

**Minutes of the 90th meeting of
the Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland
held hybrid (at Landmark House, Belfast and via Microsoft Teams)
on Tuesday 5th December 2023**

Present

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| Carrie Matchett | ACNI Chair |
| Aodhan O'Donnell | ACNI Member |
| Colm Murphy | ACNI Member |
| Jackie Neill | ACNI Member |
| Michael Wilson | ACNI Member |
| Paul Wickens | ACNI Member |
| Karen Baxter | Ofcom Board Member for Northern Ireland (by Teams) |
| Rick Hill | Chair & NI Member of Communications Consumer Panel |

In attendance

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| Jonathan Rose | Northern Ireland Director |
| Judith Carville | Regulatory Affairs Manager |
| James Stinson | Regulatory Affairs Manager |
| Bimpe Archer | Regulatory Affairs Associate |
| Jane Hillis | Regulatory Affairs Advisor |
| Seemaab Naseem | NextGen NED observer |
| Briony Robinson | Policy & Public Affairs Team, Channel 4 (Item 9 only) |
| Shaminder Nahal | Head of Specialist Factual Commissioning, Channel 4 (Item 9 only, by Teams) |
| Sam Westwood | Policy & Public Affairs Team, Channel 4 (Item 9 only, by Teams) |
| Tom Walker | Principle, Content Policy (Item 10 only, by Teams) |
| Natalie Fox | Content Policy Advisors & Managers (Item 10 only, by Teams) |
| Flora Pringle-Paterson | Senior Policy Manager (Item 10 only, by Teams) |
| Chia Seiler | Public Policy Principle (Item 11 only, Teams) |

Apologies

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| Maria McCann | Content Board Member for Northern Ireland |
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Item 1: Welcome, apologies and declaration of Members' Interests

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, particularly Seemaab Naseem who was attending her last meeting as a NextGen NED observer.
2. Apologies were received from Maria McCann.
3. Members did not have any interests to declare.

Item 2: Minutes of the 89th meeting held on 10th October 2023 and Actions

4. The Minutes of the 89th meeting were approved.
5. Members noted the actions table from the previous meeting and agreed all actions apart from the summary of the October SITCOM meeting which would be distributed when finalised.
6. VOIP update – An oral update was given to committee members along with information in the Northern Ireland Director's Report. There was discussion around how best to engage with local government.
7. Members asked for further information on Ofcom's forthcoming review of local media.

Item 3: Interim Committee Business & Issues since last meeting

8. The Chair invited updates from the subgroups on connectivity and broadcasting:
9. Broadcasting
10. Michael Wilson reported on behalf of the broadcasting subgroup:
11. Future of TV Distribution: The subgroup had met with the project team to discuss this consultation and ACNI would soon be submitting its advice.
12. BBC NI TV Commissioning: The subgroup had met with Eddie Doyle, Head of Content Production for BBC Northern Ireland, to discuss the approach and challenges for BBC NI TV commissioning on local and network channels as well as on BBC iPlayer.
13. The Committee noted the recent departure of Bauer's Northern Ireland manager and the loss of his role.
14. Belfast Media Festival: Several members had attended the festival in November and had noted that BBC and Channel 4 had both made commitments to commissioning from NI.
15. Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC: The Committee discussed how perceptions of local representation and public value would develop in light of the move towards more co-commissions with network and fewer local 'opts'.
16. Members expressed concern over the increasing centralisation in all aspects of broadcasting.
17. Connectivity
18. The newly formed connectivity subgroup will meet late this year/early next year to set out its workplan for 2024 and will use Ofcom's Plan of Work 2024/2025 as a basis. Judith Carville will assist the subgroup.
19. Chairs and Other business
20. Next Generation NED: The Chair noted that a new Next Generation NED observer would join the Committee in the New Year and asked for a volunteer mentor for among Committee members.
21. Communications Consumer Panel: The Chair attended recent CCP hubs both of which focused on social tariffs.
22. Annual Reviews: Individual reviews for Committee members will be diarised before the end of the financial year.

