



BBC Audience Council Northern Ireland Advice to the BBC Trust Service Review of Nations' Radio and News and Current Affairs

Black, C., Davis, R., Hanna, D., Hicks, E., Jackson, H., Johnston, B., Langan, A., Law, S., Mann, P., McCallion, P., McCaughan, N., McGinley, A., Shine, J., Todd, B., & Varma, M. (2016). *BBC Audience Council Northern Ireland Advice to the BBC Trust Service Review of Nations' Radio and News and Current Affairs*. BBC. Advance online publication.
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**BBC Audience Council Northern Ireland
Advice to the BBC Trust Service Review of
Nations' Radio and News and Current Affairs
February 2016**

1. Summary

The BBC Audience Council advises the BBC Trust, the BBC's governing body, on the interests and issues for licence fee payers in Northern Ireland. This is its advice to a major review of news and radio in the devolved nations. Our focus is on Radio Ulster/Foyle as well as news and current affairs for audiences in Northern Ireland, on radio, TV and online. The Trust reviews all BBC services every five years, and this will be its final review under the current BBC Charter.

Although the focus of the current review is on local services we note that the Trust will also consider whether, in the context of an evolving UK, each nation is receiving the best service of international, UK and nations' news from the BBC. We think it is helpful to look at the experience of BBC news in the round, and have highlighted a number of issues in that regard, building on the advice we provided for the [2013/14 review of UK-wide news and current affairs](#).

Our advice below is based on a rolling programme of engagement with different sections of the audience in Northern Ireland. We have sought views on how well audiences consider these services are delivering for them against their public service remits, and how they might develop in the future. Details of the groups we engaged with are provided under the Evidence Base section below, although we have also drawn on our wider experience of audience views over a longer period, as well as our individual networks.

We have identified a number of key themes for audiences which are outlined below and explained in more detail in the next section.

News and current affairs

- News and current affairs programmes for Northern Ireland audiences are overall highly regarded and reflect the core values of impartiality, accuracy, quality and trustworthiness. Audiences recognise the high quality of journalism.
- Current affairs and investigative journalism adds particular value through in depth analysis, and it is important that this commitment is sustained.

Audiences have high expectations of BBC news in Northern Ireland and have indicated a number of areas where they believe more value could be added, in particular by:

- Investing in BBC NI's online news to better develop and refresh the range of stories throughout the day and, in particular, to extend its service at weekends and in the evening.
- Developing provision for younger audiences, in ways that are relevant to them.

- Better reflecting changes in society in NI, through a broader range of topics and voices and new ways in to public policy matters, in addition to political perspectives.
- Reporting more global and UK-wide themes through a local lens.
- We continue to be very concerned that news aimed at UK-wide audiences, particularly on TV, is not adequately reporting devolved policy across the UK, most particularly in relation to NI.

Radio Ulster/Foyle

- The station continues to reach a very large audience and is very highly regarded by its listeners; we ask the Trust to consider how well the station is replenishing its audience from the under 55s.
- The station makes a very significant contribution to the [BBC's Public Purposes](#), particularly in terms of reflecting communities and stimulating creativity and cultural excellence; its contribution to promoting learning and citizenship through its range of factual and topical programmes is also important.
- Audiences have appreciated the scheduling changes over the last two years, particularly the addition of a new business programme and a Sunday news bulletin; feedback suggests there is an appetite to build on this with more staged and carefully considered refreshment so the station keeps pace with changing needs.
- The range of programmes and genres is a key strength of the station which must be protected; listeners would like a wider range of comedy; we also think that local audiences should be able to derive more value from drama made in Northern Ireland for the BBC's UK-wide networks.
- The digital offer needs developed in order to reach a wider audience, including the under 55s, and help them to find the content that is most relevant to them.
- The strong connection between listeners and presenters is a major strength; development of a diverse range of talent both on and off air will be essential to the future success of the station.

