

Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review
Phase One: The Digital Opportunity
RESPONSE BY STONEWALL

1. Stonewall is the national organisation that has campaigned for equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people across Britain since 1989. We welcome the opportunity to comment on Ofcom's second review of public service broadcasting.
2. In recent years, Stonewall has published a range of research exploring how gay people and their lives are depicted on television, how lesbian and gay people themselves feel about this reflection and how it shapes heterosexual perceptions of gay lives.
3. In this brief response, we have focused on areas and issues that are of particular concern to us, rather than responding to every question.
4. For further information on any of the points raised in this response, please contact Jonathan Finney, Senior Parliamentary Officer. Jonathan.Finney@stonewall.org.uk, telephone 020 7593 1850. All Stonewall's research publications are available to download at www.stonewall.org.uk.

Delivering the purposes of public service broadcasting

5. Section 3 of the review asks how well public service broadcasters are delivering the purposes of public service broadcasting. **Stonewall believes that television continues to have an essential role in delivering those purposes, and that public service broadcasters have an obligation to reflect the lives and concerns of lesbian and gay people in Britain in a sensitive and realistic way.**
6. The review notes that the Communications Act requires BBC channels and the main terrestrial television services to deliver programmes and services which cover a wide range of subjects and which meet the needs and interests of many different audiences, to reflect the lives and concerns of different communities in the UK. **Stonewall strongly supports this requirement.**

Public service broadcasting – reflecting gay people's real lives

7. Television is an immensely powerful medium with the capacity to educate, inform, include and challenge millions of individuals. It is one of the most powerful influencing forces when it comes to tackling prejudice, yet conversely it also has the power to reinforce prejudices and stereotypes. **The way in which lesbian and gay people and their lives are depicted on television impacts on the way in which gay people see themselves, helping them to come to terms with their own sexuality and identity.**

8. This is particularly pertinent for young lesbian, gay and bisexual people developing an understanding of their sexual orientation and looking to television and other media for role models. Public service broadcasting plays an essential role not only in raising awareness of different communities, but also in raising awareness within communities. Young gay people in Britain are still unlikely to see their own lives reflected in public service broadcasting at all. Characters and plotlines which do include lesbian and gay people still depend all too often on heavily clichéd views. Stonewall's work to tackle homophobia in education has highlighted the prevalence of homophobic bullying in our schools, with almost two thirds (65 per cent) of young lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils experiencing direct bullying.
9. Broadcasters must inform, educate and entertain by giving an honest and informed perspective on the real lives of gay people. They should help educate young people about the consequences of homophobia and challenge, rather than copy or even instigate, the casual homophobia all too often encountered in schools.
10. A monitoring exercise of 168 hours of primetime BBC1 and BBC2 published by Stonewall in 2006 (*Tuned Out*) suggested that gay licence payers were being underserved by the BBC. The research demonstrated that within 10,000 minutes of programming, gay people's real lives featured for just six. *Tuned Out* found that many licence payers feel that the BBC has a responsibility to serve and represent lesbian and gay people.
11. Stonewall has undertaken further research to understand what gay people think about the portrayal of their own lives on television and what they think of different public service broadcasters. In a recent report by Stonewall (*Serves You Right: Lesbian and gay people's expectations of discrimination*, 2008) **nearly half of gay people said that the overall portrayal of lesbian and gay people on television is unrealistic**, with women and young people more likely to think this. However, lesbian and gay people's views of different public service broadcasters vary considerably, and when broadcasters do make an effort to portray lesbian and gay people realistically it pays off.
12. For example, lesbian and gay people are twice as likely to think that Channel 4 broadcasts more realistic portrayals of gay people, compared to other terrestrial channels. Eight in ten lesbian and gay people think Channel 4 will take complaints about homophobia as seriously, or more seriously, than other complaints. However, they believe ITV and Channel 5 are less likely to take them seriously.

Public service broadcasting - heterosexual attitudes towards gay people

13. **Television also plays an important role in how gay people's lives are seen by heterosexual audiences, whose attitudes may be shaped by media portrayal.** Stonewall commissioned a nationally representative sample of over 2000 adults in October 2006 for our *Living Together* report, with the aim of understanding the nature of feeling towards lesbian and gay people in Britain today.
14. Almost a fifth of people think that television is responsible for anti-gay prejudice, and 83% also believe that the media including television relies heavily on clichéd stereotypes of gay people. Many people (38 per cent) feel that television has a responsibility to reduce anti-gay prejudice – more so than parents, government or the

police. **People believe that the media is not doing enough in this area.**

15. It is essential that public service broadcasters ensure that programming portrays realistic representations of lesbian and gay people and their lives. This means not only the inclusion of gay characters but the avoidance of stereotypes and the use of plotlines where gay characters' sexual orientation is incidental rather than being 'the story' in itself. For example, in entertainment and drama programming the arrival of a gay character - and other characters' subsequent responses to them - are routinely sensationalised, with broadcasters seemingly reluctant to present gay people in everyday scenarios such as stable relationships or family life.

Meeting audience needs in a digital age

16. Section 6 of the review asks how important are plurality and competition for quality in delivering the purposes of public service broadcasting. **Stonewall believes that public service broadcast plurality matters because it could result in greater diversity in output and better quality of output that offers lesbian and gay licence payers an improved service .**
17. Our research has demonstrated that lesbian and gay people have felt underserved by the BBC while other public service broadcasters have greater strengths in meeting the particular needs of lesbian and gay audiences. For example, as noted above, our research shows that gay people respond positively to the role of Channel 4, and its depictions of gay lives and issues. Public service broadcasting should not be left entirely to the BBC if other broadcasters can and do better meet the needs of particular audiences.
18. In its new vision launched in March 2008, Channel 4 included a welcome initiative to 'reinvigorate its connection with minority audiences', including appointing a new Head of Diversity and doubling the budget for the commissioning team's diversity placement scheme. As a public service broadcaster providing quality programming for minority audiences including the lesbian and gay population, and with a stated commitment to further improve in this area, Channel 4 should be able to continue its work.

Conclusion

19. Ofcom's second review states that public service broadcasting at its best 'supplies diverse content which meets the needs of all communities within the UK.' We completely agree with this assessment. Public service broadcasters have a duty to give lesbian and gay audiences value for money and we trust that they will show themselves fit to rise to this challenge in coming years.