

Audience Council Northern Ireland

Report to the BBC Trust

2016-2017

Introduction

The Audience Councils are advisory bodies of the BBC Trust, the governing body of the BBC. There are four Audience Councils – for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The Audience Councils have played an important role in providing the Trust with insight on the views, needs and interests of audiences in their respective nations, and on how well the BBC is serving these audiences and delivering its public purposes.

The Audience Councils have brought the views and perspectives of local audiences to bear on the work of the Trust in a number of ways:

- They assess how well the BBC is performing for audiences in their nation, most notably through an annual report to the Trust. These reports are published.
- They provide input into the Trust decision-making process, for instance in reviews of services or policies, or decisions about major changes to services.
- They identify emerging issues of importance to local audiences which inform the Trust's annual workplan.

Audience Council members are appointed by the BBC Trust, as independent volunteers from outside the BBC. Each Council is chaired by the Trust member for the relevant nation.

The Audience Councils remain in place until April 2017, when the Trust hands over its responsibilities to Ofcom and a new BBC Board.

Foreword by the National Trustee

It is my privilege to introduce the final Audience Council Northern Ireland review, as the BBC prepares to enter its new Charter period.

In many respects this was a strong year of performance for the BBC in Northern Ireland (NI) across TV, radio and online services. The Trust's final service review^[1] showed how much Radio Ulster/Foyle and BBC News NI are valued by audiences and contribute to the BBC's delivery of its public purposes, as well as suggesting how they might be further enhanced.

This year the public debate around the BBC's future has endorsed the value of the BBC and its wider public service mission – to inform, educate and entertain. It has also highlighted the need for the BBC to do more to serve its audiences in the nations and regions, and to reflect their cultural and community diversity. The Trust's research¹ indicates that there is still work to be done to fully deliver the BBC's public purposes in NI, particularly in respect of portrayal. The Audience Council welcomes the strengthened duties in the new Charter to serve and reflect audiences across the UK and it looks forward to the promised investment announcement for NI. It is essential that the BBC is

^[1] http://www.live.bbc.co.uk/corporate2/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2016/nations_services

¹ Insert link to Trust Purpose Remits research

held firmly to account for progress in the new Charter period, and that audiences are front and central in this process.

This review provides the Audience Council's assessment of BBC performance in NI in 2016/17. The Council has identified areas where the BBC could deliver more value for its audiences – whether that is through enhancing its offer for young people or other less well served groups; providing a broader portrayal of life and communities in NI for UK-wide audiences; or developing the local services which, for many viewers and listeners, are at the heart of what the BBC has to offer. There needs to be continued scrutiny and challenge to meet growing audience expectations, especially in the context of tightening resources and rapidly changing technology and consumption patterns.

I would like to take this final opportunity to thank the Audience Council members, past and present, for their time and expertise, and their unfailing commitment to the interests of local licence fee payers. Thanks are also due to Peter Johnston, Director NI, and his team for genuinely and proactively engaging with audience concerns over the years and for delivering another year of creative and distinctive programmes. It has been an honour to have worked with the Trust Unit, and in particular the wonderful NI team, to ensure that the voice of local licence fee payers has been heard at the heart of BBC decision-making.

As the BBC enters another new and challenging era it is even more important that, as a public service broadcaster, it listens to its audiences and gives them the opportunity to shape the programming they deserve.

Aideen McGinley
National Trustee and Chair of the Audience Council NI

Audience Council activities

This year the Council continued its close consideration of BBC Charter Review, following its initial advice to the Trust in 2015.² Overall we were pleased that the Charter endorsed the BBC's broad public service mission, and we particularly welcomed strengthened commitments to serve and reflect the nations and regions of the UK.

The Council contributed advice to the Trust's service review of nations' news and radio services, drawing on a programme of direct engagement with audiences earlier in the year.³ The Trust's findings reflect the strength, and importance, of local news and radio in NI, as well as capturing audience views about how they could be further enhanced.⁴ We explore these themes further below.

We continued to review BBC performance in NI, drawing on audience research and feedback, as well as briefings from BBC management and the Trust. In the spring we joined representatives from the other Audience Councils to advise BBC news management on its EU referendum coverage, and we were pleased to see and hear how feedback from the audience impacted directly on coverage.

This year we have adjusted our plans to reflect the reduction in Trust business, with fewer meetings in early 2017.

