

## **Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review Phase Two: Preparing for the Digital Future**

### Response from Fergus Ó hÍr Raidió Fáilte

Despite its ability to provide cost effective public service broadcasting, increased plurality and effective services particularly for minority communities, there is not a great deal of discussion of the importance of radio in public service broadcasting within the discussion document. I would emphasize the importance of using the available digital space to ensure adequate Irish language services both through television and radio and that these be adequately funded.

While at present the Irish language broadcast fund provides funding for television it does not currently provide funding for Irish language radio and the future of the fund is not assured. This fund should be secured in the future, its remit should be increased to cover Irish language radio and it should be increased on an annual basis to ensure that it adequately meets the needs of the sector.

While coverage of TG4 is improving in the north and will increase further when it is provided on other platforms, this does not fulfill the responsibility of the British Government to provide an Irish language television service for the north of Ireland.

Presently Raidió Fáilte the Irish language community station is providing a good Irish language service on limited resources within the Belfast area this does not fulfill the requirement of the British Government to provide an Irish language radio service for the north of Ireland. The current license and financial arrangements need to be changed so as to allow the extension of the Raidió Fáilte community radio model to provide a service for and by the Irish language communities throughout the north of Ireland.

The consultation document does note in the responses to the phase 1 consultation (Section 2.39) the importance of radio, along with other providers, in the provision of public service broadcasting. There is an important role for radio in providing public service broadcasting in the Irish language which is not being fulfilled.

Ofcom has stated that Community Radio takes the lead in ‘providing social gain’ and that ‘one of the aims of Ofcom’s strategic approach is to secure community services for every community that wants one, providing programmes for special interest groups (including ethnic and religious communities), providing a sense of identity in local communities, with community involvement and participation, broadcasting community information and facilitating debate.’ (Ofcom The Future of Radio April 2007).

Raidió Fáilte is the only radio station licensed by Ofcom providing a full service in Irish for the Irish language community in the north of Ireland. At the moment Raidió Fáilte is restricted to broadcasting in the Belfast area which means that the whole of the Irish speaking community in Northern Ireland, outside of Belfast, have no radio station to cater for their community in their language (apart from Raidió na Gaeltachta broadcasting from the Republic of Ireland). Due to the scattered nature of this community and the difficulty that some of the more remote and isolated Irish language communities would have in providing a community station of their own we feel that the area of broadcast of Raidió Fáilte should be expanded, from its present restricted 5 km range, to allow more remote communities to enjoy listening to an Irish language station, while at the same time ensuring that these communities have the opportunity to input into the service at the level they are able to, so ensuring that the service represents these communities. The stronger communities would input proportionately according to their wishes so that the stronger communities are assisting the smaller or weaker communities in receiving and being involved in providing a genuine community based Irish language radio service throughout the north of Ireland.

At the moment OFCOM may, if they think fit, authorise the holder of a community radio licence, by means of a variation of the licence conditions, to provide the licensed service for any additional area or locality adjoining the area or locality in which that service has previously been licensed to be provided if it appears to them that the increase that would result is justifiable in the exceptional circumstances of the case.

The total absence of any Ofcom licensed Irish language station broadcasting to the Irish language community throughout the north of Ireland outside of Belfast does represent exceptional circumstance which justifies an increase in the area of broadcast cover for Raidió Fáilte. There are already precedents for an increase of broadcast area because of

dispersed population given that a number of community radio stations in Scotland have been awarded a licence for a service area greater than a 5km radius because of dispersed population. These are: The Superstation (Orkney); Speysound (the Badenboch and Strathspey area); and Mearns FM (Stonehaven and the Mearns).

In Wales and Scotland both the Welsh language community and the Scots Gaelic language community respectively can avail of a radio broadcast in their own language.

In Scotland BBC Radio na nGaidheal broadcasts around 65 hours per week in Scots Gaidhlig which based on figures published by Ofcom for average cost of programming equates to around £4 million per year

In Wales BBC Cymru broadcasts around 140 hours per week of Welsh language radio which based on figures published by Ofcom for average cost of programming equates to around £11 million per year.

By contrast the amount spent on Irish language broadcasting by BBC Radio Ulster who provide around 3 hours per week of radio broadcasting which based on figures published by Ofcom for average cost of programming equates to around £265,000 per year.

Raidió Fáilte which has provided a complete 24 hour radio service in Irish since it began broadcasting in Sept 2006 has in that period received one payment of £13,000 from the Ofcom Community Radio fund. We also receive funding from the cross border funding body Foras na Gaeilge but even with that, the provision and funding for Irish language radio in Northern Ireland is inadequate and is vastly lower than that provided for radio broadcasting in Welsh and Scots Gaelic.

The Good Friday Agreement recognised the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, of the importance of taking resolute action to promote the Irish language, of facilitating and encouraging the use of the Irish language in speech and writing in public and private life, of seeking to remove, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the Irish language.

In the St Andrews Agreement the Government undertook to introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland. In Wales and the Irish Republic

and also in Scotland radio stations exist for the respective languages, Welsh, Irish and Scots Gaelic.

The British Government is a signatory of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages which, with regards to the Irish language, undertook to respect the principle of the independence and autonomy of the media, and to make adequate provision so that broadcasters offer programmes in Irish. Raidió Fáilte as currently licensed does not fulfill the requirement of facilitating the broadcasting of private radio in Irish for areas outside of Belfast as is required under the European Charter.

Despite its present restriction to broadcast only in the Belfast area and the limited funding which it has received, Raidió Fáilte has shown itself to be capable of delivering a quality Irish language radio service. This service does not in its present restricted form fulfil the commitment or responsibility of Government to make adequate provision of Irish language public service radio broadcasting for the north of Ireland. Raidió Fáilte, in co-operation with Irish speakers and Irish speaking communities in the north of Ireland, needs to be enabled and facilitated in providing Irish language public service radio for the whole region. This requires an adjustment to the licence conditions with an extension of the area of broadcast currently allowed to Raidió Fáilte to enable it in co-operation with other Irish language communities throughout the north of Ireland, to provide an Irish language community public service broadcast radio service throughout the whole of Northern Ireland. The opportunity provided by the digital future to provide proper Irish language public service broadcasting services both in radio and television in Northern Ireland must not be missed.

Of the three models put forward by Ofcom, I believe that Model 1: Evolution is the model best suited for the development of Irish language broadcasting.

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