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2008/09 AUDIENCE COUNCIL REVIEW/

England



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FOREWORD BY THE NATIONAL TRUSTEE FOR ENGLAND



The BBC Audience Councils advise the BBC Trust on how well the BBC is delivering its public purposes and serving licence fee payers across the United Kingdom. The four Councils – serving Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales – are supported by the Trust to provide an independent assessment of audience expectations and issues.

The one message that came across loud and clear in the past year is the high expectations people have of the BBC.

Editorial standards, political independence, portrayal of England's many diverse groups, serving local communities – all these have figured large in my meetings with licence fee payers and the English audience councils.

What I have heard has helped me gauge how strongly people feel about their BBC, and how they would like to have a greater reflection of their lives and communities; improved access to its digital services; and an even more creative and distinctive BBC.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alison Hastings'.

Alison Hastings
National Trustee for England

AUDIENCE COUNCIL ENGLAND REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE

As advisers to the BBC Trust on audience views from across England, Audience Council England and its 12 supporting Regional Audience Councils have helped bring a greater accountability to the BBC using the BBC Trust's framework of public purposes, service and impartiality reviews, and public value tests.

The Council noted the continuing popularity of local and regional services with audiences, thanks to insights into local lives and experiences which helped deliver the **Sustaining citizenship** and **Representing the UK, its nations, regions & communities** public purposes.

Delivery of the **Sustaining citizenship** purpose could be improved with the provision of further opportunities for audiences to follow up issues

raised in network programming dealing with sensitive issues such as *The White Season* on BBC Two, which focused on Britain's white working class.

The Council's review of children's services found strong examples of formal learning provision which met the **Education & learning** and **Creativity & cultural excellence** purposes.

During the year the Council had a fresh impetus for representing the interests of English licence fee payers, fuelled partly by the network production issues raised through the development of the new BBC production centre at Salford and partly by the review of the England accountability structure.



Left to right: Steven Langley, Steve Ryall and new North East & Cumbria member Ben Newton discuss regional TV news at the April RAC meeting held at BBC Newcastle.



The 13–16 year age group was invited to act out for the camera – in rap, speech or movement – what they wanted from the BBC as part of the audience councils' outreach last November. *Bablake School in Coventry.*

“The Council’s review of children’s services found strong examples of formal learning provision which met the **Education & learning** and **Creativity & cultural excellence** purposes.”

Among the audience priorities identified by the Council for the year ahead were:

- maintaining network commissioning and production in England at a sustainable level, particularly at the existing network production centres in England outside London (Bristol and Birmingham)
- an improved diversity of portrayal on news and other network services
- better serving communities in England following the rejection of the BBC Local Video proposal, through English Local Radio and other local and regional services
- developing plans for all English Local Radio stations to be made available on DAB (digital radio)

The Council also plans to monitor the impact on audiences and representation of ‘England’ at the BBC’s most senior levels following the BBC’s leadership restructuring last autumn; to monitor how English Local Radio offers content which engages listeners and better serves local audiences during 2009/10, with a view to reporting to the Trust; in the longer-term, to continue exploring the value and

importance to audiences of ‘entertainment’, supported by research and outreach activity; and finally, to conduct a review of England and its regions in a post-digital age in order to develop an audience strategy for the future.

THE AUDIENCE PRIORITIES FOR 2008/09

Last year Audience Council England identified six audience priorities and monitored progress against them during the year; a summary of their assessment is given under each heading.

BBC Networks: regional production and regional portrayal

- This asked for an increase in the amount of network programming commissioned and produced in the regions resulting in greater regional reflection, support for local economies, development of local talent and training opportunities; and a greater regional portrayal on networks.

At the Council’s 2008 seminar in Salford, overlooking the construction site of the BBC’s new home in the north of England, members noted the impressive and welcome investment which would undoubtedly help the BBC engage more with northern audiences, nurture fresh talent and develop partnerships with local

“During the year the Council found a fresh impetus for representing the interests of English licence fee payers.”

independent production companies. Concern remained at the impact on other network production centres in England and the possible contraction of production in Birmingham and Bristol.

Digital matters

- The priority was based on concerns resulting from the Whitehaven switchover; relevant for rollout (South West next); and the future of DAB.

