

**Minutes of the 94th meeting of
the Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland
held hybrid (at Landmark House, Belfast and via Microsoft Teams)
on Thursday 5th December 2024**

Present

Carrie Matchett	ACNI Chair
Aodhan O'Donnell	ACNI Member
Colm Murphy	ACNI Member
Jackie Neill	ACNI Member
Michael Wilson	ACNI Member
Paul Wickens	ACNI Member
Karen Baxter	Ofcom Board Member for Northern Ireland (via Teams)
Maria McCann	Content Board Member for Northern Ireland

In attendance

Jonathan Rose	Northern Ireland Director
Bimpe Archer	Regulatory Affairs Manager
Jane Hillis	Regulatory Affairs Advisor (via Teams)

NextGen NED observer

Representative from the Communications Consumer Panel (via Teams)
Channel 4 Representatives
Other Ofcom colleagues (via Teams)

Apologies

Judith Carville	Regulatory Affairs Manager
James Stinson	Regulatory Affairs Manager

Item 1: Welcome, apologies and declaration of Members' Interests

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Judith Carville and James Stinson.
2. Members did not have any new interests to declare.

Item 2: Minutes of the 93rd meeting held on 10th October 2024 and Actions

3. The Minutes of the 93rd meeting were approved.
4. Members noted one Outstanding Action, (Item 8, Point 32, outstanding due to difficulty locating research), and agreed all other actions were complete/on-going after two verbal updates.

Item 3: Interim Committee Business & Issues since last meeting

5. The Chair invited updates from the Connectivity & Consumer and Broadcasting subgroups:
Connectivity & Consumer
6. The subgroup lead highlighted recent work, including a meeting with the Royal Mail to discuss the postal USO. **(ACTION – consider a further meeting with Royal Mail at the next stage of Ofcom's USO work.)**
7. The subgroup will consider responding to Ofcom's forthcoming consultation on the ADR process. **(ACTION – ADR consultation to be shared on publication.)**
Broadcasting
8. The subgroup lead highlighted recent publications and news including: the new Channel 4 licence; Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC, which included Radio Foyle's missed news and current affairs quota; and the report on the Future of News by the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee.
9. On Ofcom's Local Media Review, the subgroup had found their pre-publication briefing with the project team extremely useful and had provided written advice in relation to NI.
10. On the BBC Annual Report, the Chair noted the recognition that plans for 'high impact' programming for NI had reduced significantly, in spite of the BBC strategy to divert some funding from local opts to optimise 'high impact' co-commissions for consumption across the UK – an issue that had been raised by the Committee. The subgroup lead asked for clarification on the reporting of upheld or partly upheld complaints to the BBC, as shown in Figure 6 on page 74 of the report. **(ACTION – raise with Ofcom's BBC team.)**
11. The Committee discussed the mitigations for the loss of talkSPORT's AM coverage in Northern Ireland, following the station's request to close a number of its AM transmitters across the UK. The Committee concluded that in light of the mitigations a response to the consultation would not be necessary.
Chair & other Business
12. The Chair thanked the NI team for involving the Committee in the Board's visit to Belfast in November.
13. The Chair noted that Committee members had received an invitation to Ofcom's annual Plan of Work event to be held in January at Parliament Buildings, Stormont.
Online Safety
14. Several Committee members had met with the Online Safety Terror & Hate group in November for feedback on their Illegal Harms consultation response. This had been a positive meeting with members reassured that Ofcom had taken their concerns on board.

The Committee will look forward to understanding how their advice was reflected in the illegal harms codes to be published in December.

Item 4: Committee Discussion on Agenda items:

15. Members discussed the key issues to raise in items 9 and 12.
16. Members agreed that ahead of the next Committee meeting, a list of upcoming 2025 consultations would be useful for prioritisation. **(ACTION – compile list.)**

Item 5: Board update from Northern Ireland Member

17. The Board member reported on the Board's most recent meeting and highlighted several items which had been discussed. These included: the Board's stakeholder engagement in Belfast; a Northern Ireland situation report; Ofcom's 3-year plan; the Public Service Media Review and the Telecoms Security Act. **(ACTION – share NI report with Committee).**
18. Committee members agreed a planning meeting for the next budget year would be beneficial before the next scheduled ACNI meeting in March. **(ACTION – arrange planning meeting).**

Item 6: Content Board update from Northern Ireland Member

19. The Content Board member reported on the Board's most recent meeting and work and highlighted several items which had been discussed. These included: proposals related to the Listed Events regime; the formation of an advisory committee for mis & dis information; and minority language broadcasting.
20. The Committee discussed the differences in volume and spend on minority language broadcasting in each devolved Nation and noted its importance to the local independent production sector.
21. The Committee restated its support for TG4's long-standing request to be elevated up the Freeview Electronic Programme Guide in Northern Ireland.

Item 7: Public Policy Update

22. The Chair welcomed a member of the Public Policy team to the meeting and thanked them for an insightful paper.
23. The team member informed the Committee of additional announcements and publications within recent days including: Ofcom's Connected Nations report; the CMA's decision on the proposed merger of Vodafone and Three; and Ofcom's update on its Digital Markets strategy.
24. The Committee expressed an interest in Ofcom's monitoring of the impact of the new One Touch Switching process on consumer behaviour.
25. The Committee also discussed: Ofcom's recent open letter on Generative AI; next steps for both the House of Lords Committee's Future of News report, and Ofcom's Local Media review; and progress on the plans for a Regulatory Innovation Office.

