

Audience Council England: Report to the BBC Trust 2007/08

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Executive Summary

Council Business

- There has been a welcome new focus during the year, widening Council's deliberations to encompass network services and Trust business. More evidence of impact would reassure the Council of the value of its work.
- Closer links have been developed with audiences in England's diverse communities, giving the Council new insights and adding value to the work of the Trust.

Performance against Public Purposes

- The Council commends the content and sense of identity in much of BBC English Regions output which builds public value and engages strongly with audiences.
- Local Radio's service to local communities and an under-served demographic is worthy of wider recognition and a strong base for the BBC Local proposition.

Audience Engagement

- Audience engagement had brought a new depth to council discussions and emphasised to members the importance of hearing varying views rather than seeking a consensus.

Priorities for the year ahead

- The amount of network commissioning and production in England to encompass out-of-London activity and the work of the three network production centres will continue to be a priority for the Council, contributing to representation of the regions.
- A major theme will be local accountability and ensuring licence fee payers' interests and concerns are championed as part of the Ofcom Public Service Broadcasting Review and Trust business.
- The BBC's role in *Sustaining Citizenship* is wider than the Purpose Remit suggests and increasingly important in a fast-changing Britain.
- The importance of entertainment in public service broadcasting continues to occupy Council thinking.

Review of Council Business

The first year of the Trust has been an interesting and challenging one, with a new focus to council business which has been welcomed.

The opportunity to contribute to the Trust's formal consultations (submissions were made to nine during the year) and to the Impartiality Review of News coverage of Nations & Regions was valued, and members asked for an honest appraisal of their worth, and whether a consensus was expected rather than a range of opinion; for the London Chair and council, diverse and varying views were seen as the lifeblood of council discussions. Such considerations would form part of the Council's response to the MACE Report (Maximising Audience Council Effectiveness). They would also feed into its own review of the workload placed on volunteers and the balance between Trust-led business and concerns emerging through contact with audiences via local accountability events and members' own local networks.

Council concerns at the breaches in trust resulting from competitions and the use of premium phone lines were allayed by the speedy response on the part of the Trust and the BBC's thoroughness in addressing the issue.

Members had embraced the new emphasis on audience engagement; this had brought greater depth to council discussions as illustrated by the autumn round of events exploring the media consumption habits of young people aged between 16 and 21. These had resulted in some surprising insights for members, including the tendency to consume TV as their parents do rather than via the internet or 3G phones, and, with the exception of Radio One, the lack of awareness of what the BBC had to offer this age group.

The Council was pleased to see evidence of the impact of the Regional Audience Council reviews on local and regional programmes and services. Examples were the relaunched *North West Tonight* programme, the greater reflection of the Isle of Man, and *Spotlight* in the south west. However there was still much to be done to ensure that England in all its diversity was reflected at the national level. The BBC networks were also criticised for continuing to draft in network presenters to report on regional matters, often inaccurately. Despite assurances to the contrary, members in the east of England noted little improvement with the coverage of the Steve Wright murder trial.

The impact of the BBC's re-prioritisation plans on BBC English Regions was felt to be particularly harsh, with the abandonment of plans for four new local radio stations to serve large county populations, the 13th region based on Milton Keynes, the loss of the BBC Buses and the reduced role for the Open Centres. All this would reduce the BBC's ability to reach out to communities and under-served audiences as required under the first Public Purpose, *Sustaining Citizenship*. The hope was that the BBC Local proposition would, if approved, help regain some of that lost ground.

BBC English Local Radio once more came in for high praise, for its strong links with local communities and service to a particular demographic poorly served elsewhere. Members were also pleased to note the emergence of language services for new migrant communities including the Polish and Portuguese. The North West Council would like to see greater integration of issues of interest to the Asian communities within mainstream BBC Local Radio programming.

