The International Amateur Radio Union (IARU) Region 1 is holding a strategic workshop in the autumn to understand: how national societies can attract new radio amateurs; how the IARU can better support the amateur radio community, and its member societies adapt to changes; and what the IARU and member societies can jointly do to support the growth of amateur radio. The RSGB supports this project and is fully engaged with it. The IARU Region 1 consists of nearly 100 member societies across Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Northern Asia.

As part of this work, we asked RSGB Members

and non-Members, whether licenced or not, to contribute their thoughts on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of amateur radio across the UK. We asked for up to three examples in each of the four categories. We received approximately 1000 responses, giving us a total of 12,000 opinions to collate and analyse. We apologise to those that thought that a 30 word limit was too little space to fully express their thoughts, but we believe that readers will understand that we would have had difficulty analysing and summarising lengthier tomes.

Our summary was submitted to the IARU workshop organisers who further summarised all inputs received from the participating member societies. The merged result can be found at <https://www.iaru-r1.org/2021/workshop-future-of-amateur-radio-continues-with-a-session-addressing-strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-and-threats>.

While it is clear there are many internationally shared benefits, concerns and challenges associated with the enjoyment of amateur radio, there are also significant national variations that constrain how many member societies have to operate.

Region 1's findings largely align with our own, indicating the global nature of amateur radio. There were however a few standout items that were not common. One of these was cost of participation that featured in some of the UK responses, however it was clear that in some other countries this was far more significant. These amateurs were trapped between a low national income and punitive import taxation. Another was the extreme difficulty that radio amateurs in some countries have in overcoming the security fears of their government to get permission to operate.

The RSGB is one of the few national societies to experience significant growth in people taking

STRENGTHS		
1	Friendship, Community, Support, Social, Like Minded, Camaraderie	Safe, friendly hobby with little evidence of class and ethnic barriers offering companionship and assistance across the hobby spectrum and beyond into social domains, with a sprinkling of competitiveness. Friendship and camaraderie amongst a technically literate diverse group, with the ability to communicate with like-minded people worldwide and share ideas, always someone to talk to 24 hours a day. Mutual support and assistance, led by a national society with a strong network of radio clubs supporting, promoting and sharing of ideas and developments within the field of amateur radio. A strong sense of community with willingness to help others. Great sense of community, a supportive "can I help you" attitude
2	Learning, Training, Education, Exams, Online, Self Training, Self Learning	RSGB's Online exams have maximised the opportunity and given access to countless numbers of people who were otherwise prevented from accessing exams due to other commitments, letting them take the exams at a time when it's convenient for them, rather than having to do them at a club. Online exams open up the hobby to everyone. Passing the Foundation and the successor exams in order to obtain a licence provides candidates with skills that can often lead to career prospects and greater knowledge in many aspects. Educational hobby that encompasses many technical interests - 'something for everyone'
3	RSGB, National Society, Clubs	A pro-active, internationally respected national society, the RSGB, provides national cohesion, representation with Ofcom, and works tirelessly to protect, support and promote amateur radio. The number of newcomers to the hobby has accelerated in the last year enabling modernisation steps to be introduced to keep clubs alive and grant new opportunities. Members of local Clubs using video conferencing etc still manage to pass on practical advice and assistance to those new to the hobby and those returning to the hobby. Mutual support, assistance, help is always available from other amateurs within a strong network of radio clubs and the RSGB.
4	Technical, Developing, Innovative	A fascinating, technical, challenging hobby at all levels, encouraging innovation, creativity, experimentation, discovery etc so promoting technical understanding and achievement. Technical and scientific based hobby that encourages mental activity. A broad, engaging, practical pastime centred around a technical hub but with a multitude of radiating avenues to engage numerous sub-interests. Continual development of new more effective communication techniques. Experimentation with, and development of, new methods of communication e.g. data modes, digital voice and narrow band digital video. Excellent learning environment often guiding career choices and providing early opportunities in life to develop learning and practical skills.
5	Emergency, Diversity, Communication	Potential to add value to local communities - an 'on demand' service to provide communications support for local communities both for planned activities and emergency events. Provides a backup during disasters and emergency situations and can assist the Emergency services in emergency situations with communication alternatives to national infrastructures. Diversity - it doesn't matter who or what you are. Wide variety of opportunities for operation and experiments. Great variety of interests in amateur radio; topic areas available include HF/DMR/WSPR/Analog/TV/Satellite etc. Non-political communication bridge between the UK and the rest of the world providing inclusive communication transcending social, religious or racial boundaries

up amateur radio and choosing to join us. This has been driven by a combination of our forward looking, wide-ranging strategy, together with our rapid responses to unforeseen circumstances and challenges. These recent successes do not stop us looking for even more ways to grow, and to both support newcomers and established amateurs alike.

