



**Consultation Response to:
Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review
Phase two: Preparing for the digital future**

December 2008

1. The SDLP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Office of Communications (Ofcom) consultation on public service broadcasting (PSB).
2. The SDLP believe it is vital that future planning allows for strong and vibrant PSB that is tailored to the specific needs of viewers in Northern Ireland given the unique cultural and political make-up of this region of the British Isles.
3. Consequently the SDLP believe strong public service broadcasting is only viable if provision extends beyond the remit of the BBC.
4. The SDLP find some merit in two of the refined models for long-term broadcasting, the evolution model and the broad competitive funding model.
5. It is important that any model chosen allows for greater integration with the broadcast network in the Republic of Ireland so that viewers on both sides of the border are able to access programming from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.
6. Additionally the new infrastructure must be developed in such a way as to ensure digital platforms in the North and South of Ireland are entirely compatible.
7. The SDLP find merit in the broad competitive funding model as we are aware that in future audiences are likely to turn to new platforms and content providers and as a consequence we are keen that the future of PSB is not jeopardised by overly restrictive future planning.
8. However it is vital that any future licensing structure is designed within a regional framework. A single UK wide licence would have a hugely damaging effect upon PSB for Northern Ireland.
9. Consequently we deem it vital that PSB is not left solely to the BBC or to Channel 4 and the BBC; it is essential that regional broadcasters are at the core of any new PSB structure.
10. The SDLP would welcome an extension to the Channel 4 PSB remit provided this comes without a reduction in PSB output from other PSB providers who have a history of regional broadcasting provision that is not matched by channel 4.
11. The SDLP find merit in the affiliate system detailed in the evolution model as we realise it would not be commercially viable to have a stand-alone nation-based license in Northern Ireland.
12. However any restructuring should not dilute the quality or quantity of PSB delivered by regional broadcasters and we believe the affiliate model may produce undue restrictions on the regional broadcaster as the partner broadcaster, as is currently happening to UTV Television with commercial pressures restricting the amount of regional programming ITV wish to carry.

13. The SDLP encourage Ofcom to undertake further assessment of the possibilities for the affiliate model with regard to Northern Ireland, including the possibility of an affiliate partnership with broadcasters from the Republic of Ireland.
14. The SDLP welcome Ofcom's understanding of the importance of indigenous languages in the UK's broadcasting ecology: "Indigenous language broadcasting forms an important part of the public service broadcasting ecology of the nations of the UK, reflecting aspects of our cultural heritage unique to these islands."¹
15. However the SDLP believe Ofcom must include proposals to safeguard and encourage Irish language programme production and broadcasting within the UK structures and develop principles on which the broadcasting of Irish language programmes can be incorporated into the UK's broadcasting system to prevent reliance on the output of Republic of Ireland broadcasters.
16. As well as the licence fee, the SDLP believe there should be Regional Broadcasting fund established for Northern Ireland to part-fund high-quality cultural content which might not otherwise be produced.
17. This Regional Broadcasting fund should be additional to a secure and permanent Irish Language Broadcast fund.
18. The SDLP would like to see the devolution of broadcasting matters to the Northern Ireland Assembly and would welcome the establishment of a broadcasting commission for Northern Ireland. That would include in its remit a duty to safeguard and encourage Irish language programme production.
19. We commend the work of UTV Television for its successful and innovative PSB output and are keen to see such high levels of service continue.
20. We strongly believe any reduction in short term regulatory quotas for PSB in Northern Ireland to be completely inappropriate, especially given Ofcom state: "We believe UTV should be able to fulfill its commitments to news and other programmes throughout the license period."²
21. Furthermore the SDLP are disappointed that Ofcom has allowed UTV Television to use this interim regulatory decision as part of its reasoning for recently proposed job cuts, especially as final recommendations are yet to be made.

¹ Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review Phase two: Preparing for the digital future
Page 82 paragraph 5.77

² Ibid Page 115 paragraph 7.14