This 'purist source of public service broadcasting' was applauded for its *Connecting in a Crisis* role and described as the fourth emergency service by those affected by the summer and autumn floods of 2007. In contrast, members in the north east of England were critical of the greater attention paid by the networks to floods in the south of the country over those in the north, citing the example of Hull last June.

A common theme to council reviews of programmes and services against the public purposes was the importance of 'entertainment'. All six purposes might be met but if a programme did not entertain and engage an audience, it would fail. The Council therefore decided to investigate the meaning of entertainment to audiences in its second round of audience engagement in March, and to commission research into the nature and value of entertainment as described in academic literature.

The UK's digital switchover began in the Whitehaven area and appeared to go smoothly although some problems were noted including a restricted Freeview service contrary to expectations for the full service, and poor reception during rainfall – an all too frequent occurrence in the north west.

Despite transmitter enhancements, Freeview and DAB blackspots remain across the country, notably in the North East & Cumbria region, the East, South West and South East. Some viewers are also unable to receive the regional television service for their area. The expectation is that Freesat will solve some of these reception difficulties.

Finally, the Council returned to its consideration last year of the first public purpose, *Sustaining citizenship*. Discussions during the year and at the Joint Councils Conference in Windsor in January had again raised questions around the BBC's role in promoting citizenship and civic society. There was a call for a new social contract between state and citizen to provide information, entertainment and education – to nurture citizenship; what was the BBC'S role in that? Councils noted that citizenship comes from the people, rather than being imposed from above or delivered; it is for the audience to carry the debate forward on citizenship. While the BBC's impartiality was key in encouraging understanding and debate, it should reflect and explore society, and not manipulate.

They concluded that the Purpose Remit was too narrow and should encompass other genres including comedy and drama which were also important reference points.

Performance against Public Purposes for 2007/08

The BBC's Public Purposes

1. Sustaining citizenship and civil society
2. Promoting education and learning
3. Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence
4. Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities
5. Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK
6. Emerging communications

1. Programme and Service Review

News

School News Report Day

Year 7 and 8 students in a hundred secondary schools across the UK produced news reports for inclusion on a special BBC website, or national or regional television or Local Radio. The consensus was that this was a valuable experience for children but had resulted in a low standard of television. Members noted that more successful reports were already an established part of *Newsround* but the exercise did connect with tomorrow's voters and therefore was worth repeating. **Public Purposes: 2, 4**

The 8pm Bulletin

Launched just before Christmas, this 90 second bulletin is designed to appeal to viewers who rarely consume news or current affairs. Members considered its length and style, and most supported the concept which was thought to be right for the target audience. Despite its populist approach it was still very much 'the BBC' and had appeal across the age divide. **Public Purposes: 1, 2, 5**

Politics & Current Affairs

The Politics Show

Councils felt that the network element of the programme rehashed the content of other political programmes over the weekend, and some described the style of presentation as lacking drive, staid and unlikely to appeal to younger viewers. By contrast the regional element did appeal to younger council members; it was fresher and more engaging, occasionally irreverent, had better graphics and imaginative content. Two councils disliked the putting of questions in an overly robust and confrontational style. The programme's title could be off-putting as many people thought of politics as 'heavy' whereas the content was more about local issues affecting local people's lives; this led onto a debate at some councils as to what constituted 'politics'. There was recurrent criticism of the Sunday lunchtime scheduling. **Public Purposes: 1, 2, 5**

Panorama: White Flight

This programme, comparing attitudes and behaviour of the Asian and indigenous white communities in Blackburn through the eyes of two taxi drivers from those communities, polarised opinion, often based on age with younger members being more engaged. It gave rise to some strong debate.

Thirty minutes was too short a time to explore the subject; nevertheless it was educative and challenging, and had been a good attempt to air a serious issue. The title itself was felt to be confrontational and likely to pander to prejudices. The lack of any follow-up such as a studio debate and interviews with members of the ethnic minority communities was criticised, particularly by the more urban-based councils of London and the East Midlands but also the South West council, whose Jersey-based members described the programme as 'Daily Mailish'.