Item 4: Committee Discussion on Agenda items

23. Members discussed key items to raise in its discussions with Channel 4 and Ofcom's Channel 4 relicensing team in items 9 and 10.

Item 5: Board & Content Board update from Northern Ireland Member

24. Board Update: The Board member reported on the Board's recent meeting in the Cardiff office in November, and highlighted several items discussed, including: the first two major consultations on online safety (Guidance for service providers publishing pornographic content & Protecting people from illegal harms online); a summit on how we approach AI globally; Mid contract price rises, the Media Bill and Age Verification.
25. Content Board Update on behalf of Maria McCann: A number of topics discussed at the most recent meeting were highlighted, including the appointment of new Group Director for Broadcasting & Media, Cristina Nicolotti, who will be joining the Content Board, the vacancy for a non-executive Content Board member with particular expertise in online safety, impartiality investigations, the number of complaints relating to the Israel/Gaza coverage and the decline in linear viewing.
26. There was some discussion among the Committee on the progress of the Media Bill and whether it would get Royal Assent in the near future.
27. Members discussed possible implications of the removal of the restriction on Channel 4 making its own programmes.
28. The Committee discussed the new economic growth duty and the impact this might have on Ofcom decision-making, noting the balance between economic growth and other consumer interests and outcomes.

Item 6: Mobile Roaming Update

29. Judith Carville gave an update on behalf of the project team, noting that 20 consultation responses had been received, all of which were published on Ofcom's website. The majority of responses to the proposal had been positive.
30. The Committee discussed a respondent's suggestion that roaming should reflect the Common Travel Area, and noted that Ofcom had no powers to enforce this.
31. Members discussed roaming text alerts, agreeing too many notifications was better than too few and that they need to be clear, concise and include more detail.
32. There was some discussion around providers' responsibilities when consumers want to complain, appeal or have roaming charges investigated. Judith advised that Ofcom cannot dictate how these situations should be handled but they do expect providers to have a clear process for complaints.
33. The Mobile Roaming team is assessing all the consultation responses with the aim of publishing a statement in March 2024.

Item 7: Communications Consumer Panel Update

34. Rick Hill introduced his paper and noted the Panel's continued focus on a few areas of concern including:
- Social tariffs & Affordability – While the CCP is continuing to promote social tariffs, the use & awareness is very low, particularly amongst young people. The Panel is carrying out research in this area, which the Committee will be interested to see.
 - Awareness of migration to VOIP – the CCP is trying to increase awareness as well as carrying out surveys to gain consumers' opinions.

- Postal USO – Rick advised the Committee of helpful research on the delivery of letters & parcels conducted for Consumer Scotland.

35. The Committee agreed to support the priorities in the CCP's strategic plan for 2023/24.

36. Rick advised the Committee that his term in the CCP is coming to an end and interviews have been held for his replacement.

37. The Chair thanked Rick for the report and his substantial contribution across a wide range of ACNI work throughout his term. The Committee agreed that it was very beneficial to have CCP working with Ofcom and contributing to the Committee's work.

Item 8: Online Safety Report

38. Bimpe Archer introduced her paper and highlighted the following:

- Royal Assent was granted to the Online Safety Bill on Thursday 26th October.
- Ofcom's first online safety consultation, regarding illegal harms, has been published and is open until late February.
- A consultation on the Protection of Children will be published in late Spring.

39. The Committee agreed to receive a briefing on the first consultation with a view to making a submission.

40. The Committee noted the importance of continued stakeholder engagement on NI-specific and UK-wide issues and agreed to provide advice on the range of organisations with whom Ofcom is engaging in Northern Ireland.

Item 9: Channel 4

41. The Chair welcomed the Channel 4 guests to the Committee who gave a brief presentation on Channel 4's work and engagement in Northern Ireland over the past year, and a look ahead to future commitments to Northern Ireland.

42. The Committee noted the changing context in which Channel 4 is operating, in relation to the Media Bill and the relicensing process.

43. The Committee recognised Channel 4's contribution to NI through commissioning spend and other initiatives such as 4Skills. However, members were disappointed that NI did not receive, by some margin, its fair share of the 9% of commissioning hours and spend allocated to the devolved Nations. The Committee would like to see quotas established for each devolved Nation to bring this about.