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http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/charter_review/audience_councils/acni.pdf

³ http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/acni/acni_sub_nations_radio_news_ca_2016.pdf

⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/services/nations_services

BBC progress towards ACNI's 2016/17 audience priorities

In its Annual Review 2015-16, the Council identified the following audience priorities for the year ahead. This section reviews progress towards these to date.

1. *Young audiences: Be relevant to young audiences and deliver value for them.*

We believe that young audiences, in their teens and twenties, are not well served by the BBC. Huge changes in the way media is consumed suggest that the BBC cannot rely on these audiences turning to the BBC as they get older, as they have tended to in the past.

Many young people we spoke with said that the closure of BBC Three as a broadcast channel in 2016, and its reinvention online, had exacerbated their view that the BBC offers little for their age group. It will take time to see the full impact of this change and understand how well the mitigating actions required by the Trust have worked for the target audience, especially those who do not have ready internet access. Our conversations with younger audiences suggest wider challenges: many don't see the BBC as relevant to them and may be difficult to reach, even with a stronger content offer; and when they do access BBC content through third parties, such as social media, they are often not aware of the source.

We welcome the BBC's commitment in its objectives to transform its offer for young people. However, we wish to see a clear strategy for how this will be achieved. It is vital that the new BBC Board works to ensure that this ambition is fully defined and delivered.

2. *Listening to audiences: Find innovative ways to build on how the BBC listens to its audiences, with particular attention to sections that are less well connected with the BBC and its services. This is especially relevant in the context of changes to governance and regulation in the next Charter.*

The BBC's duty to listen responsively to its audiences underpins its unique public service mission as well as its 'contract' with its licence fee payers. This was one of the key themes of our discussions this year, as reflected in our advice to the Trust.

We were disappointed that the UK government's White Paper and Charter did not have a stronger focus on audiences, or define more closely and with greater ambition the BBC's duty to listen to its licence fee payers. There is, nonetheless, a clear responsibility for the new BBC Board to set the highest standards for engaging with audiences, in all their diversity, and to take their views into account in key decisions.

As the BBC enters this major transition, we believe that it must work to ensure there is no significant gap between closing the Trust's arrangements, for listening to audiences, including its Audience Councils, and setting up new ones. Audiences will also expect the BBC to build on the strengths of the current model to ensure that new arrangements are, from the outset, at least as good as those that went before, as well as a basis for making further enhancements. We endorse the principles that the Trust outlined in its response to the UK government's Green Paper as a useful first test of the next steps in audience engagement and accountability.

3. *Portrayal: Deliver a fuller portrayal of a contemporary Northern Ireland and its communities to UK-wide audiences; increase the volume and range of network content from Northern Ireland.*

We are pleased that the BBC has met, and indeed slightly exceeded, its aim to commission 2.9% of network (UK-wide) TV content from Northern Ireland. This is a considerable achievement, particularly when we bear in mind the low base from which NI started in 2008, when the Trust first agreed targets for 'out of London' network TV supply. The quality of local productions has been

clearly evidenced – from *The Fall* and *Line of Duty* to groundbreaking editions of *Panorama*. We want to see the BBC build on this level of commissioning as a floor rather than a ceiling. It will be particularly important that the changes in in-house production, through the creation of BBC Studios as a commercial subsidiary, fully support the principle of a diverse base of content supply from all four nations of the UK.

The BBC's partnership with NI Screen from 2015 has been a major step forward, resulting in more network commissions and contributing to longer range strategic aims, including the sustainable development of the creative industries and enhanced representation of NI on the UK-wide networks. It is vital that this partnership is renewed and developed so that longer term benefits to the creative industries and wider society can be realised.

We remain very aware that local audiences do not yet feel there is a full and authentic portrayal of NI on the BBC's network services. Over the years the Trust's tracking survey, along with direct feedback from audiences, has told us how strongly people feel about this. Efforts to improve portrayal have provided insights into how this may be best achieved, and shown that progress is possible. For example, events coverage such as *Sports Personality of the Year* from Belfast in 2015 and high quality drama have made a particularly positive impact on audience perceptions. And this year *My Mother and Other Strangers* drew audiences into a compelling love story set in the west of NI during World War Two, a step away from the Troubles related themes which many people felt were too dominant. The challenge for the BBC in the next Charter period is to broaden and deepen its portrayal of NI in a more sustained way across the schedules.

