

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

Response from Ofcom Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland

The Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland welcomes Ofcom's second Public Service Broadcasting Review and wishes to comment on the issues of particular interest to citizens and consumers in Northern Ireland.

Plurality

The Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland notes that audiences in Northern Ireland value plurality with 93% of respondents in Ofcom's recent research citing that it was important for UTV as well as BBC Northern Ireland to show news programmes about their nation. The Committee therefore welcomes Ofcom's endeavours to generate debate on this subject.

The Committee also acknowledges the important contribution made to plurality in Northern Ireland by the availability of RTÉ and urges Ofcom to give greater consideration as to how availability of cross-border channels can be maintained post switchover.

Indigenous Language Broadcasting

The Committee is concerned that indigenous languages continue to be highly politicised in Northern Ireland and encourage all parties to consider how best to advance the interests of both Irish and Ulster Scots speakers in a non-political context.

While the Committee welcomes the recent announcement to extend the Irish Language Broadcast Fund for a further two years, members remain concerned at the lack of long-term planning with regard to both the funding and scheduling of Irish language broadcast content. The Committee urges Ofcom to give further consideration to the suggestion made by Alan Esslemont of the Gaelic Media Service at the PSB conference held in Belfast on June 6 that the Government should seek to adopt a consistent UK-wide indigenous language broadcasting strategy, with Welsh as the sustainable model.

The Committee welcomes the suggestion that coverage of Ulster Scots cultural activities should be acknowledged as Ulster Scots content and notes that, as with Scots broadcasting by BBC Scotland, Ulster Scots would benefit in terms of profile and self esteem from being mainstreamed in Northern Ireland broadcasting.

Network Portrayal and Production

Reflecting life in contemporary Northern Ireland (as opposed to social unrest) at a network level continues to be an issue of concern (children's television is a particular case in point) as does the locating of network production, and the Committee notes that in recent years only 0.1% of total network production has originated in Northern Ireland. This is an issue of both citizen and consumer concern.

The Committee urges Ofcom to implement a mechanism for appropriately identifying both Northern Ireland network production and portrayal. Any new mechanism should

place the onus on the broadcaster to justify why particular programmes should be labelled as produced in Northern Ireland or reflective of life in Northern Ireland.