Members felt that the BBC needed to make more of this kind of thought-provoking programming.

Public Purposes: 2, 3

Factual

Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade season

The range and quality of this season of programmes focusing around 25 March 2007, the bi-centenary of the bill to abolish the slave trade, was highly praised and members found it engaging and informative. For the London Regional Council, it was this season alone which met the Audience Priorities ACE had identified for the year.

Uncomfortable issues had been highlighted and all agreed that this was exactly the kind of the programming they expected of the BBC. The website had provided valuable support and in-depth information and the impact of the season was enhanced through the associated discussion forums which allowed for the expression and discussion of sensitive issues.

Public Purposes: 1, 2, 3, 5

Saving Planet Earth

This was an example of what the BBC did best: strong presentation, brilliant photography, and strong content. Councils noted the exceptionally high audience appreciation mark of 80+. However there were several criticisms ranging from the decision to use celebrity presenters who may have attracted viewers but brought little to the subject matter, to the fundraising nature of the series which many felt to be an inappropriate use of BBC resources. There was also a desire to see more interaction with the public.

Public Purposes: 1,2

***How we built Britain and How we are building Britain* (regional programmes)**

This was 'a terrific series' with enjoyable network and regional programmes of good quality, providing a wealth of social history.

David Dimbleby came in for praise, bringing gravitas and substance to the network programmes but they were not an unqualified success. Beautifully filmed, the network series was compared to a coffee table book and when set against the recent Andrew Marr *History of Modern Britain* series, was described as bland and not as entertaining or controversial; members would have welcomed something more challenging and less pretty. Some inaccuracies were also noted, for example a reference to ticket barriers at Newcastle station which has none.

Comments on the regional programmes included the lack of interaction with the public, poor scheduling at 10.30pm and its impact on audience size, and complaints from some councils that their regions' programmes did not give an adequate reflection of the region, for example a Hull-only focus in the Yorkshire & Lincolnshire programmes; nothing from Norfolk, Suffolk or the east coast in the East programme; and the East Midlands' programme looking at Leicester's regeneration as opposed to the region's architecture. In the West Midlands, the council noted the omission of African-Caribbean culture in the focus on faith buildings and the missed opportunity to foster a debate on integrating their architectural styles in a multi-cultural city.

Public Purposes: 2,3,4

Comic Relief

The comedy was strong and well staged, effective at engaging the interest of the hard-to-reach audience of 11 to 25 year olds but not to the taste of older members. Reports of how the money was spent were powerful and poignant and it was accepted that heart-rending pictures were an effective medium to encourage donations. Various aspects met all of the six Public Purposes but it was particularly strong in some.

Public Purposes: 2,5

Local Radio

High on *Citizenship*, high on *Representing the region*, high on *Emerging Communications* through its associated local websites and largely unrecognised for the creativity of presenting and production staff on small budgets – this was the verdict of the East Council whose members have the highest number of stations – six - to review; that verdict was endorsed by other regions.

With the exception of Southern Counties Radio and BBC Three Counties, a common strength was Local Radio's sense of place, with local information forming the backbone of the service and coming to the fore in its *Connecting in a Crisis* role. There was good reflection of city and country life but members were concerned at the loss of connection with listeners in rural areas and their different voices and stories once the BBC Buses had been phased out. The South West Council asked if the Trust could use its influence here.

Coverage of local sports was impassioned and informed, the local websites had become brighter and more up to date, but playlists came in for criticism as being middle of the road and monotonous apart from stations in Yorkshire and Yorkshire & Lincolnshire.

In the North East members detected a move towards a slightly younger audience and a more contemporary feel, and in the North West, BBC Radio Manchester was making strides to appeal more to female listeners. Yorkshire-based members were pleased to learn of the refurbishment programme at Radio York which has suffered breaks in transmission due to the state of its broadcast equipment.

