

## Ofcom

### Small Screen Big Debate: Public service broadcasters and the UK production sector

#### Call for evidence

#### MG ALBA response

16 March 2021

#### **MG ALBA**

MG ALBA is short for Meadhanan Gàidhlig Alba (Gaelic Media Scotland) and is the operating name of Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig or the Gaelic Media Service.

MG ALBA's statutory purpose is set out in section 208, Communications Act 2003:

*"to secure that a wide and diverse range of high-quality programmes in Gaelic are broadcast or otherwise transmitted so as to be available to persons in Scotland"*

*"...and a reference to being available to persons in Scotland includes a reference to being available both to persons in Scotland and to others"*

Governance oversight of MG ALBA is exercised by Ofcom, who appoint members of the board of MG ALBA subject to the approval of Scottish Ministers.

MG ALBA is funded by the Scottish Government.

#### **BBC ALBA**

MG ALBA funds and operates BBC ALBA (the Gaelic language television channel) in partnership with the BBC. BBC ALBA is the first partnership television service to operate under a BBC licence.

BBC ALBA fulfils the UK's obligations for Gaelic television **under Article 11 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages** and is an important part of the Scottish broadcast ecology, commissioning a large proportion of all independently produced TV content in Scotland.

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**Question 1: Given changes to audience consumption patterns and wider market developments, is there any aspect of Ofcom's Guidance on commissioning of independent productions which Ofcom should update to ensure it remains fit-for- purpose?**

While MG ALBA recognises the changes in audience consumption patterns and wider market developments, the current framework sustains a useful ecology in which PSB investment enables the growth of a strong, internationalised independent production sector. Successful programmes may generate sales for the companies in other territories. The current system also enables talent development. As well as a strong UK independent production sector, this creates conditions attractive for inward investment. While streaming services can offer greater upfront payments, PSBs can be valued partners for independent production companies. MG ALBA is ambitious for the BBC ALBA supply sector, including through internationalisation, because not only does a stable, strong supply sector benefit the channel and its audiences, it creates economic benefits in some of the most economically fragile areas of the UK. The current system enables such growth and creates an incentive for production companies to opt to work with PSBs.

**Question 2: Is there any change to the independent production quota which Ofcom should recommend to Government as part of its 'Small Screen Big Debate' programme?**

While the current quota stipulates 25%, in practice the number is higher, and Ofcom's own estimate is that the majority of money spent on UK commissioned programmes is with the independent sector. [98% of MG ALBA's content budget](#) is invested in the independent production sector and, as noted above, we are ambitious for the channel's suppliers. Any move to stimulate the independent production sector, especially in Scotland, is good for the Gaelic media supply ecology.

**Question 3: Do you have any recommendations for potential changes to the definitions of 'qualifying programmes' or 'independent production' which Ofcom should recommend to Government as part of its 'Small Screen Big Debate' programme.**

No. Note that any move to change the definition of independent production risks impeding efforts to enable the growth of smaller independent production companies, to the benefit of large indies that are now bigger than the broadcasters themselves. MG ALBA supports a framework which enables smaller companies to develop and grow. We also believe this contributes to the creative diversity of the sector as a whole and that is ultimately to the benefit of the broadcasters and audiences. A change which would enable larger players to participate would restrict growth and limit creative diversity.