

Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review Phase One: The Digital Opportunity

Submission from the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Gaelic

The Scottish Parliament's Cross Party Group on Gaelic welcomes the opportunity to participate in the current debate and consultation on Public Service Broadcasting. As the Parliament's Cross Party Group with an interest in Gaelic matters our comments will be restricted to issues relevant to Gaelic broadcasting. Like many other organisations and individuals, the Cross Party Group has for many years lobbied successive Governments campaigned to provide funding for a Gaelic Service to be established and we are pleased that the new Digital Service goes on air in the coming autumn. We recognise that Gaelic broadcasting has a major part to play in both raising the profile of the language and also complementing other ongoing initiatives to secure the future of the language. There is, for example, ample evidence that Gaelic television is one of the most significant factors on positively influencing parents' choice of Gaelic Medium Education for their children. The new Service is also very important in terms of social justice, cultural diversity and equity. We therefore welcome the new Gaelic Digital Service.

We do however have serious concerns that many of the Gaelic-speaking audiences will not have access to the new Service because it is not being carried by Freeview – certainly not till 2010. It is our understanding that the majority of viewers who receive digital television do so through Freeview, rather than by satellite. We understand that the BBC Trust has mapped out a process it will go through to assess whether or not the new Service will be carried on Freeview but we urge Ofcom to bring pressure to bear on the Trust to ensure that this happens. We welcome the support for the new Service to be carried on Freeview from both Ofcom and DCMS.

The Cross Party Group believes that high quality public service broadcasting is essential for the wellbeing of the audiences. It also believes that Gaelic public service broadcasting provision is essential to ensure a sustainable future for the language. It would appear to us that the new Service has all the hallmarks of a public service but has not been accorded the PSB status. If the new Service was accorded PSB status it would enable the Service to be carried on all platforms, enabling all Gaelic-speakers to access the Service wherever they lived. We urge Ofcom to reconsider the status of the Service.

There are many appealing features in all the Models proposed as ways forward for the carriage of Public Service Broadcasting in the future, but, equally there are downsides to them all. We would ask that, when determining the way forward, Ofcom be alert to the dangers of creating a monopoly situation. We are of the belief that competition is healthy and essential in terms of Best Value and of maintaining high quality. We would also ask Ofcom to be alert to the dangers, for minority language channels, of currently ring-fenced finance being swallowed up and utilised for other programming. It is essential that there are safeguards put in place that this can not happen. Indeed, if the new Service, which we understand will operate for seven hours per day, is to be developed, it is essential that additional resources are made available for this to happen.

We are conscious that at the same time as the Ofcom PSB consultation is taking place that the Scottish Broadcasting Commission has been established to conduct an independent investigation into the current state of television production and broadcasting in Scotland and define a strategic way forward for the industry. It will be interesting to see their recommendations, with regards to Gaelic broadcasting. It was heartening to hear recently that the one programme that came up time after time as being a programme of quality was Eòrpa, which is a Gaelic Current Affairs programme produced by BBC Alba and funded by the Gaelic Media Service. Eòrpa attracts an audience figure far in excess of the recorded number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland and we believe that this is ample evidence that quality programmes can easily transcend language barriers.

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