

SENT BY E-MAIL

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Ofcom
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Our ref: 08/27.1/ag/td

Dear Mr Thoedorou,

**OFCOM'S SECOND PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING REVIEW – PHASE 2:
PREPARING FOR THE DIGITAL FUTURE**

I write set out my response to Ofcom's decision, taken as part of Phase 2 of its Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, to approve ITV's proposals to reduce its level of regional news broadcasting which currently form part of its public service obligations as set out in its license agreement.

I have raised several of these objections previously in my submission to the first phase of Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review. I also recently met with Lynette Huntley, Ofcom's Director of Public Affairs, and Adam Higgitt, Ofcom's Public and Political Relations Manager, along with two of my parliamentary colleagues from the Bristol area and am aware that many of my colleagues share my concerns about Ofcom's decision to approve these proposals.

As a parliamentarian my primary concern is that the right conditions are provided to ensure a healthy functioning democracy at both the national and local level. News and documentary broadcasters and investigative journalists are an essential part of ensuring that our nation is well informed. They serve our democracy and help to ensure that it functions. At the local level, where the provision of quality news broadcasting may not always be commercially viable, public service obligations enshrined commercial broadcasters' license agreements are crucial to ensure that the BBC is not left to operate as a monopoly state provider in this area. Indeed, many in the BBC recognise that this helps to create the healthy competitive conditions for editorial standards to be upheld.

It is also important that 'local' broadcasting actually represents a coherent region or locality with an identifiable local identity and community of interest. The kind of geographic area covered by the "government zones" as designated by central government, for example is not necessarily useful for the purposes of local broadcasting; certainly not in my part of the world. News about Bristol, Stroud, Bournemouth and Gloucester is no more nor less relevant nor significant to my constituents in West Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly than if they were to be receiving national news coverage with stories about Bolton, Sunderland, Bangor or Glasgow.

Ofcom's decision to approve ITV's proposals to subsume its current sub-regional West and West Country services into a single South West service will therefore severely damage both the quality and relevance of local news coverage available to viewers. The centralisation of operations, resources and staff that this amalgamation of services will entail will result in these areas receiving

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local news coverage primarily through weekday evening 'opt-outs' from a regional broadcast covering a much wider and less relevant area. The quality of the local coverage is likely to be superficial and reactive given the severe reduction in local resources capable of producing serious investigative news broadcasting.

I understand that a review of the operation of commercial public service broadcasting obligations in light of the rapid development of unregulated digital, cable and internet based competitors is a necessary exercise. However, Ofcom's willingness to simply allow ITV to reduce its local broadcasting obligations without seeking a viable alternative solution to maintain coverage in the interim period between now and digital switchover in 2012 sets a dangerous precedent. I fear that once lost, Ofcom's commitment and ability to introduce regulatory measures which ensure adequate levels of local PSB broadcasting after switchover will be severely reduced.

Many are concerned that the consultation has seemed to be little more than a rubber-stamping exercise for proposals which were already decided upon by Michael Grade in September last year. I have been made aware by several concerned ITV employees that the company has already begun to implement the changes to premises and staff necessary for the creation of the new South West service before official approval has been given to their proposals following the outcome of this consultation process. I feel that this process has been driven more by considerations of ITV's commercial needs rather than a desire to protect and maintain the quality and quantity of public service broadcasting which should be Ofcom's main focus.

If ITV is not prepared to commit itself to a serious level of local public service broadcasting then perhaps their more prominent position on the spectrum should be offered to a company which is prepared to provide such a service. If this requires tax breaks or other indirect public support to enable its commercial viability then that should be arranged.

I do hope that these comments are helpful to Ofcom in its deliberations and that ITV's proposals may yet be amended for the good of viewers and of local democracy.

With every good wish.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew George MP