We are aware that the BBC is entering a period of unprecedented financial challenge, and will need to seek savings through scope cuts as well as efficiencies. Local news and current affairs and Radio Ulster/Foyle each provide very strong and unique public value to audiences in Northern Ireland, and we ask the Trust to ensure that the BBC protects and invests in this. For example, Radio Ulster/Foyle's value is closely linked to the wide range of genres it can deliver. We agree, of course, that all areas of the BBC should be run as efficiently as possible, and each service should continuously review how it allocates resources to ensure it is best meeting changing audience needs. It is important that savings plans take into account how lean services are, following previous efficiency drives, and what opportunities there are for further cuts where opportunities for economies of scale are limited.

Key themes across these services include meeting the needs of younger audiences, continuing to keep pace with changes in society, enhancing the digital offer and ensuring that the public value derived is protected and built upon.

2. Key themes and Audience Council advice to the BBC Trust

For ease of reference we have captured key themes for audiences separately for news and current affairs on the one hand, and Radio Ulster/Foyle on the other, although the two overlap.

2.1 News and current affairs in Northern Ireland

Audiences in Northern Ireland are, according to independent Ofcom reports¹, especially strong consumers of news, using a wider range of sources than any other nation. The interest in local news and current affairs, whether from the BBC or the commercial sector, is especially strong.

BBC Newsline delivers strong audience reach across the week – a notable achievement given that UTV news also performs very well. Radio Ulster/Foyle enjoys very high reach as the most listened to radio station in Northern Ireland, and stands out as a major source of news for Northern Ireland audiences.

The feedback we received indicates that BBC Northern Ireland news and current affairs is highly regarded by its audiences. People are confident that it delivers all the main news of the day and reflects BBC news' core values of impartiality, accuracy, trustworthiness and quality. The quality of journalism is highly regarded. Audiences also place high value on the greater depth and analysis provided by political and, especially, current affairs programmes. Weather and traffic and travel reporting provides a useful service that is part of everyday life for many people.

“BBC Northern Ireland news is meticulous, well researched and trustworthy.”

It follows that audiences have very high expectations of BBC news and current affairs in Northern Ireland. Feedback suggested a number of areas where some people thought it could deliver even more value.

Reflecting a changing society: A number of people we spoke with want local news and current affairs to continue to develop to meet changing audience expectations, against a background of significant political, cultural and demographic change.

We heard from quite a wide range of people who think that too much of the local news agenda is reported through a political lens. As one member of the audience put it, *“There is too much focus on The Hill and not enough from The Street”*, whilst a young person commented, *“BBC Northern Ireland is stuck up at Stormont as if that's all that happens here.”*

There is, as we would expect, wide consensus that political developments should be covered and elected representatives given a voice and rigorously held to account. It is also important that events linked with Northern Ireland's troubled past are reported and understood, and that this is achieved in relevant ways for new generations. Indeed, audiences often tell us they turn to BBC Northern Ireland for its strong reporting of key political events.

However, as Northern Ireland's political situation stabilises, many people think there should also be a wider range of stories reflecting this contemporary and evolving society. They particularly want more focus on other ways into stories about public policy areas which impact on everyday lives, such as education and health.

We recognise the importance of newsgathering and the value of regional journalists. Some members of the audience think that there is too much reliance on press releases (particularly from government and political parties) to define the agenda and the way stories are reported. There is particular interest in getting beyond the news event, with more analysis and informed comment to better understand the wider context, drivers and impact of an issue. Overall, we see an appetite for

¹ News consumption in the UK 2015, Ofcom.

a wider range of storytelling that engages audiences in key issues in ways that are relevant, richly informative and get beneath the surface of the story.

Audiences recognise positive examples of this. For example, we heard that BBC Northern Ireland's investment in coverage of business and the economy in recent years is delivering benefits in terms of the range and depth of reports, and the different approaches to get under the lid of important issues.

"The BBC is leading the way in business coverage. It sets the BBC apart."

Many people told us that they would like to hear a wider range of perspectives and voices, particularly those that go beyond traditional political positions, and represent the less vocal middle ground. There was quite a widespread view among the people we heard from that more could be done to reflect the reality that, in many circumstances, community division is transcended or is not a defining feature.

"Audiences are weary of coverage that perpetuates this bilateral narrative...."

"It's the same voices and the same views."

