

Phase 1 of Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review

Consultation response from Dumfries and Galloway Council

The sections below refer to the sections in the Ofcom consultation document. The consultation asks specific questions which are listed below along with responses.

Section 3. How well are the public service broadcasters delivering public purposes?

i) Do you agree with Ofcom's assessment that television continues to have an essential role in delivering the purposes of public service broadcasting?

Television retains the capability of entertaining, informing and educating and the public look to it as a source of news and information whether national, local or regional. The public service broadcasters go a long way towards fulfilling public service purposes as defined by Ofcom, but there are gaps, particularly in local news.

Ofcom says that the needs of nations and regions audiences are not being fully met, so we look to Ofcom to try and address this gap when they look at the licensing and funding system for the future.

ii) Do you agree that UK-originated output is fundamental to the delivery of public service broadcasting purposes?

Yes, in order to fulfil its public purposes television must reflect a community's culture, whether that is at local, regional or national level.

Section 4. The changing market environment

i) Do you agree with Ofcom's conclusions about the way that other digital channels and interactive media contribute towards the public purposes?

Although the use of the internet has become more widespread, the take up of the internet in Scotland was still only 57% in May 2007 (Ofcom's Communications Market Report). According to the Scottish Broadcasting Commission's latest survey, television is still the main source of information on many topics. The internet comes in behind the TV, radio and newspapers and is at only 9% for local news.

The BBC website is certainly well used and respected, but we should expect no less from our licence fee custodians. The regional news feature is particularly useful because the BBC employs reporters who are based within Dumfries and Galloway.

ITV also publishes local news on its website, but we can expect that to reduce should ITV's restructure come about. So we cannot assume that commercial interactive and digital media that provide information which meets public purposes will continue to do so without some external pressure, either through subsidies or via a licensing regime.

Section 5. Prospects for the future delivery of public service content

i) Do you agree with Ofcom's assessment of the implications of different economic scenarios for the UK TV market for the future prospects for delivery of the public purposes?

It is impossible to say yes or no to this statement, based on research which cannot predict a definite outcome. The only certainty appears to be that the current public service broadcasters' share of the TV audience will decline. This seems to have been driven by a multi-channel world which will be shared by everyone in Dumfries and Galloway from 2009 and by the whole UK from 2012.

Once we are all used to having all this choice though, perhaps even that prediction may not be fulfilled. Familiarity with the shopping and quiz channels may well breed contempt and we will be driven back to looking for the quality programmes we expect from the PSB channels. It may be that we watch them at different times and in different places and via different media, but watch them we will. We also need to remember that the main five channels still account for the majority of viewing (OFCOM document on Plurality).

It would be interesting to ask the question why people are watching less PSB TV, particularly on the commercial channels - can it only be that we have more choice or is there more to it? ITV was successful at the last PSB review in arguing for a lowering of its responsibilities with respect to local programming - what if this has alienated viewers further and assisted the viewing decline? Viewers say they want more information on their region from the main channels, instead of which we are giving them less.

It appears that we still need quotas to ensure that broadcasters provide us with a decent amount of news and local programming otherwise we will have an audience that is completely disengaged from current affairs. This cannot be good for the political knowledge of the general public and therefore for true engagement in the democratic process.

ii) Do you agree with Ofcom's analysis of the costs and benefits of PSB status?

Section 6. Meeting audience needs in a digital age

i) Do you agree with Ofcom's vision for public service content?

Yes, though it could be useful to add something about a 'trusted source of news'.

ii) How important are plurality and competition for quality in delivering the purposes of public service broadcasting, and in what areas?

Plurality is particularly important in news programming, whether local, regional or national. It is important to have more than one view, particularly for news reporting.

In Dumfries and Galloway there is one locally based commercial radio station (not audible in the east of the region), one based in Carlisle (outwith the region), a short opt out on BBC Radio Scotland and a half hour 6pm TV programme which covers the whole of the Border TV region. If Dumfries and Galloway features on this programme for more than a few minutes a day or on BBC Reporting Scotland with any frequency it would be unusual. Border TV's Lookaround and news output is generally the only place on television where residents can expect to find out something about what's going on in their region.

So as far as regional news is concerned, little plurality exists in Dumfries and Galloway at present. At Scottish level, those receiving transmissions from the Caldbeck transmitter do not receive STV, so the only Scottish TV news comes from BBC Reporting Scotland. An opportunity to receive a separate, Scottish channel as mooted during the SBC's discussions, would certainly contribute to plurality on a Scottish level.

One writer in OFCOM's, latest paper defined plurality as three things - quality, choice and efficiency. If we cannot have a choice of regional TV news from either the BBC or ITV - what alternative is there? It surely cannot be assumed that Dumfries and Galloway is part of the same region as Newcastle upon Tyne? Even if the option were to broadcast STV to Dumfries and Galloway, surely this counts as 'national' news. Dumfries and Galloway Council would prefer to retain the Border TV region as it is and does not agree with it being subsumed into either Tyne Tees or STV.

