

Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review

Phase 2: Preparing for the Digital Future

Consultation response from POBAL

POBAL agree that:-

5.77 Indigenous language broadcasting forms an important part of the public service broadcasting ecology of the nations of the UK, reflecting aspects of our cultural heritage unique to these islands.

As noted in the Belfast Agreement,

5.79 "The British Government will in particular in relation to the Irish language...seek more effective ways to encourage and provide financial support for Irish language film and television production in Northern Ireland".

The Agreement goes on:-

encourage the parties to secure agreement that this commitment will be sustained by a new Assembly in a way which takes account of the desires and sensitivities of the community.

(Good Friday Agreement, 1998)

This pledge clearly has not been carried through, especially in light of the threat to end the Irish Language Broadcast Fund.

As noted by Ofcom, and as highlighted by POBAL on many occasions,

5.88 ...The Irish Language Broadcast Fund receives additional funding of £6m in June from the UK Government, but only for a further two years until 2011. This was a matter of concern for many...who pointed to a lack of equity in funding arrangements for the broadcasting of Irish in Northern Ireland.

5.90 ...public funding for Irish language programming in Northern Ireland remains uncertain in the long term.

POBAL feel that this is a worrying trend, and agree that:-

5.94 Conclusion ... there is a perceived [sic] concern at the lack of consistency and equity, and sometimes certainty, in the current arrangements for funding delivery which are in place in different parts of the UK.

There is a clear case, given the anomalous position of the Irish language on these islands, for domestic and legal protection. In the St. Andrews Agreement, the British government promised:-

The Government will introduce an Irish language Act...

(St. Andrews Agreement, 2006)

This promise has not been fulfilled and until it is, the Irish language in the north of Ireland is vulnerable in all fields, broadcasting included. Legislation, similar to that in place in Scotland and Wales, which protects indigenous language broadcasting, is needed in the north.

POBAL would stress again the need, not only for the continuation of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund, but an increase per annum of at least 25%. This funding needs to be on a permanent basis, as is the case in Scotland and Wales. There is a need to ensure equitable treatment for Irish language broadcasting with Gaelic in Scotland and Welsh in Wales.

POBAL are not satisfied with BBC Northern Ireland's assertion that they, as their 'contribution to Irish language programming', are:-

5.89 ... set to double over the next three years...

especially, as pointed out by Ofcom, they are starting:-

5.89 ...from a low base.

While it is recognised that TG4 is widely available in the north, and it is a positive step that it will be available on DTT in Northern Ireland at DSO in 2012, POBAL do not feel that this is enough of a move, especially in light of the newly launched Gaelic digital service, BBC Alba, in Scotland, which caters for a smaller percentage of the population in Scotland than Irish speakers in the north. The question is also raised about a dedicated Irish language radio station in the north of Ireland. At the moment, the only dedicated Irish language radio station in operation in the north is Raidió Fáilte, which only broadcasts in the Greater Belfast area. The only other provision is through Raidió na Gaeltachta from the south, or BBC Radio Ulster, which only provides 7-8 hours of Irish language programming per week, much of which is bilingual, rather than fully in Irish.

The point also needs to be made, in regards to TG4 and Raidió na Gaeltachta, that provision paid for by the Irish government cannot be used to offset British government requirements in terms of Public Service Broadcasting through the medium of Irish.

POBAL would also question Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland's belief that:-

5.93 ...coverage of Ulster Scots cultural activities should be acknowledged as Ulster Scots content...

POBAL believe that this statement places the Irish language, and indeed Welsh and Gaelic at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to Ulster Scots. POBAL believe that, if Ofcom are to regard cultural activities for one indigenous language as 'content', then they should do the same for all other indigenous languages: in the case of the north of Ireland – Irish. This cultural coverage, however, is not synonymous with linguistic coverage, i.e. broadcasting in the indigenous language itself, or broadcasting for the core indigenous language community. It cannot be cited as evidence of fulfilment of domestic or international legal obligations in respect of indigenous languages, nor should it be funded from a budget for indigenous language broadcasting.

Of the three models put forward by Ofcom, POBAL believe that Model 1: Evolution is the model which best suits the development of Irish language broadcasting. However this cannot happen without effective financial and legislative support.