

Ofcom's draft Annual Plan for 2013/14

Response by the Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland

Introduction

The Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland (ACNI) welcomes the publication of Ofcom's draft Annual Plan for 2013/14.

ACNI notes, firstly, that within each of the proposed Strategic Purposes there are a number of UK-wide priorities, works areas and programmatic activities which are of particular relevance to citizens and consumers in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, ACNI is pleased to note that there continues to be Northern Ireland-specific objectives included in the annual plan.

Our comments, below, relate to these UK-wide and NI-specific elements. The comments reflect discussions from ACNI meetings as well as some issues raised by Northern Ireland stakeholders at the Annual Plan event held at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, on 6 February.

Strategic purposes

ACNI welcomes Ofcom's commitment to continue to promote the opportunity to participate in society for consumers and citizens through the availability and use of a wide range of communications services. This strategic purpose is particularly relevant in Northern Ireland which, within the UK nations, has the highest proportion of people living in rural areas – and rural areas are commonly underserved by many communications services.

ACNI notes Ofcom's intention to assess the impact of communications infrastructure and availability on the social and economic success of cities. ACNI encourages Ofcom to include Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in this work – both of which have received funding under the UK Government's 'super-connected cities' initiative.

In relation to the economic regulation of post, ACNI encourages Ofcom to pay particular attention to the impact on the provision of the Universal Service Obligation of any development with regard to end-to-end competition.

ACNI notes Ofcom's plans to conduct a third review of Public Service Broadcasting. We encourage Ofcom to give appropriate consideration to issues of importance to the nations. For Northern Ireland the most significant issue is the continuing low level of UK network programmes being commissioned from Northern Ireland. The result is an under-developed independent production sector, as well as an under-representation of Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK.

We note the direction given by the Secretary of State for Culture to Ofcom to renew the Channel 3 licences held by ITV plc, STV and UTV. As part of the relicensing process, Ofcom is consulting on a request from UTV to reduce its weekly quota of non-news programming, from 2 hours to 1.5 hours. In doing so, UTV is seeking parity with its Channel 3 peers in Scotland and Wales. However, ACNI notes that parity with other nations seems to be the only point that supports UTV's request. More often than not the ACNI finds itself arguing that one size does not fit all as far as the nations and communications is concerned.

Northern Ireland-specific objectives

On the matter of cross-border communication services, ACNI welcomes Ofcom's focus on the continuing problem of inadvertent roaming in border areas of Northern Ireland. ACNI has long been of the view that this should be a priority for Ofcom and we encourage Ofcom to do all in its power to reduce the obvious consumer detriment. ACNI is mindful of the recast European Roaming Regulations which carry an obligation on mobile networks to protect their customers from the effects of inadvertent roaming in border areas.

ACNI would also encourage Ofcom to consider the matter of cross-border postal services. For example, we would highlight the current price disparity faced by postal users in Northern Ireland sending mail to the Republic of Ireland, compared to the price of mail going in the other direction. While ACNI understands that Ofcom has no remit to harmonise costs across two jurisdictions, we would welcome further investigation of the scale of the problem.

ACNI notes Ofcom's intention to assess the provision of Irish Language and Ulster Scots broadcasting services. ACNI would welcome clarification on how this objective would be delivered.

In relation to Ofcom's objective to provide appropriate regulatory advice to the Northern Ireland Executive, Assembly and local government, ACNI would stress the importance of joined-up thinking when it comes to planning communications infrastructure. We encourage Ofcom to play a positive role and ensure that any future public investment decisions in Northern Ireland are well-informed and as efficient and effective as possible.

Professor Wallace Ewart
Chair, ACNI
22 February 2013