

# RTÉ Submission to Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, Phase Two: Preparing for the digital future

RTÉ welcomes the opportunity to respond to *Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, Phase Two: Preparing for the digital future* Consultation. In June 2008 RTÉ responded to Ofcom's *Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, Phase One: The Digital Opportunity* Consultation, with specific reference to the provision of RTÉ services in Northern Ireland; as well as the importance of cross-border collaboration and co-ordination of spectrum frequency planning and DTT deployment.

The *Ofcom Second Public Service Broadcasting Review* specifically referred to RTÉ and its services under a number of headings, and while the major focus concerned the provision of free-to-air Irish language television services, the Consultation document also opened a wider debate concerning the distribution of RTÉ services in Northern Ireland.

RTÉ was therefore very glad to participate in Ofcom's recent Public Service Broadcasting Conference - *Towards a Sustainable Future* - held at the Belfast Radisson on Thursday 13 November. Ofcom has proposed three models for how the public broadcasting system might look in the future. This Conference provided an opportunity for RTÉ to become informed of the various models of public service broadcasting currently under consideration in Britain, and also to engage in this debate.

## Media Pluralism

In the *Briefing Notes* for that Conference Ofcom states the following:

*There is a degree of plurality in the media landscape in Northern Ireland not found elsewhere in the UK and cross-border broadcasting may offer scope for new commercial partnerships with a public service dimension.*

RTÉ is eager to play its part in supporting plurality in Northern Ireland and would be glad to see provision made for the carriage of its services to all the communities of Northern Ireland. In addition, RTÉ has been active in supporting the independent production sector in Northern Ireland and would envisage continuing that support in the future. RTÉ further notes the discussion concerning the provision of indigenous language provision in Northern Ireland, and refers to Ofcom's *Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, Phase One: The Digital Opportunity* Consultation document, which stated that Ofcom recognised *'the importance of obtaining secure and widespread distribution for TG4 in Northern Ireland and the prospects for similar distribution of RTÉ'* (Section (9.101).

## Indigenous Language Programming in Northern Ireland

In this regard, Ofcom poses the following question:

### ***What about Irish language and Ulster Scots programming?***

*Indigenous language broadcasting is an important part of the UK's PSB landscape and there are formal obligations regarding broadcasting in Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Irish arising from both the European Charter for Minority Languages and existing UK legislation. In the case of Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement commits the*

*Government to making TG4 available in Northern Ireland, and Ofcom has already pointed the way for TG4 to become available on Freeview in Northern Ireland after digital switchover in 2012. The Agreement commits the Government to supporting Irish language production in Northern Ireland as well. Ofcom has also recognised that Ulster Scots is important to audiences in Northern Ireland.*

*We welcome the proposals from BBC Northern Ireland to increase the amount of Irish language and Ulster Scots programming. However, there are perceived concerns at the lack of a consistent approach to government funding for indigenous languages in Northern Ireland in the long term.*

In this regard, RTÉ fully supports the provision of TG4 services in Northern Ireland. While language is only one part of a complex set of identities, nevertheless the significance of the various indigenous languages of Northern Ireland cannot be over-emphasised in this particular context.

RTÉ wishes to re-state that RTÉ has a statutory obligation to broadcast in the Irish language as the first national language of Ireland. RTÉ currently operates an all-Irish radio service, RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta; provides an annual subvention of one hour's programming per day to TG4; as well as investing in specific home-produced and acquired Irish language programming in television and radio schedules. The RTÉ website also publishes Irish language material online. RTÉ services, therefore, are bilingual. RTÉ has been pleased to work with the independent sector in Northern Ireland and to assist in submissions to the Irish Language Broadcast Fund (ILBF) also.

## **Free-to-air Digital Terrestrial Television**

The advent of the DTT platform in Britain and Northern Ireland, and soon in the Republic of Ireland, provides a unique opportunity for broadcasters to contribute to the further establishment of peace and reconciliation and play a part in supporting the normalisation of Northern Irish, and indeed Irish, society by allowing for the full expression of '*all traditions and identities on the island*' free-to-air in both jurisdictions.

A final point, with regard to digital switchover, concerns the probable loss of RTÉ services in Northern Ireland to many viewers there who will be affected when the switchover happens in 2012. This will have a significant impact on the cultural diversity of the television landscape in Northern Ireland. For this reason RTÉ asks if some way of legitimately providing free-to-air RTÉ services in Northern Ireland could be considered?

RTÉ looks forward to engaging with Ofcom and all the other stakeholders and interested agencies in Northern Ireland as preparations for the digital future progress.

*RTÉ, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2008*