

Renewal of the Channel 4 Licence – Ofcom Consultation

Response by the Ofcom Advisory Committee for Wales (ACW)

Duration of Licence

ACW welcomes the licence renewal process for Channel 4 and the way it has been handled by Ofcom. ACW endorses Ofcom's proposal to renew the licence for a period of ten years. Channel 4 is an important part of public service broadcasting in the UK, and it needs a certain amount of stability to be able to plan and carry out its remit.

Channel 4's Remit

Channel 4 was established 31 years ago. Key features of the remit given to the channel include

To appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society

To make a significant contribution to meet the need for the licenced public service channels to include programmes of an educational nature, and other programmes of educative value

To exhibit a distinctive character

ACW feels that this is a good time to examine the remit and its meaning. While Channel 4 at present attempts to address the portrayal of ethnic and sexual minorities, as well as disabled people, ACW believes that the concept of 'a culturally diverse society' does not adequately demonstrate the need for the Channel to reflect the **cultural** diversity of all the component countries of the UK. Fourteen years after devolution, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have distinctive societies and governments, and Channel 4 should address this. Its role of explaining diversity and minority cultures to the rest of the UK should formally extend to the UK's nations. This could be simply stated as:

To appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society in the context of a devolved United Kingdom

Quotas

ACW welcomes the fact that Channel 4 has already exceeded its quota of programmes commissioned from the nations (5.4% of spend and 7% of volume against a target of 3%). We note that since the target was first mooted by Ofcom in 2009 Channel 4 has increased its overall out of London production at a faster rate, and that the biggest single contributor to the OOP, remains Southern England.

Given the success that Channel 4 has already had in increasing production from the UK Nations, ACW does not believe that a target of 9% by 2020 is ambitious enough. 17% of the UK's population lives in the nations, and, while we appreciate that, unlike the BBC, Channel

4 does not have production bases to move to the nations to facilitate a much larger target in a shorter time frame, we believe that as a Public Service Broadcaster, Channel 4 should have a quota of 12% of its productions from the UK nations by 2020, with an aspiration to achieve this figure well in advance. The channel should have a larger target, which it aspires to meet over the lifetime of the licence period.

We also feel strongly that if a programme is commissioned from a UK nation, the whole value of that commission (editing, post production etc) should remain within that nation. We have heard of past instances where a director, brought in from London, has taken a project back to London to complete after filming. Wherever the facilities exist in the nation where filming has taken place, the project should be finished locally.

Portrayal

In its 2009 PSB Review 'Ofcom identified that production of programmes that reflect the lives and concerns of different communities and cultural interests and traditions within the United Kingdom, and locally in different parts of the United Kingdom'. It was for this reason that an Out of England production target was mooted.

However, experience has shown that commissioning programmes from the nations does not necessarily lead to portrayal of those nations, and nor should it be so. Neither Independent Companies nor Channel 4 as the commissioner would want a situation where companies from the nations could only make programmes about their own nation. Nor would anyone want to exclude a company from anywhere in the UK making a programme in or about another nation.

However, ACW believes that Channel 4 must consider the portrayal of the cultural diversity of all the UK's nations in its output. We note that according to Channel 4's own research viewers rate it below average on the statement 'Portrays my region/nation fairly to the rest of the UK'

ACW believes that Channel 4 should formulate a strategy for improving this area. The UK nations have their own minorities and diverse communities and there must be ways of filming more general programming in those nations, in addition to bringing to a UK audience, strong stories from the nations of general interest.

Although news is not a specific part of this consultation, ACW does consider Channel 4's news provision to be a high quality, distinctive offering. However, we also believe that it sometimes seems better able to report on International news than news from within the UK Nations. It also makes the 'mistake' (from which other public service broadcasters are also not exempt) of reporting stories which only apply to England (in the fields of Education or Health, for example) as if they apply UK wide. We would like to see an agreement between Channel 4 and its news provider to improve that situation.