Local news as opposed to regional news or national news appears to have been skipped over by this PSB review -the research questions were directed at whether respondents wanted to see more local news on national channels as opposed to specific local channels.

There is an opportunity to have local TV with the release of spectrum from digital television switchover - this would certainly contribute to plurality as far as local news is concerned. The geographical, interleaved spectrum (suitable for local TV) has been identified for 25 out of 80 transmitters across the UK, yet the idea that this spectrum could be reserved for public service broadcasting appears to have been ruled out by OFCOM.

Whilst acquiring spectrum is not the sole issue for very local TV news channels, it adds an extra barrier to something which is in its infancy and needs a hand in taking its first steps forwards. The recent research done for the Scottish Broadcasting Commission looked at the percentage of residents interested in receiving local Scottish news. In Scotland overall 37% are very interested in receiving local Scottish news. The proportion for the South of Scotland was higher than any other part of the country at 49%. So we do

have an appetite here for local news. Residents in the South were most interested in news about their region (74%)' but in areas where regional news is good, more expressed a wish to find out about their city/town/village.

iii) In maximising reach and impact of public service content in the future, what roles can different platforms and services play?

Different platforms are undoubtedly useful for different reasons, the internet for discrete pieces of information, through a mobile device whilst travelling or perhaps to download a programme we have missed.

We still, however, sit down in front of the TV to watch the latest news (the very latest on rolling news programmes) or to relax and be entertained. The internet still comes much lower down the list, behind TV and newspapers, as a source of different types of news. For news, we need to be able to trust that the report is being delivered in a measured and impartial way.

It is important that television reflects a culture back to itself, to assist in a sense of identity and help develop ideas of a community. Local and regional and national TV (and radio) programmes each develop a part of that identity. The internet can develop networks, but these tend to be communities of interest and may not necessarily be delivering PSB purposes.

iv) Do you agree that the existing model for delivering public service broadcasting will not be sufficient to meet changing needs in future?

Section 7. Future models for funding and providing public service content

i) What are your views of the high-level options for funding public service broadcasting in future?

ii) Are the proposed tests of effectiveness for future models for public service broadcasting the right ones?

iii) Of the four possible models for long term delivery of public service content, which, if any, do you consider the most appropriate and why? Are there any alternative models, or combination of models that could be more appropriate, and why?

The BBC should retain a core role in delivering public service broadcasting whichever model is arrived at, particularly as a source of impartial news. However, other national, regional and possibly in the future local channels could have a PSB role and deliver plurality.

Section 8. Options for the commercial PSBs

i) What do you think is the appropriate public service role for Channel 4 in the short, medium and long term? What do you think of Channel 4's proposed vision?

ii) Which of the options set out for the commercial PSBs do you favour?

Section 9. Scenarios for the UK's nations, regions and localities

i) To what extent do you agree with Ofcom's assessment of the likely future long term issues as they apply to the nations, regions and localities of the UK?

ii) Which model(s) do you think will be most appropriate in each of the nations and in the English regions in the long term, and why?

It would be interesting to see a Scottish channel develop along the lines suggested by the Scottish Broadcasting Commission -the recent research carried out for SBC was obviously leaning towards this idea and could come to fruition if it were a network of linked local channels.

iii) What are your views on short/medium-term issues referred to, including the out-of-London network production quotas?

iv) What are your initial views on the Preliminary Options set out relation to ITV plc's regional news proposal? (Please note that Ofcom will put forward firm options on these issues, and consult also on ITV plc's regional news proposal, in phase 2 of this Review.)

Given the importance of the plurality of new coverage mentioned in section 6, ITV's proposed options will reduce the regional news coverage even further and local TV news on the commercial channels will be close to zero. Border TV's share of the audience, for the 5 main channels, at the time of the 6pm Lookaround programme is one of the highest amongst the ITV regions at 25%. This reflects the interest local people have in finding out about their region. Truly local broadcast news does not exist in the Dumfries and Galloway region except on radio with some on the web. Yet TV and newspapers are the main source of news for the Scottish people.

Reasonable capacity broadband is available in some parts of the region, but PC ownership is not high. So there will be many people who do not have the option of getting broadcast news this way.

Dumfries and Galloway Council does not approve of reducing TV news coverage to the region any further and would prefer to retain the coverage given by Border TV at present. As mentioned in a previous section, the Council does not wish to see Border TV subsumed into Tyne Tees, nor do we prefer an option which has been mooted by SMG, that of linking with STV. Local people wish to see their views and culture represented in the media, helping to develop a strong sense of community

Section 10. Prospects for children's programming

i) Do you agree with our assessment of the possible short term options available relating to children's programming; are there any other options available?

Section 11. Timetable for implementing a new model

i) Do you agree that new legislation will need to be in place by 2011 in order to ensure continued delivery of the public purposes in the medium and long term?