Eleven of the 38 English Local Radio stations were either not available, or not fully available on DAB, thus impacting on audiences.



Students at Bablake School in Coventry put their views on the BBC to members of the West Midlands Regional Audience Council.

Audience contacts in Whitehaven and the Borders, and in the South West, indicated a desire for more information on digital switchover from the BBC. The Council continues to monitor the switchover process.

Compensating for re-prioritisation losses

- This priority recognised the potential of BBC Local Video to improve services to currently under-served areas and recover lost ground with the 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.

The 'local communities' purpose gap identified by the Trust during the public value test (PVT) for BBC Local Video has been of long-standing concern. Members suggest that Local Radio is the ideal platform for further investment to engage more with the cultures, communities and regions of England and to regain the impact lost by the demise of the buses, the open centres, the 13th region, and the failure of the BBC Local Video PVT.

“The roles of the national and regional councils have been redefined, with Audience Council England concentrating on finding the ‘English voice.’”



BBC Trust Chairman Sir Michael Lyons (centre) with members of the West Midlands Regional Audience Council at Highbury Hall in Birmingham, during the BBC Trust's visit to the city last October:

“The Trust has brought about a significant improvement in portrayal on network news through its impartiality review but the Council notes that there is still a long way to go in achieving inclusiveness for all audiences.”

The work of the Audience Councils

- This stated the heavy workload for volunteer members and an imbalance between output review and advising on strategy/Trust consultations.

The review of the accountability structure in England has addressed the balance between reviewing output and advising on strategy. The roles of the national and regional councils have been redefined, with Audience Council England concentrating on finding the 'English voice', and the regional councils reflecting local audience views on the BBC through their own discussions, community networks and public events. Feedback from the Trust has improved too.

Gaps in services

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

The Trust has brought about a significant improvement in portrayal on network news through its impartiality review but the Council notes that there is still a long way to go in achieving inclusiveness for all audiences.

Delivering the public purposes

- Delivery of the **Supporting citizenship** purpose remains an audience priority for both BBC 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 Public Service Broadcasting Review.

This continues to be a priority for the Council. The Council will explore further the value and importance to audiences of 'entertainment'; and will continue to champion audiences' interests in preserving the BBC's funding and defending its long-term sustainability as the cornerstone of public service broadcasting.

REVIEW OF AUDIENCE COUNCIL ACTIVITY

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

The Council's growing confidence in contributing audience views gleaned from their local networks, both actual and virtual, and in hosting ambitious public engagement events has resulted in some forthright and robust exchanges inspired by a strongly held desire to represent the interests of licence fee payers in England as effectively as possible.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Members discussed the services in their own local networks and hosted events for children under six with parents or carers, and face-to-face with 6–12 year olds, in rural, urban and inner city groups and schools.

They were very positive about CBeebies. The programmes reflected diversity in the widest sense, with the outreach indicating a desire for yet more diversity including rural representation and social class. The service was a rich resource for engagement and informal learning; parents felt 'safe' letting their children watch; and there were no distracting advertisements.

Overall, CBBC was considered to be less satisfactory than CBeebies. It did not engage as well with its audience nor did it have the broad appeal of competing commercial services.

Members recognised that the target 6–12 year olds was a more challenging age group and felt there was a significant gap for those approaching the early teens.

SERVICES FOR YOUNGER AUDIENCES

The outreach with younger audiences identified the huge efforts that the BBC was making to connect with them through creative and imaginative content, particularly online, but greater promotion of the services was necessary. Lack of digital access to certain services meant that some youngsters were excluded. The young people wanted more comedy; more sports including minority sports but also major football fixtures; the 60Second News but not the 30 minutes news; positive images of young people; and school based dramas. They felt there was an over-reliance on celebrities in programmes.

“The outreach with younger audiences identified the huge efforts that the BBC was making to connect with them through creative and imaginative content.”



Tottenham in north London was the venue of a meeting for under-sixteens last November; hosted by the London Regional Audience Council.

“Contributing to the Trust’s impartiality review of network news, the Council welcomed the greater accuracy in the coverage of devolved matters.”

SERVICE REVIEWS AND TRUST CONSULTATIONS

Audience Council England and the Regional Councils participated in five Trust consultations during the year including the reviews already described of children’s services and services for younger audiences.

