

We are writing in response to Ofcom's consultation on its review of regional TV production and programming guidance. We are extremely disappointed that on-screen talent is excluded from the criteria for a production to qualify as regional (which includes those badged as produced in one of the UK's nations) and are writing to urge Ofcom to include opportunities for on-screen talent in its revised guidance and explanatory notes for public service broadcasters on regional TV production.

While Ofcom recognises on-screen talent as an important part of the production industry and the benefits of local casting initiatives, it is disappointing that the only reference in the amended guidance to on-screen talent is that it exempts it from the criteria.

Over the past number of years, high profile, award winning drama series (include Poldark, The Lost Honour of Christopher Jefferies, Five Daughters, Three Girls to name some) have been filmed in the West and South West of England using regionally based actors from regional casting sessions, thus proving that there is a pool of regional talent which is just waiting to be harnessed. As one of 4 Equity Branches in the South West - which totals over 3000 Equity members - local casting (or rather the lack of) is an issue that comes up time and time again to our branches, desperate for a move away from the metropolitan centric casting of London and Manchester.

Production companies may argue that it will impact on the quality of their dramas if they are somehow forced to hire actors that are outside London. This would be a slur to the talent on offer outside of the M25 area. Evidently by the examples of the productions mentioned above, it does not have a negative impact on quality. Nobody is forcing them to actually cast these actors (although there are further benefits to doing so) but it would be prudent to hold at least one casting session in a region where the project is filmed. It is not a quota of numbers as it is with crew: it is just a case of holding casting sessions - widening the net.

Again - with the productions mentioned as examples - it was the decision of an individual director or casting director to come to the region, and make a success of it: it was not the TV or Film company's mandate. These are the minority of productions which come to the Bottle Yard Studios based in Bristol; the majority of productions pitch up with a selection of actors who have been cast in London. These companies are not choosing to invest in the local talent. And they won't unless they are forced to.

Local casting sessions will in effect pay for themselves. If a production does cast a number of regionally-based actors, then that will reduce the production cost in relation to accommodation, travel and other subsistence, so therefore they will recoup at least some of the cost that they put into the casting sessions and - as a Union - I am certain Equity would be very happy to help facilitate these things. The casting of local talent will additionally help improve work/homelife balance which in turn can be a contributing factor to improving mental health and wellbeing (another major topic from our branch members). It also opens up the employment opportunities to a broader and more diverse range of talent, especially those with caring and parental responsibilities, and performers with disabilities.

Regions such as the South West of England still hold an authenticity in accent and lifestyle, as well a unique historical understanding of the counties within the region (and it would be the same for other regions as well with their own historical and accents) and the talent

within will have a strong and proud connection to this, even in this age of diversity. When a production is set within a region that it's filmed (such as Poldark), local castings adds a level of this authenticity in terms of accent; in terms of a local population that understand the history of the region; and the knowledge that they invested in a project. There's a passion and enthusiasm because it's their story.

Then there is the issue of what and how the industry can do to help improve its carbon footprint and effect on ecological/environmental issues such as Climate Change. The fewer miles a performer has to make to a casting and work, the less negative impact it has holistically. The more performers cast locally, the more positive the impact holistically. The industry needs to seriously review and assess its negative contribution to environmental and ecological issues. Local casting will be one way to help improve matters. In addition, whilst economics and ecological issues do not always balance well, casting locally would also help local economics by ensuring that money paid and spent is kept within the locality of the local performers' region.

The purpose of this regulatory structure is to strengthen regional production centres and creative and cultural economies across the UK, including helping to disperse job opportunities in the sector; actors and performers are a key part of their regional creative economies and are a significant factor in the success of productions.

On behalf of our branch members, we urge you to include opportunities for on-screen talent in the guidance and explanatory notes on regional production and look forward to your response to this consultation.

Yours sincerely

Bristol & West General Branch of Equity