The BBC also broadcasts some programmes made for local audiences for a second time on the UK-wide networks. Thus programmes like *Van Morrison – Up On Cyprus Avenue and Keepin' 'Er Country* have been enjoyed by a wider audience and provided a window into different communities and aspects of life in NI. We think that there is more to do to realise the full potential of this approach for all the Nations and Regions, without diluting the cultural relevance of programmes made first and foremost for local audiences.

The new Charter has placed stronger obligations on the BBC to portray and serve audiences in the nations and regions of the UK, which we consider wholly appropriate. This will be an important area for further progress monitoring from the outset of the new Charter period.

4. News: *Meet evolving audience needs for news – strengthen network reporting of the devolved UK; do more to reflect the pace of political, social and demographic change in Northern Ireland and to report the local angle on UK and international issues. Enhance the depth and range of BBC News Northern Ireland online, seven days a week.*

BBC NI news is highly regarded by its audiences and reflects the core values of accuracy, impartiality, quality and trustworthiness. Current affairs programmes, particularly *Spotlight*, are highly valued by a wide audience and essential to the delivery of the 'Citizenship' public purpose.

Audiences in Northern Ireland have a very strong appetite for news, especially at local level, and they have correspondingly high expectations. There is wide acceptance of the need for high quality political journalism to keep us up to date and well informed about developments and perspectives, as has been amply demonstrated across the events of the year. Local election coverage in May attracted particularly strong audiences. However, some people also think that too much of the wider news agenda is reported through a political lens, with a heavy focus on legacy issues. They told us that more could be done to reflect the pace of political, social and demographic change in NI by finding new ways into stories about public policy matters, with a wider range of topics and voices. This is an evolving picture, and we have been pleased to see and hear many examples of this

broadening news agenda on a day to day basis. We nevertheless believe it is an area where many sections of the audience want to see continued focus and development.

The BBC's online news plays an increasingly important role as more and more people use mobile apps and the internet to keep up to date. Audiences told us that they can rely on BBC News NI online to cover the main issues and report major breaking stories promptly, without prioritising speed over accuracy and impartiality. However, they also found that new stories – whether on the app or website – were not always refreshed quickly enough throughout the day to keep track of developments in stories and introduce new items. This is particularly the case at weekends and on weekday evenings when there are staffing limitations. We understand that BBC management is looking at how the online product can be developed, and suggest that this is an area where progress should be assessed next year.

Over the years, audiences have told us of their frustrations with the BBC's network news reporting of devolved matters. They raised concerns about Westminster policy being reported as if it applied to the whole of the UK, when in fact policies and context in each of the devolved nations can be quite different. The Trust took on board the concerns of the Audience Councils and, since 2008, it has commissioned research and held management to account for improvements. The Audience Councils have played an active role in monitoring progress. Overall, we have seen a considerable improvement in labelling stories accurately and reporting news from around the UK, such as in the approach to coverage of the EU Referendum. However, the latest research published by the Trust, combined with our own observations, indicate that progress has been uneven and constant vigilance is required.⁵ We especially want to see more comparisons of public policy around the UK as we believe that this will significantly enrich and inform debate.

5. Access to services: *Continue to work to close the digital divide so that all sections of the audience benefit from the full range of BBC services.*

BBC management's proposals for the new Charter period, *British, Bold, Creative*, outlined major plans for digital innovation, including new ways to serve audiences in the nations. We welcome enhancements that will deliver added value to audiences, such as plans to make local content easier to find through the iPlayer and website. However, we are very aware of the needs of those audiences who have limited access to high speed broadband and connected devices, and consequently benefit less from these developments. NI has lower availability of communication services than the UK as a whole, with rural areas particularly affected. Access to superfast broadband has increased but is still, jointly with Scotland, the lowest of all nations in the UK.⁶ Whilst it is not up to the BBC alone to close the digital divide, it must also take full account of the circumstances and experiences of *all* of its audiences in planning for the future.

Performance of the BBC in Northern Ireland

Television

BBC Television continued to perform strongly in Northern Ireland this year, reaching 79% of the population aged 4+, which is in line with the UK average.⁷ We were pleased to see that appreciation levels in NI were, as last year, higher than the UK average.

