

Clare Sumner
BBC
New Broadcasting House
Portland Place
London
W1A 1AA

Kevin Bakhurst
Group Director
Content & Media Policy Group and
Executive Member, Ofcom Board

17 August 2020

Dear Clare,

The BBC's regional news and current affairs

I am writing following the announcement of changes relating to the delivery of regional news and current affairs in England announced by the BBC on 2 July 2020 and 15 July, the first of which, Helen Thomas briefed to us on 1 July. We understand that these changes are driven by a requirement for £25m p.a. savings in BBC England.

Whilst the changes did not directly impact on any specific conditions within the Operating Licence, we are concerned that the scale of the reported changes could reduce the BBC's ability to deliver its mission and public purposes - specifically, delivery of Public Purpose 1 of providing impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them, and Public Purpose 4: to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions. Significant concerns have been raised with us by a number of stakeholders.

In setting the BBC's Operating Licence, we were clear that the BBC should seek to maintain its coverage of regional themes and stories within its news, current affairs and factual programming, to enable audiences to develop a broad understanding of what is happening locally and regionally.

When we undertook a review of the BBC's news and current affairs output last year, audiences told us that they want to see more news about their communities, reported by people with a deeper understanding of the area; this was a particular issue for audiences from minority ethnic backgrounds. There was also a consistent message from viewers outside London, who thought the BBC could improve how it reflected and reported on their lives. In concluding that review, we said, specifically, that the BBC should better represent the whole of the UK with authentic news and current affairs content that feels relevant and engaging to all audiences.

It is not for Ofcom to comment on the BBC's decisions about job cuts, or the cancellation of specific programme titles. This is rightly reserved for the BBC, but in accordance with the duties given to Ofcom under the Charter, we need to know how the BBC will continue to ensure that audiences in all of the UK are served by high quality local and regional news. The BBC's annual plan did not

contain specific detail on the changes that it has subsequently proposed, beyond reference to a general need to 'extract more value for local audiences at less cost'. No detail was given for audiences about what this meant for service delivery. Likewise, the Plan indicates that the BBC expects to propose changes to local radio and TV services that are likely to require changes to the Operating Licence but without detail as to what this means for audiences and interested stakeholders.

We understand that the BBC's financial context means that cuts to services will be made for budgetary reasons, and members of your team are talking to us about the BBC's current financial position tomorrow. Following this, given the concerns that we have about the potential impact to audiences of incremental reductions to regional news and current affairs, we would like, by the end of September 2020, the BBC to set out in writing, and then talk us through:

- more detail of the basis on which these decisions around regional news and current affairs have been made, including how the BBC has reached this decision in the context of broader cuts to services;
- how the BBC will ensure that it maintains a high quality local and regional news and current affairs offer in accordance with Public Purpose 1 and Public Purpose 4 with this level of budget cuts;
- how the BBC will monitor the impact of these changes to the delivery for audiences in England, and how that will feed back into its ongoing strategy;
- given the broader financial challenge that the BBC is facing, a strategic plan for the delivery of the mission and public purposes within a reduced funding envelope.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ke: Bakhurst". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The name "Ke" is followed by a colon and then "Bakhurst". There is a small dot at the end of the signature.

Kevin Bakhurst