A wide range of viewers and listeners have told us that they want news and current affairs to play its part in a broader portrayal of the increasingly diverse population of Northern Ireland, reflecting major demographic changes in recent years. The Audience Council has, over the years, spoken with a range of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and nationalities, most recently a Filipino fathers' group in Belfast. These sections of the audience would also like to see themselves reflected more fully in news (and other) coverage, particularly with regard to the role they play in wider society.

Audiences often tell us they would like more positive news stories—not lighter and less challenging reporting, or solely celebratory pieces—but rather a broader definition of stories that matter and inform across a range of subjects. A number of people told us that there are rich and informative stories to tell at community level that could shed light on wider news themes. The line between news reporting and magazine items needs to be observed, but without defining news too narrowly in terms of the breadth of issues, voices and tone.

"The news can seem relentlessly negative."

"We've spent 20 years building community relations in a town that wasn't known for good relations and all we seem to hear from are people who want to bring us back to the past."

We heard some calls for more coverage outside the major population centres of Belfast and Londonderry, particularly from rural areas. There was, however, a broad consensus that BBC news should not be parochial or hyperlocal, but it should rather seek out local stories that are relevant to the wider audience.

Another recurring theme was the interest in more outward facing coverage, reporting the local angle on major UK and global events. A number of people saw a risk of the local agenda becoming too insular and focused on Northern Ireland in isolation. This is especially important for those sections of the audience who consume more local than UK-wide news.

Radio news: Radio Ulster/Foyle is one of the key sources for news in Northern Ireland and contributes significantly to the BBC's Public Purposes through its range of news, current affairs and topical discussion programmes. Many people we spoke to place a high value on the programmes they listened to, often on a daily basis. However, we also heard from some listeners who felt that

the drive time programmes *Good Morning Ulster* and *Evening Extra* were becoming less compelling, for instance by including some items they perceived to be more suited to a magazine programme, or dragging other reports out beyond their natural limits. There is also a particular issue of repetition of stories across the various daily news and current affairs/topical programmes on radio.

“If you listen for an hour in the morning you know that’s all you’ll hear all day.”

We think it would be helpful to understand more about how well radio news programmes are meeting changing audience needs and whether there is any impact on retaining or attracting new audiences.

Online news: BBC Northern Ireland news online plays an increasingly important role in news provision. Audiences value the sense that it covers the main issues and is usually refreshed quickly for major breaking stories, without prioritising speed over accuracy and impartiality. There is appreciation for links to other stories and external sites, and the site should continue to build on this. The *BBC News NI Live* pilot has added a new dimension to coverage, particularly for mobile users.

“Working in the community you hear things that are happening from others, then you go to the BBC website for more information.”

However, there was a recurring theme among many users we spoke with that the local site and news app pages are not refreshed sufficiently throughout the day to keep track of developments in stories and to introduce new items. It is especially noticeable at subsection level (e.g., North West, Politics, Business) where some stories can remain on the main page for days or even longer without being replaced by newer items. This is a particular issue in the evenings and most especially at weekends when audiences notice a lag due to staffing limitations.

“I am not home in time for the early evening news so I turn to the news app. But local news is just not updated enough – I read the stories in the morning but they are not developed throughout the day. The journalism is good but I turn to Twitter because the app isn’t up-to-date.”

Although the standard of journalism is generally considered high, a number of people reported losing confidence in the online service because of errors in grammar and spelling, or the occasional ill thought-out headline.

We ask that the Trust considers how well the local online service is meeting the needs of its audiences, and whether further investment is required to keep it relevant and up-to-date.

News for younger audiences: We have a particular concern about how well younger audiences—in their teens and twenties in particular—are served by BBC news, especially at local level. There are important Public Purpose drivers for meeting this audience’s needs for local news, given the extent of societal change and the differences in structures and public policy from the rest of the UK. Feedback suggests that there is an interest in local news over and above what is typical for this generation in other parts of the UK, and it is a key way in to news as a whole.

“If there was news that appealed to me or was targeted to me, I would be interested.”

“Everyone our age is posting stuff online daily about things like the events in Paris, and we are interested.”