NETWORK NEWS IMPARTIALITY REVIEW

Contributing to the Trust’s impartiality review of network news, the Council welcomed the greater accuracy in the coverage of devolved matters. However English audiences still wanted to see more matters relating to England outside London and the Westminster village, greater coverage of the diverse communities for whom England is home, and a holding to account of the Regional Development Agencies and other large budget-holding public bodies in the regions.

The Council revisited the subject of impartiality for one week in January, monitoring network news. Although the Israeli/Palestinian conflict had dominated the output, news teams had taken the opportunities offered by the credit crunch and bad winter weather conditions to report regularly from towns, cities and rural areas across the UK.

What had been more difficult to identify were the news omissions; one example was a siege in Sheffield. While viewers in the north of England followed this story as it unfolded over four days, it had not featured in any network news output; in contrast, a not dissimilar siege in London last year had been featured across network news.

BBC LOCAL VIDEO PUBLIC VALUE TEST

The BBC Trust’s decision to reject the BBC Local Video proposal on the evidence of the public value and market impact assessments and the responses to the public consultations had been reluctantly accepted by members.



ACE member Clarke Willis hosts an outreach event for young people in Cambridge.

In its submission to the Trust on the PVT, the Council was looking for an answer to the performance gap on delivering more local news to licence fee payers. This was of particular interest after the loss of BBC buses and some open centres around the country, and the removal from the BBC plans for four additional radio stations and a 13th English region.

The question now for the Council was how much of the funding set aside for the local video service was to be made available to better serve communities in England.

OFCOM PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING REVIEW

In its submission to the Trust on the second part of Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) review, the Council recognised the merits of each of the three models but none was thought to provide a totally satisfactory solution.

Audience interests argued for the preservation of ITV1 as a broadcaster of at least some PSB output, most obviously in the provision of international, national and regional news, but while recognising the benefits of plurality and competition, members could not support moves to these ends at the cost of potential

damage to the BBC. The BBC is, and should remain, the cornerstone of public service broadcasting and present funding arrangements uniquely preserved this principle. The evidence was that the great majority of audiences support this view and continue to trust and have confidence in the BBC.

The complete ACE submissions to the Trust are published on the website at: www.bbc.co.uk/england/ace/

BBC PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH REGIONS AGAINST THE PUBLIC PURPOSES

The subject of network commissioning outside London inspired the 2008 ACE Seminar in Salford, where the BBC will be moving several major London departments to the new MediaCity complex in 2011.

The development was described as an impressive and welcome move to engage more with northern audiences, and an opportunity to nurture fresh talent and partnership working with the independent sector:

This positive reception was tempered by some concerns that a talent drain to Salford might disadvantage other regions, particularly at this time of recession and large scale reduction in ITV's commitment to the regions.

The Council therefore asked that particular attention be paid to maintaining the sustainability of the existing network production centres in England, specifically Bristol and Birmingham, for three reasons: first, to support local economies and to develop talent; second, to improve the BBC's presence outside London; and third, to better reflect diverse communities on air through an understanding and awareness by BBC staff of regional and cultural diversity.

Regional Audience Councils were keen to ensure that the announced increase in network production from the three nations did not adversely affect production in England's out-of-London regional centres.

The South regional council gave a related example of what they saw as a difference in attitude to 'Nations' and 'Regions', with the coverage of the 2008 Cup Final between Portsmouth and Cardiff. BBC Wales was given a budget and programme to celebrate their team reaching the final but in contrast, BBC South had to work hard internally to get a programme slot and also find the money from its existing budget.

In considering out-of-London production, members were agreed that a balance was needed between quality of output and where that output was made; the fear was that quality would suffer in the face of quota-setting.

“The Council asked that particular attention be paid to maintaining the sustainability of the existing network production centres in England, specifically Bristol and Birmingham.”

On-air portrayal in network services of the diverse communities and cultures in the regions of England continued to be a source of dissatisfaction. The Council has decided to take this forward as one of its key strategic issues for the coming year:

The gaps fell into two broad areas: non-representation and authenticity of portrayal.

Overall, the Council would like to see a richer mix of portrayal across the UK, and across all genres – factual, drama and entertainment – as well as news.

Over-promotion of forthcoming programmes with too often repeated trails continued to irritate, as did the practice of ‘squeezing’ end-credits and cross-promotion.