44. Channel 4 representatives expressed the view that Nation-specific quotas can be difficult to deliver and, at times, counterproductive – but assured the Committee that they were committed to NI receiving its fair share of commissioning and other investments in the creative economy.

45. There was discussion about the poor audience perceptions of 'programmes which feature my country and region' in NI. The Committee noted that local representation in content is especially valued in NI, across the public service broadcasters, and often a driver of consumption. It was further noted that audience reach for Channel 4 is notably lower than the UK as a whole. Members thought that there was more scope for cultural representation through locally commissioned productions and also by including more NI faces and voices in major strands such as Gogglebox and Bake Off.

46. The Channel 4 representatives said they recognised the power of connecting with audiences this way and would like to improve that for NI.

47. There was discussion about the lack of a government in NI and whether this placed NI at a disadvantage compared with other devolved Nations in seeking investment and

development. The Channel 4 representatives noted the positive advocacy from NI Screen and their continued ability to engage with elected representatives.

48. There was discussion about Channel 4's important work in training and mentoring for those starting out in the production sector.
49. Members were interested in ways to attract younger viewers in NI through Channel 4's digital offering. They noted the need to continue to serve and include linear audiences, especially those who, for various reasons, were less ready to move to on demand digital services.
50. The Chair thanked the representatives from Channel 4 for the briefing and discussion. She noted the Committee's support for the Corporation's mission and the creative ways in which it is delivered, whilst underlining the importance of NI receiving its fair share of commissioning spend and other investment and achieving strong outcomes in terms of audience reach and cultural representation.

Item 10: Channel 4 Relicensing

51. The Chair welcomed the project team who noted the impending publication of a consultation on the relicensing of Channel 4.
52. There was discussion around Channel 4's current Out of England production quota. Committee members considered 9% to be too low and were concerned that NI did not get its fair share of the allocation given its share of the population and the quality of the production sector in Northern Ireland. Committee members queried why the quota could not be split by Nation for Channel 4 like it has been for the BBC and there was a discussion around the implications of that. The Committee advised they would like to understand more around Ofcom's thinking on this issue and asked the team to provide further information.
53. The Committee noted that, as well as lower investment in NI there were poorer portrayal scores and lower audience reach than other parts of the UK. With this in mind, it was important that relicensing ensured that all audiences were served, including those in NI.
54. The Chair thanked the project team for the important work they are doing and advised that the Committee would remain engaged throughout the relicensing process.

Item 11: Public Policy Update

55. The Chair welcomed Chia Seller. Chia introduced the Public Policy update paper.
56. The Committee noted that the UK Government was expected to publish its response to the consultation on its white paper on implementing a pro-innovation approach to AI regulation by the end of 2023.
57. The Committee noted Ofcom's work with its DRCF partners to pilot an 'AI & Digital Hub'. This new multi-regulator service will support innovators by providing support for firms who raise questions with the service that cross multiple regulatory remits. The pilot is expected to run for 12 months, and its launch is planned for Spring 2024. Chia agreed to provide further information.

Item 12: Northern Ireland Directors Report

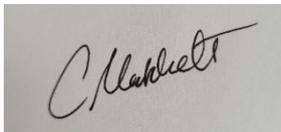
58. Jonathan Rose introduced his paper report to the Committee.
59. The Committee discussed the well-publicised developments at RTÉ in recent months and noted that the next biannual meeting of the Television Broadcasters in Ireland Group was due to be held early next year.

Item 13: Any other Business

60. On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked Seemaab for her contribution to the ACNI meetings over 2023 and wished her well for the future. She also thanked Michael Wilson for all his work as Seemaab's mentor.
61. The Chair thanked Committee members for all their work across the year, bringing a diversity of knowledge and experience to bear on Ofcom's work. She also expressed appreciation for the expertise and support provided by the Ofcom NI team.
62. She closed the meeting with season's greetings to all.

Date and Time of Next Meeting

63. The next scheduled Committee meeting will be held on Thursday 7th March 2024.

Approved:**Date:** 7th March 2023