“There has been coverage of big stories such as abortion and gay rights, but we never hear our voice. We are the generation that will be living with these issues.”

This section of the audience has particular needs and consumption patterns which need to be taken into account in overall provision. Social media is especially important, but BBC Northern Ireland's presence is limited.

The young people we talked to said that they would like their age group to have more of a voice in BBC news and current affairs; a view echoed by a variety of people from other age groups.

“Let’s have more comment from youth leaders and youth and how they see their future and what solutions they would suggest.”

We ask the Trust to consider how well young audiences are reflected and served by local news and current affairs.

Current affairs and political programmes: Current affairs and political programmes contribute significantly to the delivery of the BBC's Public Purposes in Northern Ireland. *Spotlight* is often singled out for particular praise by viewers who appreciate the distinctiveness and quality of its award-winning investigative journalism. It has a particularly long run of programmes throughout the year which we would like to see maintained given the important role it plays in providing in-depth analysis and insight into key issues.

Political programmes like *The View*, *Sunday Politics NI*, *Stormont Today* and *Inside Politics* all play significant roles in informing democratic debate, whilst *Spotlight Specials* give the audience an opportunity to put their questions to public representatives. There is an appetite among many people we spoke to for a wider range of contributors and some also felt that there could be more rigorous challenge of elected representatives.

We think it is vital that BBC Northern Ireland is able to maintain its commitment to local current affairs and politics programmes, in order to provide the depth and analysis necessary to deliver its Public Purposes at a time of political and societal change.

Reflecting and serving audiences in Northern Ireland through UK-wide news: We continue to have significant concerns that UK-wide news reports, particularly on television, do not do enough to report public policy in the devolved nations. All too often policy from Westminster is reported as if it applies across the whole of the UK, even where the situation is different in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. For audiences this can be misleading or even inaccurate – for instance in the case of some reporting about the junior doctors' strike in England which, at least initially, did not make the situation in other parts of the UK sufficiently clear. We noticed some improvements following the Trust's Impartiality Review of network news coverage of the four nations² but are now even more concerned that some efforts to address the issues take account of policy in Scotland and Wales but leave out Northern Ireland altogether.

We also think that UK-wide news reports do not take the opportunity to enrich news content by drawing comparisons between the nations. For example, reports on the introduction of plastic bags, or the move to combine health and social care services in England did not look to the experience in Northern Ireland for insight. Audiences here tell us they are not sufficiently represented on network news, or informed about devolved policy issues. Audiences here have a strong interest not just in the local experience, but in what can be learned from other parts of the UK, especially the other devolved nations.

² BBC Trust review of the impartiality and accuracy of network news coverage of the four nations http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/network_news.html

Similarly, Northern Ireland news needs to be in a position to make useful comparisons and find the local angles to UK and international stories. Sometimes this will be about finding the local link, through a person or organisation, but reports should also be capable of making deeper comparisons of policy and context.

“Across local news there isn’t enough about world events.. news becomes totally insular if you don’t have global news.”

We welcome the BBC Executive’s commitment to review the balance of UK-wide and nations’ news across all platforms.³ It is important that the internal review takes into account the particular audience needs and circumstances in each nation, and also the need to tell a UK-wide story, in all its breadth and diversity.

2.2 BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle

BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle is a highly valued BBC service in Northern Ireland. It has a very strong audience reach, performing better than the BBC’s networks, and remains the most listened to radio station in Northern Ireland. For many listeners it is central to the value they receive from their BBC, particularly as a significant proportion do not listen to any other BBC station. The station’s strong reach means it has a particularly key role to play in delivering the BBC’s Public Purposes in Northern Ireland.

Radio Foyle listeners place a high value on the local radio station and feel that it contributes particularly strongly in local news, arts and culture, sport and reflecting local people and places. Some people think that it serves and reflects audiences in the city more than the surrounding area, and we believe this merits further consideration. We are pleased that the station has become available on DAB and is available to a wider audience as a result, as well as giving those inside and outside the catchment area the choice of listening to Foyle or Ulster. We also think that the greater synergies between Foyle and Ulster in recent years are helpful – for instance in showcasing talent in the North West to a wider audience on Radio Ulster.

