
Proposals by Ofcom for Changes to Television News Programming in ITV Border

Report by the Chief Executive

Scottish Borders Council

25th April 2013

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 **The purpose of this report is to gain approval for the Council's response to the proposals put forward by Ofcom for changes to news programming for ITV Border.**
- 1.2 As part of the licence renewal process ITV has been discussing with the independent television regulator Ofcom, a future Border TV service. This would be aimed at increasing the amount of regional news and current affairs programming by enhancing the coverage of Scottish issues for viewers in the South of Scotland (i.e. the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway).
- 1.3 The main proposals put forward (see Appendix 1) involve an enhanced nightly Border news programme *Lookaround* providing 30 minutes of news and a choice between:
- A new weekly 30 minute current affairs and politics programme for the Border TV region (i.e. covering Cumbria and the South of Scotland) **or**
 - An extra 90 minutes of current affairs programming each week that could be shared with STV and could result in the retransmission of the STV *Scotland Tonight* programme.
- The consultation also asks whether there is a different and more appropriate option to the above in respect to news and current affairs coverage.
- 1.4 The options form part of a wider Ofcom consultation on TV broadcast licenses which is open until 2 May 2013.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 **It is recommended that the Council:**
- **In relation to the available options being proposed by Ofcom, the Council supports the second option which is an extra 90 minutes of current affairs programming each week that could be shared with STV and could result in the retransmission of the STV *Scotland Tonight* programme.**

- **Indicates to Ofcom that the most desirable way forward for the Scottish Borders would be a Scottish national television channel with strong and effective local news coverage for the Scottish Borders.**

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 ITV provides the Channel 3 television service in England, Wales and parts of Scotland including Border TV and Scottish Television (STV). Public service broadcasters must meet certain programming obligations, such as the provision of news and current affairs programming and the amount of original and independent productions.
- 3.2 The current UK wide Channel 3 and Channel 5 television broadcast licenses will expire on the 31st December 2014. Ofcom provided advice to the UK Government's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on whether the existing licensees could continue to operate services for the 10 years period from 2015 onwards and meet the purposes of public service broadcasting on a commercially sustainable basis. This advice indicated that the existing licensees had presented proposals that were realistic, sustainable and commensurate with current levels.
- 3.3 In November 2012 the UK Government's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport announced that the Government did not intend to prevent the process of the renewal of the Channel 3 Public Service Broadcasting Licenses for a full 10 year term from their expiry at the end of 2014. Based on this decision Ofcom are now continuing the process of negotiation with the existing licensees on the renewal and details of the new licensees, and has issued a consultation paper with a series of questions. (see Appendix 2).The consultation period ends on the 2nd May 2014.
- 3.4 No changes have been proposed by Channel 3 licensees to regional television areas. This means that Scottish Television would continue to cover central and northern Scotland. However ITV has been discussing with Ofcom, a future service for the Border TV area (comprising Cumbria, Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders) that is aimed at increasing the amount of regional news and current affairs programming by enhancing the coverage of Scottish issues for viewers in the South of Scotland (i.e. the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway).
- 3.5 Scottish Borders Council together with Dumfries and Galloway Council and Cumbria County Council were involved in direct discussions over the previous changes to Border TV news programming arrangements in July 2008. This resulted in an early weekday evening 'Lookaround programme' involving 15 minutes Border news (covering the Scottish Borders, Dumfries and Galloway and Cumbria) followed by 15 minutes of Border/Tyne Tees news (covering the entire Border /Tyne Tees TV region), and a short weekday late evening news programme following the ITV news.

4 PROPOSALS FOR CHANGES TO NEWS PROGRAMMING

- 4.1 The UK Government's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport indicated to Ofcom that under ITV's proposals viewers in the South of Scotland (including the Scottish Borders) would not receive the same level of programming about Scotland as those living in central and northern Scotland (who are served by STV licensees). She said that the quality and plurality of news provision was of the utmost importance in the light of

these concerns.

4.2 To tackle this issue two options have been put forward by Ofcom for changes to new programming in the Border TV area, following discussions with ITV on the licence renewal process. These are:

4.3 **Option 1** involves an enhanced nightly Border news programme *Lookaround* providing 30 minutes of news from Cumbria and Southern Scotland, not including stories from the north east of England.

In addition, it is proposed that there would be a new weekly 30 minute current affairs and politics programme for the Border TV region (i.e. covering Cumbria and the South of Scotland) and that will focus on the stories, issues and concerns of viewers in the Borders. It will have a particular emphasis on matters dealt with by the Scottish Parliament. It would be broadcast at 10.35pm for 30 minutes, in most weeks of the year and could be repeated during the weekend.

