

Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review Phase One: The Digital Opportunity

Submission from Comunn na Gàidhlig

Comunn na Gàidhlig (CnaG) welcomes the opportunity to have input into Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review. As the Gaelic development agency with a remit to promote the Gaelic language and culture our comments will be restricted to the issues which we feel are relevant to Gaelic broadcasting.

Over many years CnaG, along with many other Gaelic organisations, have campaigned for the establishment of a dedicated Gaelic Service and have supported the need for the Gaelic Media Service to be given powers to run such a channel with adequate levels of funding to make such a Service viable and sustaining and we are therefore delighted that this new Service will be coming on-stream in the coming months. We do however have serious concerns that the majority of Gaelic television programme audiences are going to be denied the opportunity to access the new Service as it will not be delivered on Freeview until a further review is carried out before the digital switchover in 2010. This is going to have a massive impact on audience numbers and we urge Ofcom to bring pressure to bear on the BBC Trust to ensure that the new Service is carried on Freeview. We understand there is a due process the BBC must go through to assess the value of the new Service being carried by Freeview, but we welcome the support of Ofcom and the DCMS for the new Gaelic Service being carried on Freeview.

CnaG remains convinced of the continuing importance and relevance of quality public service broadcasting, particularly and crucially for cultural, social and democratic reasons. This is particularly important in terms of minority languages such as Gaelic to help ensure a sustainable future for the Gaelic-speaking community. It would appear to CnaG that the new Gaelic Digital Service, to be launched in autumn this year, has all the hallmarks of public service broadcasting but has not been accorded the status of PSB. CnaG would urge Ofcom to examine this anomaly as the designation of the new Gaelic Service as a PSB would enable the Service to be carried on all platforms, including Freeview.

CnaG is conscious that the Scottish Broadcasting Commission is taking place parallel to the Ofcom Review and indeed CnaG has met with the Commission at one of its public meetings. It was interesting to learn that the one television programme which came up time and time again, in terms of a quality television programme was *Eòrpa*, which is produced by the BBC and funded by the Gaelic Media Service. With audience figures far in excess of the recorded number of Gaelic-speakers in Scotland, this is ample evidence that high quality Gaelic programmes will attract audiences from non-Gaelic speaking viewers. This is notable considering the number of quality programmes that are produced for television and a magnificent tribute to the work of both the Gaelic Media Service and the BBC. Looking at the way forward, it is vital that quality is not compromised.

Looking at the various options proposed by Ofcom in the Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, CnaG can see many merits in them all but also weaknesses in them all. In deciding the way forward a number of issues must be borne in mind – amongst these, we do not believe that creating a monopoly situation would be to the benefit of the audiences, we believe that competition is good to ensure both high quality and also value for money. Also, it would appear to us that in some of the models proposed, there could be a danger that the current funding available for the delivery of the Gaelic Service could be subsumed and end up being spent on other programming. The funding currently available for delivering the new Gaelic Service must be protected, and indeed increased to enable a full Service to be delivered. As technology continues to advance at an ever increasing rate, CnaG believes that with appropriate government interventions and adequate financial support, there are huge opportunities for the new Gaelic Service to play a very important role in raising the profile of the language and complementing initiatives to secure its future in terms of education, the arts, and social and economic development.

18 June 2008