Although audience performance remains strong we think it would be helpful for the Trust to consider how well Radio Ulster/Foyle is attracting replenisher audiences—in the 30s to 50s age groups—for the future.

Listeners have given us some insights into the success of the station, as well as some thoughts on how it might further enhance its offer and develop for the future. Key strengths include the range and variety of content, and its relevance to the local community; the strong connection with presenters; and the sense of ownership the station inspires in its listeners, partly through the many opportunities it offers for interaction.

Range and quality of programmes: Radio Ulster/Foyle provides a broad range of programmes across many genres, serving different interests as well providing the wider audience with a mix of content that is not available elsewhere. Audience feedback suggests that the range of programmes and genres is vital to the success of the station and to how it delivers the Public Purposes, especially in reflecting Northern Ireland and its communities and stimulating creativity and cultural excellence.

Music: The range of music is particularly appreciated by audiences, from the mix of music and conversation in the weekday schedule to the specialist music programmes in evenings and at weekends. Audience feedback suggests that—whilst some people would like more of

³ *British, Bold, Creative* – BBC Executive proposals for programmes and services in the next Charter period, Section 5.

their favourite music—there are no major gaps in music genres and local tastes are well reflected, for instance through country music, folk, jazz, contemporary, classical, choir and sacred music. Specialist music programmes play a particular role in meeting specific interests and extending the range of music. We heard particular praise for specialist presenters' expert knowledge of music, and the added value that brings to listeners.

Weekday music shows attract loyal audiences for their mix of music, chat and companionship. We think that it is important that these main strands continue to build on the distinctiveness of their offering, particularly through their speech content.

Sport: The station makes a major contribution to BBC Northern Ireland's coverage of sport through live coverage, highlights and results. A number of people have told us that they would value more local coverage of minority sports, and we suggest that Radio Ulster/Foyle could play a major role in meeting this need, in close collaboration with BBC Northern Ireland sport online.

Irish and Ulster-Scots: Indigenous minority language coverage is a key part of the schedule, serving listeners with a particular interest as well as bringing Irish and Ulster-Scots language and culture to a wider audience. We believe it is vital that Radio Ulster/Foyle continues to serve these audiences as part of a strategic cross-platform approach.

Religious and ethical content: This content has a key role to play in meeting the distinctive needs of local audiences. It is important that it continues to be reflected in the schedules through a range of formats including music, worship and debate.

Factual programmes: The range of factual content, particularly at weekends, is greatly appreciated by audiences. Listeners told us of their enjoyment of long standing favourites like *On Your Behalf* and *Gardeners' Corner*, as well as a wide range of different genres from natural history to science. These are distinctive programmes which help to reach a wider audience, including some younger groups, and significantly contribute to the Public Purposes.

Arts and culture: Radio Ulster/Foyle takes its responsibility for stimulating creativity and cultural excellence very seriously as reflected in programmes such as *The Arts Show*.

Comedy: There is an appetite for more comedy on the station, and a wider range of formats and talent. This is an area where we think the station could add more value for audiences, and play a role in piloting new comedy for TV.

Drama: There is also an interest in local drama. Many people are not aware of the volume and range of drama that BBC Northern Ireland produces for Radio 4. We understand the resource challenges involved in producing more local drama for Radio Ulster, and that contractual issues can prevent plays being repeated locally. Nevertheless, we would like to see this content, rich in creativity and portrayal, deliver more value locally.

Serving the Public Purposes: Radio Ulster/Foyle makes a particular contribution to the Public Purposes for Representing the UK, its Nations, Regions and Communities; Promoting Education and Learning; and Stimulating Creativity and Cultural Excellence.⁴

Representing NI, its regions and communities: Audiences place a very high value on content which reflects the people and places across Northern Ireland, giving insights into

⁴ The BBC's Charter sets out six Public Purposes to define the BBC's public service remit.

both the familiar and the less well-known aspects of life here. Radio Ulster/Foyle's ability to respond to this is undoubtedly one of its strengths, complementing portrayal on BBC Northern Ireland TV which is subject to much greater restrictions on time. The long running series *Your Place and Mine* plays a particular role here, as do outside broadcasts and the range of programmes with a particular remit to get out and about around Northern Ireland, uncovering different stories. Agriculture coverage is of a high standard and valued by rural communities as well as the wider audience.