Exploring new ways to defend, develop, support, and grow amateur radio by sharing

our experiences and learning from others is key to the evolution of amateur radio in the UK and around the world. We look forward to working together with other IARU Region 1 Member Societies to help shape the future of amateur radio worldwide.

Whilst the survey has given us an excellent starting point, there is considerable work ahead to convert this into a future strategy for IARU

Region 1 and its member societies. We will keep RSGB Members up to date as the project proceeds.

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OPPORTUNITIES		
1	Greater engagement with young people	Greater engagement with young people through schools, college, universities, scouts, guides etc. to demonstrate the importance of wireless communications in the modern world. But also remain attractive to the older generation who might have more time
2	Link with industry, professional bodies and government initiatives	Link with industry, professional bodies and government initiatives, perhaps by offering STEM ambassador support to schools, to help develop an interest and perhaps a career in software or hardware engineering, together with an awareness and interest in wireless communications. Sponsorship of suitable apprenticeships might be considered.
3	RSGB, National Society, Clubs	Take advantage of modern and accessible technologies to demonstrate amateur radio using digital modes, video, SDR and IoT. Build on interests in space communications and link to other modern communications. Links to Hacker and Maker communities
4	The growth of remote working, video conferencing and online learning	The growth of remote working, video conferencing and online learning gives an opportunity for modern amateur radio to grown and develop with those technologies, supporting online training, exams, virtual meetings, webinars and continued development and progression – at local club level too.
5	Take advantage of the greater public awareness generated by the RSGB media campaign	Take advantage of the greater public awareness generated by the RSGB/NHS media campaign and continue to attract even more people to join or return to amateur radio. Retain and expand their interests as technology continues to change, while highlighting the social and quality of life improvements for a diverse community.

WEAKNESSES		
1	Socially and technically conservative old men	The majority of radio amateurs are old men who prefer things the way there were when they were young. There has been a failure to engage with, or attract the interest of, any significant numbers of women, younger people or ethnic minorities in taking part in amateur radio activities.
2	Regulator considered unsupportive:	Neither the regulator or the government is seen by many radio amateurs as supportive of amateur radio. This is particularly the case over their failure to enforce EMC regulations, interference or abuse. The regulator is considered to side with those with deep pockets when it comes to provision of spectrum.
3	EMC blights amateur radio	The continually degrading noise floor as a result of xDSL, consumer devices, and the continual electronic evolution in all its forms, makes receiving amateur radio signals difficult to impossible for many particularly for those in an urban environment. The inaction by the authorities in policing the rising noise floor adds to this frustration.
4	Exam dissatisfaction	There is little common ground in terms of the ease or difficulty of the license exams and their relevance to the radio activities that specific groups within amateur radio which to pursue. There is concern that the multi-level exam system that enables many to gain a licence with less knowledge or training, fosters elitism.
5	Public perception	The public are not aware of amateur radio, and those that are aware hold it in poor regard. No enough is done to promote amateur radio or to change this public perception
6	Financial issues	Amateur radio is (incorrectly) perceived as an activity needing expensive equipment to take part. (see also RSGB threat-7)
7	National society held in poor regard by some	National Society is not seen as adequately representing or supporting the best interests of amateur radio by some respondents. Supporters would obviously not include comments in this section.
8	Antenna restrictions	Local government regulation and neighbour concerns place limits on the ability to erect antennas which reduces the ability of radio amateurs to pursue in their interests. EMF regulation may result in further limitations.

THREATS		
1	Noise/Interference/ Pollution levels/RFI	RFI - strong concerns on Spectrum pollution (and rising noise floor) from general electronic equipment, DSL, Solar, LEDs, PSUs etc)
2	Regulators (national and local)	Over-regulation (such as EMF/ICNIRP), and lack of regulatory support for amateur matters, enforcement, antenna planning permissions. Very poor Ofcom image amongst replies, but also strong antenna-related concerns re local government Planning Officers
3	Spectrum Loss	Loss of spectrum allocations due to commercial pressures, and strong concerns on low VHF/UHF+ usage/occupancy
4	Age/Demographics/ diversity	Ageing hobby, poor diversity (inc by youth, women)
5	Internal Amateur issues	Own goals from FT8/Digital modes, Abuse, Exams, Apathy
6	External Amateur Issues	Poor presence in mainstream public media, old-fashioned image/terminology of amateur radio, poor appeal to youngsters
7	Non-threats	Equipment Costs (are not a barrier to entry), Brexit