Members in the South would welcome more arts coverage and generally a more experimental and creative approach as illustrated by Radio Berkshire's *Stringers* and Radio Oxford's *Sunday Nights*. In the South East both Radio Kent and Southern Counties Radio had an older 'sound' and style than was likely to appeal to the target audience. BBC London 94.9 had a clear London identity but faced the fiercest competition in the country; it could benefit from further developing its distinctiveness from the big London music stations.

In the South West, members were concerned at the recent large dip in Radio Cornwall's audience – the largest ever for English Local Radio - and awaited the results of a management investigation into the reasons. The West Council detected an unwelcome increase in phone-ins following the ban on competitions, and found some unnecessarily controversial and aggressive in tone. **Public Purposes: 1,3,4,6**

Radio 5 Live Service Review

This was the first network service council members had been asked to review. They were delighted to respond and were looking forward to carrying out more network service reviews in 2008.

The service provided good sports coverage and sports news. It had been a revelation to some council members who came to it new and found 'little gems' within the schedule, for example *Fighting Talk* and the film reviews. It reflected England and the UK well, with no obvious geographical bias other than where sport was coming from; the North East & Cumbria Council was alone in discerning a metrocentricity in the output.

Coverage of football was largely restricted to the Premiership which inevitably left some regions out entirely and some councils thought the football emphasis was too strong.

Presenters were commended; there was some debate about the balance between expressing their personal views and putting across those of the wider audience. One comment was made on the sound of the presenters which was felt to date back to the 1950s and was unlikely to appeal to younger listeners. One regional council felt that callers to programmes were not generally well dealt with; this needed to be improved.

A question was asked about the number of commentators who had been sent to France to cover the Rugby World Cup. Audience perception was important and this had not played well at a time when the BBC was facing significant cuts. There was a view that the service undersold itself, particularly its news service, and could do more by way of cross-promotion. All the Purposes were met, to varying degrees.

Drama: *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, BBC Three

Councils relished the opportunity to review more challenging output as exemplified by the BBC Three drama *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, and responded to the invitation to seek out wider audience views from their own local networks, particularly the target youth market. Not all members had access to BBC Three (DVDs had been provided for review purposes) and while the programme would not have been the normal choice for many, a number had become hooked.

The drama sparked off some of the liveliest debates at regional council meetings in recent years and a number of common themes emerged with feedback being polarised, based more on attitude than age.

For some, this had been moving, powerful drama with a high sense of comedy, and for which the BBC should be congratulated but it was recognised that it would not appeal to all. On the one hand there had been praise for the acting, strong storyline, script and treatment of real life issues; on the other, a view that it was all doom and gloom with bad language and unsuitable messages.

Most people within the target age group had loved it and there had been good use of some well known *Coronation Street* actors, but it was also good to see new talent. While the first two series had been entertaining, members cautioned against stretching the storyline too far with a third. The trails had not encouraged people to watch, and there was a view that the gay story-line was stereotypical and reflected an image from the 1970s.

For one council, the review had led onto a discussion about BBC Three and its targeting of young people; it was felt there was a hidden audience, not restricted to the young, who enjoyed the service.

Public Purposes: 1,2,4

2. Network programmes from England and regional representation

Members had received reports during the year on the partnerships BBC English Regions has made with network colleagues and congratulated the Head of Programming and Controller on the growing number and greater recognition of the strength of content, as demonstrated in the increase in broadcasts on the networks and in peak-time schedules.

A growing source of concern during the year was the lack of funding for regionally produced network programmes, and related to that, the general lack of network programmes which either reflected the regions – rural as well as urban - or were made in the regions. Such programming could not only improve regional portrayal as required under the BBC's fourth public purpose but also make a significant impact on regional economies, career opportunities and the development of a wider and more diverse talent base. One highly lauded example was BBC Yorkshire's *Helicopter Heroes*, originally made for daytime TV and rescheduled to a peaktime early evening network slot, thanks to its strong regional content. *The One Show* too was cited as a positive example although the recent emphasis on celebrity guests seemed to be heralding an unwelcome change in focus.