A recurring theme in feedback is that the station could do even more to reflect different communities outside Belfast and, in the case of Foyle, Londonderry – especially more rural communities. There is also a strong appetite for the station to do more to keep pace with changing demographics in Northern Ireland across its coverage, including the experience of different ethnic groups and nationalities. Notably this was the feedback from the mainstream audience as well as diverse groups.

The young people we spoke to, whilst they did not see themselves as core Radio Ulster/Foyle listeners, thought that their generation should be better represented on the station, particularly in relation to factual and topical programmes. We were struck by how many older members of the audience also wanted to hear more young voices.

Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence: Radio Ulster/Foyle makes a significant contribution to this Public Purpose, particularly through music and its coverage of the arts and culture. Coverage of events in communities across Northern Ireland has been particularly important in delivering public value and driving up perceptions of the BBC's contribution and commitment to portraying the breadth of life here. It will be important that pressure on resources does not diminish Radio Ulster/Foyle's capacity to cover these live events.

Promoting education and learning: Although Radio Ulster/Foyle no longer broadcasts formal curricula content it has a major contribution to make to informing and educating the audience through its range of factual programmes, covering science, the arts, natural history, consumer affairs, history and archive and current affairs. It is important that this commitment is sustained and developed and that new audiences are introduced to this content, with cross platform support as appropriate.

Sustaining citizenship and civil society: The station's current affairs/topical discussion programmes, like *Stephen Nolan* and *Talk Back*, have a key role to play in informing audiences, and promoting citizenship. We heard mixed—and often very strong—views about the *Stephen Nolan* show. Some listeners believe the programme plays a distinctive role in engaging wide audiences with important issues, giving people a voice, and challenging policy makers and elected representatives. We are mindful that others find that some of the discussions contribute more heat than light to debate.

Audience interaction: Radio Ulster/Foyle offers many opportunities for audience interaction and we see this as a particular strength of the station, contributing to a sense of ownership and relevance. We recognise that some sections of the audience would prefer more input from the presenter and informed guests than from the audience, particularly in news and current affairs and topical programmes. One recurring theme is that the same voices are heard across the schedule: listeners asked for a wider diversity of voices and views to better reflect the society we live in, including the less vocal middle ground. We think it is important that audiences can contribute directly to programmes and interact with content on social media, but the station should continue

to work to find the right balance and approaches for different programmes and audiences. We would particularly like there to be greater focus on finding new voices to broaden the debate.

Talent: Listeners have strong connections with presenters on Radio Ulster and Foyle and this was often the natural way in for people to talk about the station and its programmes. Listeners appreciated the particular qualities presenters brought to different types of programme, from humour and companionship to knowledge about their subject.

We think it is important that the station focuses on developing a diversity of new talent, both on and off air. It is especially important to find and develop the next generation of main presenters, and that they reflect the diversity of the wider audience. The *New Voices* series is a welcome addition to the schedule, and we hope to see further development of this and similar initiatives. We would like to understand what arrangements are in place to train and provide opportunities for new production staff, particularly given the closure of the Community Services Volunteer Media Trainee scheme as a result of external funding cuts.

Scheduling: Audiences seem to find the scheduling blocks – music programmes, news and current affairs, specialist music and weekend programmes – familiar and easy to navigate. However, many people listen at regular slots and so might miss other content that might appeal. We suggest the BBC Trust asks management for thoughts on how to improve findability, perhaps through digital curation or different promotional approaches, without increasing the proportion of time allocated to trails.

Feedback over the years has told us how much audiences value occasional break outs from the normal schedule, for instance to cover live events and themes like *Music Day*, or to introduce a series of special slots such as the five-minute *Titanic Letters* or the recent *Listening Project*. This content has provided added public value and distinctiveness and we believe audiences would like to see more. We also think that there are opportunities for more cross platform approaches to special events and series, adding value through digital content.