4.3 **Option 2** involves the same new nightly Border news programme as Option 1 i.e. an enhanced nightly Border news programme *Lookaround* providing 30 minutes of news from Cumbria and Southern Scotland, not including stories from the north east of England.

In this option there would be an extra 90 minutes of current affairs programming each week that could be shared with STV and could result in the retransmission of the STV *Scotland Tonight* programme to viewers in Border Scotland while viewers in England would see programming shown on the rest of the ITV network Border.

Ofcom is also asking for views on whether, if this option was adopted, ITV would be required to split the signal for Border so that viewers in Border Scotland see *Scotland Tonight* (or similar) while viewers in England would see programming shown on the rest of the ITV network.

4.4 ITV's preference is for Option 1 and, if it is approved by Ofcom, it would intend to have the new services in place by the Autumn of 2013 which would allow it to fully cover the run up to the referendum on independence for Scotland.

4.5 The main Consultation Paper also asks whether there is a different option to the above two options in respect to news and current affairs coverage.

4.6 To complement these proposals Ofcom is also asking whether the Border licence should be amended to reduce the proportion of regional production required to a sustainable level. This would allow more resources to be made available for local news gathering which is important in a licence area serving a relatively small population.

5. The Response

- 5.1 News programming is vital for informing the public about decision making in local government and other public bodies and in providing details about other local news and events.
- 5.2 ITV Border covers a significant number of locally important stories which are unlikely to have been covered by more national TV media. Scottish Borders Council receives fairly good coverage of Council news and events from ITV Border. Between 1 January and 31 March 2013, ITV Border covered 14 items which directly related to the work of Scottish Borders Council.
- 5.3 Ofcom has carried out research into the preference of Border viewers for regional news. This research which involved full day sessions with participants in four locations including Galashiels, concluded that respondents universally would prefer a return to a service covering a smaller area in the belief that it would lead to more coverage of each of the localities surveyed. Although a service aimed at both central and southern Scotland received some support, many expressed concerns that in such a scenario, coverage would focus on the major population centres further north at the expense of news about the local area.
- 5.4 Any options for future television news programming needs to be measured on what is best for the people and communities of the Scottish Borders. It is considered that the ideal option would be for a Scottish national television channel with strong and effective local news coverage for the Scottish Borders as happens in BBC radio. This would meet demands for both more Scottish and local news coverage. However this is not an option that has been put forward by ITV or the regional television broadcasting companies.
- 5.5 With respect to the options outlined above a judgement needs to be made on whether this is best served by a new weekly 30 minute current affairs and politics programme for the Border TV region (i.e. covering Cumbria and the South of Scotland) or an extra 90 minutes of current affairs programming each week that could be shared with STV and could result in the retransmission of the STV *Scotland Tonight* programme.
- 5.6 It is considered that Option 2 would be the most appropriate option for Scottish Borders. This option would provide an extra 90 minutes of current affairs programming each week that could be shared with STV and could result in the retransmission of the STV *Scotland Tonight* programme to viewers in Border Scotland. This option would enable the Scottish Borders to develop and promote a stronger voice within Scotland by providing the opportunity for the area to influence the contents of this STV currents affairs news programming from any domination by the main population centres in central and northern Scotland. Option 2 would also allow an enhanced nightly Border news programme *Lookaround* providing 30 minutes of news from Cumbria and Southern Scotland which would provide more local news coverage in line with issues and points raised in paragraphs 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 above.

6 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial

- (a) There are no financial implications arising from this report.

6.2 Risk and Mitigations

- (a) Local television news is an important media for providing the public of the Scottish Borders with news about the Council and local issues. There is a risk that not responding to this consultation would have an adverse affect on the future of local news programming coverage for the Scottish Borders.

6.3 Equalities

- (a) There are no direct implications for equality and diversity arising from this report.

6.4 Acting Sustainably

- (a) There are no significant economic, social and environmental issues arising from this report.

6.5 Carbon Management

- (a) There are no effects on carbon emissions.

6.6 Rural Proofing

- (a) Rural Proofing is not required as proposals do not relate to new or amended policy.

6.7 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

- (a) There are no changes to be made.

7 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The Corporate Management Team, the Chief Financial Officer, the Head of Corporate Governance, the Head of Audit and Risk, the Clerk to the Council, and Corporate Communications have all been consulted in respect of this report and its recommendations. Their comments have been incorporated into this report. Any further comments will be reported at the meeting.

Approved by

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Background Papers: Channel 3 and Channel 5: proposed programming obligations, Ofcom, February 2013

Previous Minute Reference: nil

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Rosie Kennedy can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

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