While the development of BBC Salford was seen as an important step for northern audiences, the Council was concerned lest other regions be eclipsed, for example the neighbouring regions of Yorkshire and the North East. The likely effect on network production at the two other network centres in England, in Birmingham and Bristol, was also of concern and the Council registered its disappointment at the recent fall in network commissioning in the Midlands during in 2007. Members also wanted to be reassured of the BBC's commitment to commissioning in the north west and the level of economic investment that would flow from the Salford move.

The year ahead

Key issues arising from audience events

- Issues relating to representation of young people on the networks
- Different expectations of BBC across entertainment output, for all generations
- Desire to see impact of audience engagement activity on Trust deliberations and ultimately on BBC programmes and services

Key issues for the Council

- Responding to Trust consultations on the service reviews for children and young people
- Progress of the Trust's Impartiality Review on Network News coverage of Nations & Regions
- Gauging audience demand for the BBC Local service as part of the Trust's Public Value Test in 2008
- The importance and role of 'entertainment' in the BBC's public service offering
- Championing the interests, needs and concerns of audiences in England as part of the Trust's response to Ofcom's review of Public Service Broadcasting
- The development of the Council's own engagement and communications strategies
- Developing the Council's relationship with the Trust Unit and other Audience Councils across the UK

Priorities for Delivering BBC Public Purposes for England 2008/09

1. BBC Networks: Regional Production and Regional Portrayal

Increase in amount of network programming commissioned and produced in regions resulting in greater regional reflection, support for local economies, development of local talent and training opportunities; and a greater regional portrayal on networks

Measures: The Council will monitor the volume of network contributions from the regions in 2008/09 compared with 2007/08 and assess the range of genres and services; and monitor network performance, using audience feedback data and audience perceptions as gauged through council feedback and outreach.

2. Digital matters

Whitehaven switchover concerns of relevance for rollout (South West next); future of DAB

Measures: The Council will continue to monitor reception blackspots and switchover progress

3. Compensating for re-prioritisation losses

Potential of BBC Local to improve service to currently under-served areas and recover lost ground with ending of buses, open centres, plans for four new local radio stations for large under-served county populations, and a 13th region based on Milton Keynes.

Measures: The Council will continue to comment on the plans for the proposed BBC Local service and consider the responses to the public consultations as part of the Public Value Test, including the Public Value Assessment

4. The work of the Audience Councils

Heavy workload for volunteer members and an imbalance between output review and advising on strategy/Trust consultations

Measures: Evidence that the Trust values council contributions, and that they are making a difference

5. Gaps in Services

Sustaining improvements to under-served audiences eg younger, ethnic minorities, new migrant communities, elderly and disabled; also geographical communities including Isle of Man, Somerset; a higher priority for minority sports; and better resourcing for and coverage of rural areas in what is currently an urban-centric offering.

Measures: The Council will look for improvements across the year.

6. Delivering the Public Purposes

Delivery of the *Supporting Citizenship* Purpose remains a priority for both English Regions and the networks, as does the place of 'entertainment' within the Purposes. The Council wishes to champion audiences' interests as part of the Trust's response to Ofcom's PSB Review

Measures: Monitoring of output against the Purposes; ongoing work on place of 'entertainment'; and involvement with the PSB Review.

Appendices

1. List of ACE Submissions to Trust Consultations

1. Service Licences
2. Purpose Remits
3. iPlayer PVT
4. Audience Engagement Protocol
5. Freesat PVT
6. Gaelic Service PVT
7. PVT: High Definition Television
8. Service Review of bbc.co.uk
9. Complaints Framework
10. Trust Work Plan 2008/09

2. Formal Council Outreach: Executive Summaries

1. Young People's Events, autumn 2007
2. Entertainment with family groups, spring 2008