Discussion of bad language and ‘unsuitable’ content was also not new to the Audience Councils, but this year the serious breaches of the BBC’s editorial guidelines in editions of *The Russell Brand Show* gave new momentum to the debate. Those incidents had been grossly offensive and there was support for the actions taken by the Trust.

Despite funding and staff pressures during the year, there were noted examples of strong and popular local and regional services. The best of these resonated strongly with audiences, demonstrating innovative approaches and evoking emotional responses.

Local Radio performance was more variable. The service continued to excel in its connecting in a crisis role, working with local authorities and the emergency services to keep audiences abreast of local conditions during emergencies but members stressed the need for compelling content which would offer insights into local lives and experiences.

Keeping those services on air was a recurrent concern for stations including BBC Radio York and BBC Radio Derby, where the repeated postponement of property and technology projects was increasing the risk of major failures. Members continue to monitor the situation.

These local and regional services might not have the glamour and big budgets of the networks but their importance to members and their local communities, often under-served, could not be over emphasised.

“Despite funding and staff pressures during the year, there were noted examples of strong and popular local and regional services.”



Young people from St Benet Biscop Catholic High School in Northumberland visited BBC Newcastle to take part in one of last year's audience engagement events.

“On-air portrayal in network services of the diverse communities and cultures in the regions of England continued to be a source of dissatisfaction.”



Students from Clare and Downing Colleges, Anglia Ruskin University and Cambridge 6th Form College were among those taking part in the East Regional Audience Council's public engagement activity.

The Council wondered whether they were sometimes not as appreciated or valued by those at the centre of the BBC.

The public purposes of most interest to the Council were the **Sustaining citizenship** and **Representing the UK, its nations, regions & communities** purposes. *The White Season* and *Headroom/Losing It* programming had been challenging and thought-provoking, and the London council had also reviewed episodes of *Silent Witness* focusing on gang and knife culture in the capital. The latter was described as accurate but unremitting, and ultimately 'the antithesis of a contribution to citizenship', while the former would have benefited from better sign-posting and more opportunities to follow up the sensitive issues which had been raised.

There had been some strong examples of output delivering the **Education & learning** and **Creativity & cultural excellence** purposes, most notably children's provision through the formal learning content; and *White Girl* from *The White Season*, with its fostering of new talent and exploration of family, cultural and religious issues. Such issues were also the bedrock of comedy.

The BBC managed to remain edgy and was to be congratulated for its risk-taking in developing new series even when initial audience reaction was lukewarm.

New young talent needed to be encouraged, and *Live at the Apollo* and *Outnumbered* were highly praised; some other formats were becoming a little tired, particularly situation comedies such as *My Family* and *The Royle Family*. There was little for the younger audience; other criticisms centred around an overly laddish humour and the lack of ethnic minority actors and comedians, with people wanting more programmes such as *Three Non-Blondes*.

Two concerns were raised under the **Emerging communications** purpose: the desire for more information for vulnerable audience groups about digital switchover; and the prospect of making the 11 remaining English Local Radio stations available on DAB.

On one point all members were in agreement, and that was the dedication and sheer hard work of BBC programme makers who produced some of the world's highest quality and high volume output in an unprecedentedly demanding and pressured environment.

“There had been some strong examples of output delivering the **Education & learning** and **Creativity & cultural excellence** purposes.”

AUDIENCE COUNCIL ENGLAND AUDIENCE PRIORITIES FOR 2009/10

Along with the Audience Councils for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, Audience Council England has identified six audience priorities for 2009/10.

There is a seventh priority shared by other Audience Councils, around improving audiences' understanding of the BBC's complaints procedures.

All these have been approved by the Trust and are reflected in the Trust's workplan for 2009/10.

DIGITAL AND OTHER ACCESS ISSUES

The BBC Trust should ask the Executive to develop plans to work towards greater access for all BBC content on digital platforms. In particular all four national Audience Councils attach importance to DAB radio across the UK.

NETWORK COMMISSIONING OUTSIDE LONDON

That the Trust should monitor the delivery, within the timescale which it set, of the proposals announced by BBC management arising from the TV Network Supply Review. That in monitoring the roll out of the plans, it ensures that the BBC maintains and develops sustainable production centres across the UK.

