

# **Response by Channel 4 to Ofcom's discussion paper on children's television programming**

## **Introduction**

Channel 4 is a publicly owned, not-for-profit broadcaster operating in the UK. It was established in 1982 as a publisher-broadcaster required to commission originated content from the independent production sector. Its core public service channel, Channel 4, is a free-to-air service funded predominantly by advertising and sponsorship. It also operates a number of other services, including the free-to-air digital television channels E4, Film4 and More4; a video-on-demand service 4oD, which is available via PCs and on cable; and an expanding range of new media services at channel4.com.

Channel 4 welcomes the opportunity to respond to Ofcom's discussion document on "The Future of Children's Television Programming". This is a highly detailed piece of research that raises important issues about the future of children's television. As the report highlights, while children's television has been an important part of the UK's public service broadcasting system for many decades, investment in this genre has fallen rapidly in recent years, as has the degree of plurality, with most UK original investment now being made by the BBC. Ofcom's consultation comes ahead of its second Review of Public Service Broadcasting, the Phase One report of which will be published in the spring, and will cover a range of interconnected issues, including children's television, as well as the future of Channel 4 and the prospects for public service content in new media.

By way of context regarding Channel 4's position, Ofcom concluded its Financial Review of Channel 4 last June, reiterating the important public service role that Channel 4 should continue to play in the future, accepting that the corporation will face a potentially significant funding gap in the years ahead under the current model, and encouraging Channel 4 to set out a clear Vision of its future role. Channel 4 is now drawing to a close the detailed research that has underpinned its work over the last six months to articulate its future Vision, and we intend to announce this in the New Year. As part of this work, Channel 4 has given consideration to children's TV and the possibility of it playing an enhanced role, as Chief Executive Andy Duncan indicated at the RTS Cambridge Convention in September. However, at this point in time, we are unable to set out our detailed thoughts ahead of the launch of our vision next year, and therefore restrict ourselves to responding briefly to Ofcom's discussion paper with general comments.

## **Channel 4's appeal to young viewers**

Channel 4 is generally the most young-skewing of all the public service broadcasters, and its appeal to younger people is growing. Our viewing share amongst 16-24 year olds has grown by 20% over the last five years, at a time when the BBC and ITV's portfolio shares have fallen by 15-20% amongst these audiences. Audience research also shows us that 33% of 15-24 year olds rate one of the Channel 4 channels as their favourite, up from 19% four years ago. This reflects the appeal to young adults of a wide range of our programming, including the news – Channel 4 News has the strongest 16-34 profile of any terrestrial news programme. Our connection to young people is strengthened further by our growing portfolio of

new media content and services (such as the innovative on-demand application 4oD), usage of which is heavily skewed towards the youngest demographics.

While Channel 4 does not currently make programmes that would fall under the traditional “children’s” genre, many of its programmes unquestionably appeal to under-16s, such as Hollyoaks and some of the peak time Educational documentaries. Channel 4 is also required in its licence to transmit 330 hours each year of schools programmes, and comfortably exceeds this quota (with 395 hours in 2006). Our strategy in this area has been to focus on building “life-skills” for 14-19 year olds, tackling issues which teenagers often face in their daily lives. Programmes in 2007 focused on media literacy, careers advice and gay teen sexuality, with additional series on globalisation, science, philosophy, and parents. Amongst 10-15 year olds, Channel 4’s portfolio share has grown by 37% over the last five years, while viewing to the BBC and ITV channel portfolios has fallen by 17-20%.

In conclusion, Channel 4 has traditionally had a strong connection with young audiences – an increasing range of our programming appeals to older children, ie 10-15 year olds, as well as our traditional core audience of 16-34 year olds. Moreover, viewing of Channel 4’s channels by both of these age demographics is growing rapidly at a time when their viewing of the BBC and ITV channel portfolios is falling, meaning that Channel 4’s ability in the future to connect with children and young adults and to engage them with public service programming becomes more important than ever. In this context, Channel 4 is giving careful consideration to how it can engage more directly with children in the future.

### **Response to Ofcom’s questions**

Ofcom posed several key questions to which stakeholders were invited to respond. We set out some brief comments on these below. As noted above, we will return to these issues in more detail when we set out the Vision for Channel 4 in the New Year.

#### **What is the role and importance of UK- originated programming for Children?**

UK originated programming is extremely important in all programme genres: just as with other genres for adults, we agree with the audience research that it is important that children in the UK have a range of originated programmes to watch and relate to.

Of course, American imported programmes play a role, especially when it comes to entertainment, but UK originated programmes more accurately reflect the experiences of British children growing up, and at their best they resonate more strongly with young audiences’ concerns.

#### **What is the role and importance of plurality in the provision of children’s programming?**

We believe strongly that plurality is very important in all types of programming, and that originated children’s programmes should come from a variety of sources, not just the BBC. Plurality in the market place increases choice and quality, allows for different perspectives and approaches, and ensures constant innovation and creativity. These attributes are particularly relevant in the children’s TV market, both given the influence programmes can potentially have in shaping young people’s

minds, and the particular dominance of US acquired programming on children's channels.

We understand – from our dialogue with stakeholders engaged in the debates around children's TV – that there is a desire by parents for gritty, edgy drama and factual programmes for older children which cover serious issues, and that most originated children's programmes currently tend to shy away from such issues. It has been put to us that Channel 4's ethos – its willingness to take risks and tackle challenging subject matter, along with the authenticity achieved by programmes targeted at older teens, such as *Skins* and *Hollyoaks* – would be equally well-suited for programming for older children and younger teens.

Should more consideration be given to the provision of public service content for children over platforms other than "linear television"?

We agree that there should be more consideration for the provision of public service content for children over platforms other than "linear television". As Ofcom's report points out, watching television remains popular for older children and young teenagers but, more than for other age groups, activities using the internet and mobile phone are taking up growing proportions of their time. Our own research into the behaviour of young people confirms these findings.

The usage of new media by young people has motivated the development of Channel 4's new Schools strategy. From 2008, £6m of the commissioning budget for Schools programming has been shifted from linear TV to cross platform projects – the first time such a substantial TV commissioning budget has been re-focused towards new media in the UK. New commissions include interactive programmes such as "4Pioneers", a programme on social networking for social entrepreneurs; "Insiders" a blog network offering young people career advice; and "Get a Life" a YouTube and MySpace based reality series.

Does the policy approach for children's programming need to be different from the policy approach taken to public service broadcasting overall?

We believe that all PSB genres are important, and that each genre throws up particular challenges and issues that need to be addressed individually. However, these issues ultimately need to be considered in the round, and we support Ofcom's approach of looking at children's TV within the framework of its imminent PSB review. It is also important that any solution for children's programming should be a sustainable and long-term one, another reason why we support this being reviewed as part of Ofcom's PSB Review, which will focus on supporting sustainable models for PSB for over the medium- to long-term.