When the BBC Trust last reviewed this service in 2010/11 we advocated for schedule refreshment to keep pace with changing interests and needs in Northern Ireland, and to enhance appeal to the under 55s. The station has completed a series of schedule changes over the last two years which have been well received by audiences. Notable additions include *Inside Business* and a Sunday news bulletin, which we believe add value in line with the Public Purposes. Feedback suggests that there is a sustained appetite for well-considered and paced schedule refreshment so that the service continues to evolve with changing society and audience needs. We ask the Trust to consider management's plans to evolve the service in the next five years.

Digital offer: Audiences who we spoke with tended not to make much use of the Radio Ulster through digital services, including the iPlayer app, the website and social media. We think that the station's digital offer is underdeveloped and this could have an impact on its ability to attract new audiences, particularly in the 30+ age groups. We would like to see Radio Ulster provide more value through its website, for example through playlists and more related content and links. There is a particular need for more curation so that audiences can find content that is of most value to them, including topics covered within programmes they might not otherwise listen to. This might provide an opportunity to point listeners to relevant content on other channels including, for instance, BBC Northern Ireland drama on Radio 4.

Social media is better developed in some areas than others and we think that there needs to be further focus on developing this in a more strategic way where it can add most value to listeners. Audiences who use digital devices expect the BBC's local services to be as up-to-date as the BBC's

UK-wide networks, or commercial equivalents. The BBC should be using its strengths in digital to add value across the relevant services at optimum cost.

The BBC iPlayer radio app adds significant value for those who use it but seems to be little known amongst the core Radio Ulster/Foyle audience. Although not everyone wants to listen in this way, we think it is important that local audiences are aware of the choices they have.

Relationship with the networks: We believe that it is important that Radio Ulster/Foyle listeners have some opportunities throughout the year to sample content from other BBC radio stations that might be of interest. Joint projects like *The Listening Project* with Radio 4 play an important role in bringing local voices to a UK audience and giving local audiences a taste of content for another station.

Accessing Radio Ulster/Foyle: Whilst we understand that reception issues are not within the scope of this review, we do think it is important to outline a range of issues as context, and to inform the wider work of the BBC Trust. We recognise the frustrations of listeners in areas where reception on FM is patchy, especially where other means of listening are not readily available. We are delighted that since the last review Radio Foyle has been made available on DAB digital radio, which offers more choice to listeners in the North West, including the option of choosing either Foyle or Ulster. We are conscious that there are significant areas with limited DAB coverage, and that, although there are rolling plans to extend coverage this year Northern Ireland is unlikely to have coverage levels below the UK average. We are also aware that DAB take up in Northern Ireland is relatively low and some audiences have concerns about a digital switchover. We continue to make the Trust aware of issues around access to services in Northern Ireland and the importance of striking a balance between launching new services and ways of listening and better meeting the needs of those who have less access.

3. Evidence base

We have a rolling programme of audience engagement with diverse sections of the audience which informs our advice to the BBC Trust on behalf of local licence fee payers. In 2015 and 2016 we have particularly asked for views on Radio Ulster/Foyle and BBC news in Northern Ireland.

We met with representatives of local organisations and members of the general audience in the Cookstown area and with visitors from all over Northern Ireland at the Tall Ships Festival. In the North West we engaged with a variety of people attending the Playhouse Theatre, as well as with members of Foyle U3A and Bellaghy Women's Group.

Members of the Age NI Consultative Forum and Belfast East Senior Citizens Forum provided us with a wide range of views. We also heard from young audiences through Young Influencers, Northern Ireland Science Park Connect and journalism students at Belfast Metropolitan College. Belfast-based community groups, the Golden Girls and the Filipino Fathers' group, provided us with further insights into the range of views and interests.

We heard a variety of views from the business community through discussions organised in conjunction with Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Londonderry Chamber of Commerce.

We have drawn on our understanding of audiences in Northern Ireland, and views from members' own networks, as well as the wider programme of audience engagement in recent years, where, such is the level of interest, Radio Ulster /Foyle and local news have invariably been discussed. We

are very grateful to everyone who has taken the time to share their views with us, and help shape these services for the future.