



OFCOM'S SECOND PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING REVIEW

PHASE ONE: THE DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY

SUBMISSION FROM COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR (WESTERN ISLES COUNCIL)

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council) is an all purpose authority with responsibility for the provision of public sector services for the 26,500 residents in the Outer Hebrides. Since the Comhairle was established in 1975/6 it has championed Gaelic on many fronts recognising that Gaelic, as the community language of the islands, has a special place in the lifestyle of the people of the Western Isles as it permeates every facet of life from culture to crofting and from the croileagan to the church. Since it was established, the Comhairle has attempted to create a strong Gaelic ethos within the community and provide support for initiatives which support the Gaelic language.

For many years now, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and other Gaelic organisations have lobbied successive governments to provide funding for a dedicated Gaelic Television Service. The Comhairle recognises that Gaelic broadcasting has a pivotal role to play in sustaining and revitalising Gaelic. Gaelic broadcasting has a key part to play in raising the profile of the language and complementing initiatives to secure its future in the fields of education, the arts and social and economic development.

Quality public service broadcasting provision is considered essential to the wellbeing of the citizen/consumer in wider society. In the U.K. quality Gaelic public services broadcasting provision is an even more crucial factor in ensuring a sustainable future for the Gaelic speaking community. As Gaelic is one of the key indigenous languages of the U.K., it is desirable and in the national interest, on grounds of social justice and cultural diversity, that the Gaelic speaking audience should be served by a broadcasting system appropriate to the 21st century.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is totally supportive of the joint initiative, launched in 2007, by the BBC Executive and the Gaelic Media Service (GMS) to launch a Gaelic Digital Service (GDS) in 2008. The mixed-genre service, including the daily news and weather in Gaelic, is a huge boost for the Gaelic language in general and a significant re-affirmation of the BBC's commitment to Public Service Broadcasting. Although the service will be available on cable, satellite and broadband, it is disappointing that the new GDS will not be carried on Freeview until after a further review is carried out before the digital switchover in 2010. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar urges Ofcom to bring pressure to bear on the BBC Trust to ensure that carriage of the service on Freeview is given urgent consideration. The GMS/BBC joint partnership model is to be commended as an innovative initiative to turn what has been a long held aspiration for the Gaelic community into a sustainable development which hopefully will normalise Gaelic broadcasting provision within the U.K. broadcasting landscape.

The future wellbeing of the Gaelic language is partly dependent on the expansion of Gaelic medium education. Independent research has concluded that Gaelic television has a significant influence on positively influencing parents' choice of Gaelic Medium Education for their children. This inextricable link between Gaelic television and GME must be strengthened with the delivery of high quality Gaelic television programmes. It is essential, therefore, that index linked funding be made available to ensure that the content and quality of the output from the now Gaelic Digital Service is of the highest standard.

One example of this is Eorpa the Gaelic t.v. programme which deals with European affairs. This high quality, but costly programme attracts audience figures far in excess of the total numbers of Gaelic speakers in Scotland and is tangible proof that quality programmes can easily transcend language barriers.

The Ofcom consultation posits four possible models for the delivery of Public Service Broadcasting in Britain. The four models all have aspects which are appealing but underlying them all is the fact that the pace of technological change is unprecedented with the convergence imperative driving new media and communications technology across global boundaries shrinking both distance and time. This global technological revolution could have disastrous consequences for Gaelic in terms of increasing cultural marginalisation and exclusion. On the other hand, with appropriate government regulatory and adequate financial support, the GDS could provide the means by which Gaelic linguistic and cultural development could be promoted and enhanced within the U.K. context.

The new joint partnership must be strong enough to provide the overview, co-ordination, coherence, identity and potential for interaction with audiences which will revitalise the current Gaelic broadcasting framework, building on the new technologies available.

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