Item 8: Online Safety Report

26. Bimpe Archer introduced her paper and highlighted key issues, including a new trusted NI 'flagger' for fraud content, and a Media Literacy Ireland conference held on 4th December.

27. Bimpe informed the Committee that Ofcom's new Online Safety Group Director had been appointed and will take up their post in March 2025.
28. Bimpe noted the impending publication of the Illegal Harms codes & statements.
29. The Committee discussed local political engagement on Online Safety.

Item 9: Media Act implementation

30. The Chair welcomed members of the Media Act team. The team gave a brief introduction to their paper and highlighted the most immediate and relevant consultations arising from the Media Act implementation.
31. The Committee discussed the importance of defining and protecting local news content, and how the new Video On Demand Code would affect existing VoD content.
32. The Committee was particularly interested in radio deregulation and whether that would lead to network content replacing local content on some commercial radio stations. They expressed an interest in discussing this in more detail prior to any consultation publication. **(ACTION – Broadcasting subgroup to meet with Radio Policy team.)**
33. The Committee was also interested in changes to PSBs' programming quotas, especially the impact of quotas being able to be met online as well as through linear output. The Committee expressed concern at the potential impact of this aspect of the Media Act on local linear programming and agreed to monitor this issue.
34. The team agreed to come back to the Committee in the Spring for a further update.
(ACTION – agree June meeting date with team – complete)

Item 10: Communications Consumer Panel update

35. The Chair welcomed a Panel member to present the update paper, in the continued absence of a member for Northern Ireland.
36. The Committee noted that recruitment was underway to appoint a new NI member of the Panel.
37. The CCP member informed the Committee that the Panel will be meeting in the New Year to prioritise its research for 2025 and would welcome ACNI input. Members agreed it would be beneficial for the Connectivity & Consumer subgroup to collaborate with the Panel on this. The Chair noted that research on the consumer impact of network outages could have a Northern Ireland dimension. **(ACTION – organise a C&C subgroup meeting in New Year.)**
38. The Committee discussed One Touch Switching and the impact third party intermediaries could have in this area.
39. Committee members discussed research on the impact being online is having on younger generations.

Item 11: Northern Ireland Director's Report

40. Jonathan Rose introduced his paper. He thanked the Committee for its support with the Board's visit and Ofcom's sessions at the Belfast Media Festival. He also noted the NI Connected Nations Report and growing political interest in geo-blocking of RTÉ content in Northern Ireland.
41. The Committee discussed recent attacks on 5G mobile masts in Belfast and the status of mobile masts in relation to Critical National Infrastructure.
42. Noting the advanced rollout of full-fibre broadband in the NI Connected Nations report, the Committee asked how this might be leveraged to support inward investment.
(ACTION – ask Invest NI)

Item 12: Channel 4

43. The Chair welcomed the Channel 4 representatives to the meeting and thanked them for the presentation provided in advance.
44. The Chair noted the strongly-felt and consistent views held by stakeholders in Northern Ireland – including the Committee – and across the devolved nations regarding the recent relicensing process. With that process now concluded, the Committee wanted the discussion with Channel 4 to be forward-looking and focussed on Channel 4’s ambition for Northern Ireland and how it would ensure Northern Ireland’s production sector was treated fairly in the years ahead.
45. The Board member for Northern Ireland echoed those comments and emphasised the importance of improved engagement with and by Channel 4. In that regard, she welcomed the appointment of Jo Street as Channel 4’s new Director of Commissioning for the Nations & Regions.
46. The Channel 4 representatives made opening comments about their planned investment in industry engagement, commissioning, and skills-development in Northern Ireland. They acknowledged the hurt felt by the local production sector which needed to be addressed and recognised the importance of Channel 4 being accountable for its performance. On commissioning, they said they wanted to have a steadier flow of commissions from Northern Ireland and noted two recently announced commissions. They also explained plans for further development funding and putting commissioning leads in place for each genre in the nations. Increasing investment in skills would focus on developing existing talent and filling gaps to complement the content work in Northern Ireland.
47. The Committee raised several issues with the Channel 4 representatives in relation to commissioning, partnerships, engagement and skills-development in Northern Ireland, including:
- The importance of a new partnership with Northern Ireland Screen
 - The balance of investing in commissions versus development or skills funding
 - Providing better engagement and feedback to indies after commissioning rounds
 - The possibility of co-productions with broadcasters in the Republic of Ireland
 - How Channel 4 will deliver its 12% Out of England commissioning target by 2028
48. Summing up, the Chair reflected the positive nature of the discussion and stressed the importance of Channel 4 making concerted and collaborative efforts to build its relationships in Northern Ireland, to correct for its lack of physical presence here. Mindful of Channel 4’s new licence requirement to produce a commissioning strategy for Northern Ireland, the Committee agreed to invite Channel 4 representatives back to discuss progress in June 2025.

Item 13: Any Other Business

49. On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked this year’s Next Gen NED observer for their contribution to the ACNI meetings over 2024 and wished them well for the future. The thanks were reciprocated by the NED observer for an interesting and enjoyable experience with the Committee.
50. The Chair also thanked Michael Wilson for his work as mentor to the NED observer.
51. The Chair thanked Committee members and the Ofcom NI team for their work during 2024 and closed the meeting by wishing everyone a Happy Christmas.

