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Dear Kevin,

You wrote to us recently about our regional news and current affairs output, in particular some changes we are making to how we work in BBC England.

The BBC remains fully committed to providing programmes and content of a regional or national interest across TV, Radio and Online. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced just how important our nations and regions services are and how much our audiences value them. Local radio has been a lifeline to many people during the lockdown and our regional TV news bulletins have been watched by a quarter of the population of England on a daily basis.

None of the changes we are planning to make to our services in England will undermine this commitment. We will still employ 2,250 people in BBC England including more journalists than any other organisation. We will still have newsrooms in more locations across England than any other broadcaster or regional news provider. We will still provide 15 live regional news services on TV, with bulletins throughout the day from breakfast until 22:30. Our 18:30 local TV bulletin is the most watched programme on television. We will still have 39 local radio stations across England delivering around 34,000 hours of news each year. We have recently announced that – as part of our wider plan to inform, educate and entertain through continuing unprecedented times for the UK – we will go even further and deliver extra temporary local radio content for Bradford, Wolverhampton and Sunderland focussing on local news and information. Each local TV and Radio station will continue to have a dedicated political reporter.

BBC News online will continue to offer a range and depth of regional news not widely available from other United Kingdom news providers. Since April 2020 we have published over 12,000 stories on BBC News Online from the English Regions. As part of the changes we are making we will decentralise editorial decisions to local news teams rather than publish everything from Birmingham as we currently do. This will allow us to publish stories more quickly, as well as ensuring that editorial decisions are taken locally, as they should be for local news. We are also looking to share more stories and content across TV, radio and online platforms to make the best use of the great people we have working in our newsrooms across the whole of England. All of this will continue to work alongside the important work we do through our local news partnerships where we will continue to fund 150 local democracy reporters to cover councils and other public services on behalf of the BBC and local news organisations, as well as sharing content and resources.

The major change to programming that will result from these changes will be a refresh of our peak-time current affairs offer on BBC One in England. Our new current affairs programme will be more contemporary and focused than *Inside Out* and more relevant to our audiences. This refresh is long overdue – it is unusual to keep the same format on air for nearly twenty years without making editorial changes. We keep all programmes under review and continually evaluate the extent to which they deliver for our audiences using the data we gather. This includes viewing figures for each episode, as well as data on how well each episode resonates with our audiences. We can compare the performance of different titles over time, as well as against other relevant programmes in the same timeslot. In the case of *Inside Out* this data clearly shows that the current format no longer has the same impact as it did when we first commissioned it. Its audience has been in decline for the past ten years. Fewer and fewer people across England are tuning in to each episode and the format now underperforms against other titles in the same slot on BBC One.

We are still developing the new format – and do not yet have a working title – but it is our intention that it will resonate more with a C2DE audience and provide more in-depth and higher quality documentaries and investigations. We can achieve this – while still achieving our necessary saving targets – by making six regional variations rather than 11, reducing the number of production hubs from 11 to six, centralising overall editorial oversight. This will allow us to invest more in each story and programme, while ensuring that they are still local and relevant to our audiences across England.

This new programme will also continue to be one small but important part of how we deliver high-quality investigative journalism in England, alongside our other programmes and services across TV, Radio and Online. Like all of our programmes we will continue to keep it under review and track its performance, and we will continue to listen to our audiences each time we take a decision on whether to recommission.

While during the peak of COVID-19 our Sunday political programmes joined up as a single “Politics England” programme, as of 13 September all 11 regional versions of *Sunday Politics* are now back on air. Given their importance we are planning an editorial review to make sure they have the greatest possible impact and reach.

While we are confident that our continued news and political programmes and our new current affairs format will continue to deliver for our audiences, we want to highlight that it is only one small part of how we deliver the first and fourth public purposes. The BBC News Channel is required by Ofcom’s operating licence to provide more local news than other comparable services. In the findings of your 2019 review of our network news output you specifically noted its relevance to our delivery of public purpose four and how well we serve audiences across the UK. News and current affairs feature strongly in BBC Network radio, including Salford-based BBC Radio 5 Live. Beyond news, over 50% of our spend on originations is now outside of London, nearly 30% of which is in the English regions. Across factual, drama, sport and children’s we commission and produce a wide range of programmes from across the UK that resonate with audiences nationally as well as regionally. Next year, we will increase the BBC England budget for network co-commissions by 50%. Programmes like *Angels of the North* are an increasingly important part of our BBC England strategy to ensure we reflect the whole of the England in our programming.

In making these changes we will continue to deliver against all of our operating licence requirements, including the quotas that Ofcom has set for the BBC on programmes of national and regional interest. These requirements have now been considered by Ofcom three times since Ofcom became the BBC's regulator in 2017. Ofcom originally set these in 2017 with its first operating licence for the BBC – some of these were largely a continuation of the BBC Trust service licence requirements, but others were new Ofcom requirements for programmes of national and regional interest. Ofcom amended these conditions to reflect the hours of BBC Two Scotland opts moving across to the new BBC Scotland Channel and made no further changes. In 2019 Ofcom concluded a review of regional production, triggered in part by Ofcom's new regulatory framework for the BBC.

We agree with Ofcom that our regional news and current affairs services are highly valued by our audiences. However it is right that we maximise efficiency, and every part of the BBC is being asked to make savings. The savings we require from Nations and Regions are proportionally the lowest across the main BBC Divisions, and other BBC Divisions are also further ahead in realising these necessary efficiencies.

These savings do not impact our ability to deliver the quotas set out in Ofcom's operating licence. We are also confident that we will continue to serve all of our audiences across the UK with the national, regional and local services that they rightly expect and value.

Yours sincerely,

Clare Sumner