Within this it was a particular priority for Audience Council England that whilst welcoming the creation of a new hub in Salford, particular attention should be paid to the sustainability of Bristol and Birmingham.

PORTRAYAL

That the Trust should investigate ways in which the BBC might better portray the full diversity of the UK's nations and communities in the regions of England across its network services, significantly enhancing the cultural representation of the English regions, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

IMPARTIALITY REVIEW OF THE COVERAGE OF DEVOLVED MATTERS

That the Trust should carefully monitor the implementation of the BBC management actions regarding the Impartiality Review of Network News and Current Affairs coverage of devolved matters.

AUDIENCE COUNCILS' OPERATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

That the Trust should strengthen its relationship with all Audience Councils through the implementation of the outcomes of the **Maximising Audience Council Effectiveness** project, and seek to achieve more visible participation of the Audience Councils in its work to ensure the widest audience participation in the processes leading to its decisions. This should include a review of the communication strategy for the Trust and Audience Councils.

NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL NEWS SERVICES

That the Trust should keep in mind that Audience Councils continue to attach importance to ensuring the BBC delivers high quality services to its audiences at a national, regional and local level, including ensuring sufficient investment in the infrastructure of local and regional radio services and seeking ways to improve the range and depth of regional and local news coverage.

The Trust will consider all these priorities in its work; there are also numerous actions contained within its work plan. In respect of the priority identified around news, the Trust will consider this in the light of the BBC Executive's response to the Trust's interim decision on the Local Video public value test.

“Audience Councils continue to attach importance to ensuring the BBC delivers high quality services to its audiences at a national, regional and local level.”



What do you want from the BBC? Students from St Benet Biscop's Catholic High School in Northumberland prepare to film their take on the BBC, as part of the young people's outreach.

ENGLAND ONLY PRIORITIES

- Monitor representation of and services to audiences in England within the BBC following the Executive's Nations & Regions leadership restructuring.

The Trust believes this is partly covered within wider monitoring of services following the impartiality review and invites ACE to report any other concerns to the Trust.

- Diversity of portrayal of England's communities and cultures on local and regional services including BBC Local Radio, as distinct from network services, to fill the 'local communities' purpose gap.

The Trust will consider this question within the portrayal priority work.

- Ask the Executive to consider provision of a dedicated *Politics Show* and *Inside Out* for the Yorkshire & Lincolnshire region.

This is a matter for the Director-General to consider:

- Monitor services to audiences in England to ensure postponement of property and technology projects do not adversely impact on services, particularly Local Radio.

This will be covered by the priority for news; the Trust also asks ACE to report any concerns to the Trust.

- Reappraise BBC policy end-credits and cross-promotion, taking account of audience reaction.

This is a matter for the Director-General to consider:

CONTACTS

If you wish to find out more about the BBC's year – including full financial statements and each service's performance against its Statement of Programme Policy – then please visit

www.bbc.co.uk/annualreport

If you want to know more about how the BBC is run then please **visit www.bbc.co.uk/info**

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Textphone: 03700 100 212*

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Website: **www.bbc.co.uk/feedback**

Last year we had over 1.6 million contacts from the general public.

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* 0370 numbers are called 'UK wide' and cost no more than calls to 01 or 02 geographic numbers.

BBC Audience Council, England

From left to right:

Top row:

Belinda Channer

David Claridge

Second row:

Stuart Paterson

Thelma Holland

Third row:

Hannah Eyres

Ted Wright

Julie Panagary

Fourth row:

Philippa Denton

Christine Fanthome

Annette Priestley

Fifth row:

Elizabeth Peacock

Clarke Willis

"IT'S MY LOCAL NETWORKS WHICH HELP ME UNDERSTAND WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE THINKING ABOUT THE BBC."

BELINDA CHANNER



"AS THE BBC'S HISTORIC MOVE TO SALFORD APPROACHES, PRESENTING THE ENGLISH PERSPECTIVE TO THE TRUST HAS NEVER BEEN AS IMPORTANT."

JULIE PANAGARRY



"ACE AND THE REGIONAL COUNCILS BRING A COMMITTED NETWORK OF PEOPLE CONTRIBUTING DIVERSE VIEWS TO THE TRUST'S THINKING."

CLARKE WILLIS