

Rhona Parry
PSB Review
Ofcom
Riverside House
2a Southwark Bridge Rd
London
SE1 9HA

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Dear Rhona Parry

Re: Second Public Service Broadcasting Review Phase 1: The Digital Opportunity

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) is the lead development agency for the arts. Our mission is to place arts at the heart of our social, economic and creative life. The broadcast media are significant influencers in modern society and their importance in helping ACNI realise its mission cannot be over emphasised.

ACNI therefore values the opportunity provided by Ofcom's review to contribute to Phase 1 of the consultation process. ACNI takes this opportunity to request that Ofcom proactively includes this organisation in future phases of the consultation process.

Sect 3: How well are the public service broadcasters delivering public purposes?

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) agrees with Ofcom's assessment that television continues to have an essential role in delivering the purposes of public service broadcasting.

In addition, ACNI agrees that locally-originated output is fundamental to the delivery of public service broadcasting purposes here in Northern Ireland.

It is the view of ACNI that coverage of the arts in NI is currently under-represented in national output by both BBC NI and ITV1's subsidiary UTV. It is imperative to state then, that the people of Northern Ireland are as entitled to have equitable access to our artistic and cultural assets as the citizens of London have to theirs. Further consultation by Ofcom into the means of widening access to arts coverage through PSB providers for people in Northern Ireland is an important criterion to ACNI.

Sect 4: The changing market environment

The increasingly fragmented media market, combined with competition from content providers in digital and online media, pressure on innovative, higher-risk programme making and lower levels of investment in UK-originated content are, overall, affecting standards of public service broadcasting.

For example, it appears that specialised factual programming in areas such as the arts is sacrificed for programming that is more economically viable for the commercial public service providers, and for programming which attracts larger audiences and more user interaction for the BBC. There is room for improvement in the delivery of public purposes by current public service broadcasters.

ACNI agrees that it is important to capitalise on the wide range of content providers – private, public, voluntary sector and individuals – who are producing an unprecedented diversity of interactive content which, in some respects, meet aspects of public purposes and characteristics.

On this note, ACNI would support consideration by Ofcom within this review, of the role of local, community television providers. It would appear that on condition that content could be quality assured as fit for the public purposes, such providers should be allowed to output broadcast on Freeview multiplexes.

This would have the effect of widening the reach of quality, local community television, which has a public service value in Northern Ireland, and has particular resonance for the coverage of community-based arts activities and events here.

Sect 5: Prospects for the future delivery of public service content

ACNI accepts the view of Ofcom regarding the short, medium and long-term likely outcomes for programming if the current PSB model remains unchanged – it is likely to deliver a poor result for content originating from within Northern Ireland.

Sect 6: Meeting audience needs in a digital age

Ofcom's vision for public service content is in keeping with ACNI views: programming should contain high levels of NI/UK content; innovative, original, challenging, engaging and high quality content; available on a variety of platforms; reflecting a plurality of suppliers and diverse in nature.

The current model for PSB is dated and does not serve the arts in NI well. PSB providers are required to deliver public service content as per relevant legislation, but in some content genres – the arts being one – individual broadcasters can decide just how much content they provide. This has allowed programming of the arts to decline in the face of changing market conditions.

Without doubt, digital and online providers have a role to play in providing public service content in the future. However, both digital and online platforms do not currently provide clear signposting to public service content. If such media are to be considered seriously as PSB providers then this 'discoverability' aspect must be remedied to meet users' needs.

Sect 7 & 8 : future models for funding, providing public service content programming and options for commercial PSBs

The possible funding sources of future models of PSB proposed by Ofcom, the models for long term delivery of public service content and options for commercial PSB's are all

worthy of consideration. ACNI will wait with interest to read the views of respondents on this matter but will not make a recommendation at this time.

ACNI notes that the proposed tests of effectiveness for PSB providers appear sufficient for purpose.

Sect 9: Scenarios for the UK's nations, regions and localities

ACNI makes the case that Northern Ireland has a particularly rich seam of artistic talent and its historical contribution to culture on these islands, as well as internationally, outweighs the size of its population – in short, in terms of our arts and cultural output, Northern Ireland punches beyond its weight.

ACNI continues to make the case for the arts and their valuable contribution to society, in terms of the beneficial economic impact they make and their ability to generate wellbeing while communicating the needs and desires of the people around us.

This rich source of content is substantially under represented in current public service broadcasting and in particular, is not given due cognisance by local public service broadcasters in Northern Ireland. Three-quarters of the adult population in NI and 93% of young people attend or participate in arts and cultural events. Yet public service broadcasters such as BBC NI rarely include the arts in its mainstream programming – unlike sports and farming.

In relation to BBC, described by Ofcom as 'the cornerstone of public service content provision', ACNI believes that BBC NI needs to raise the profile of its arts coverage to reflect the wider contribution of the arts to mainstream social, cultural and economic activities. One solution is regular inclusion of the arts in mainstream news and current affairs programming on both radio and television. Another is to invest and prioritise more specialized factual programming that reflects NI society and in particular, the rich contribution made to it by artists and arts organizations.

To summarise, ACNI believes that this review, provides an opportunity for the BBC to improve delivery on at least one of its 6 Public Purposes identified in its Royal Charter – 'stimulating creativity and cultural excellence' – by mainstreaming the arts within its news and current affairs programming and using the rich source of local stories available.

ACNI agrees with Ofcom's long term assessment that PSB issues, as they apply to Northern Ireland, will be affected by any overall model of PSB selected by government. However in the medium to short term, public service content from commercial suppliers and from BBC continues to evolve.

New opportunities for content delivery from digital and online producers are emerging in Northern Ireland and make a valuable contribution. Community television output, particularly that which covers arts and culture, could be more readily accessed by being provided through Freeview multiplexes. ACNI views this as potentially valuable support to public service programming, but does not view it as a substitute for same.

Sect 10: Prospects for children's programming

ACNI agrees with Ofcom's view of underinvestment in children's programming by current PSB providers and the need to reverse this within any new model of PSB selected.

Sect 11: Timetable for implementing a new model

ACNI agrees with Ofcom's views that new legislation should be in place by 2011 in order to continue delivery of the public purposes in PSB in the medium and long term.

This submission completes ACNI's response. This response is available for publication to Ofcom's website.

Rosemary Kelly
Chairman
Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Roisin McDonough
Chief Executive
Arts Council of Northern Ireland