⁵ http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2016/nations_news

⁶ Ofcom Connected Nations 2016 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0035/95876/CN-Report-2016.pdf

⁷ Year on year figures in this report relate to the period Oct 2015 – Sep 16, compared with the full year 2015.

However, we are also aware that viewers in NI continue to watch less BBC TV on average than their counterparts in other parts of the UK. Audience research and feedback suggests that one reason for this may lie in the distinct tastes and interests of NI audiences, when compared with their counterparts across the UK. We believe that some small changes to a number of key network strands could provide greater interest and resonance for Northern Ireland audiences without detracting from their wider appeal across the UK.

Local television, made in and for NI audiences, continued to perform very well. Local non-news programmes reached around one fifth of the audience each week, which is a strong performance given the low volume of programmes relative to the networks. Local programmes also continued to make a positive contribution to the channel share for BBC One and BBC Two in Northern Ireland, whilst appreciation scores were on a par with the network channels.

It is vital that both the range and quality of local programmes are preserved and developed, to meet the distinct tastes of audiences here. It will be particularly important to ensure that the BBC's plans for savings and reinvestment in NI in the coming year do not impact negatively on diverse local audiences.

Radio

BBC radio's audience reach and share has been stable this year. The BBC's UK-wide radio networks tend to perform less well as a whole in Northern Ireland than in the UK generally, particularly Radio 2 and Radio 4. One reason for this is the strength of Radio Ulster/Foyle which reached around 35% of the adult audience, around half of whom do not listen to any other BBC radio. Radio 1's audience has been declining in NI, as elsewhere in the UK, and we believe that this needs to be addressed as no other BBC radio station is specifically targeted at this young audience.

This year, Radio Ulster/Foyle continued to achieve very strong reach and share – much higher than any other BBC nations or local radio station. We are pleased to see an improvement in the 'time spent' with the station which, although high, had been declining, particularly among some demographic groups such as younger women. This year also saw some improvements in appreciation scores. It will be important to ensure that this performance is sustained in the year ahead.

In the summer the BBC Trust completed its service review of nations' news and radio, including Radio Ulster/Foyle. Our advice to the Trust was rooted in many conversations with different sections of the audience across Northern Ireland. Overall, we found that Radio Ulster/Foyle performed very strongly for its audiences, and made a very significant contribution to the public purposes, as well as providing good value for money. Particular strengths include the quality of programmes (reflected in the number of industry awards this year), the range of genres, programmes and themes as well as opportunities for interaction with the audience.

Audience feedback and continued strong reach suggest that the staged programme of schedule changes over the last two years has, on the whole, been well received. Radio Ulster/Foyle must continue to refresh the schedule, voices and conversation going forward in order to attract and retain new listeners, especially the under 50s. We also believe that the station's digital offering needs strengthened to meet the evolving expectations of listeners.

BBC News

The BBC's role in reporting and analysing events without fear or favour is highly valued by the audience, who increasingly look on it to play a role as trusted fact checker to debunk misleading or false news and information, particularly online.

BBC News NI maintained its strong reach on both TV and radio this year. 17% of adults in NI visit BBC News NI online each week, which compares very favourably with the equivalent services in the other devolved nations. 'General impression' scores for BBC News NI continue to be above the UK average, which is consistent with much of the feedback we have received. Nevertheless, as noted above, expectations run high and audiences wish to see continued development of the news agenda to reflect changes in society here, as well as investment in the online service.

The BBC in Northern Ireland, 2007 – 2017

2017 marks the end of the current BBC Charter, and an opportunity to assess the BBC's performance for audiences in NI over the last decade. In that period the Audience Council NI, with its regularly refreshed membership, has contributed to over 60 strands of work. We have brought the views and interests of diverse audiences in NI to bear on the wide range of significant decisions – setting the BBC's high level strategy; opening, closing, or redefining its services; and agreeing its editorial standards. Every year we have reviewed the performance of the BBC in NI, through its UK-wide and local services, and identified priorities from the perspective of local licence fee payers. We have engaged directly with audiences to understand their views and priorities, and to identify emerging issues for the Trust's agenda. It is these direct conversations with audiences, in all their diversity, which give our advice its authority and insight.

The audience priorities which we have identified each year have reflected the breadth and depth of the BBC's remit as well as NI's particular needs in relation to the BBC's public purposes. There have been several particularly dominant themes that continue to be relevant into the next Charter period, including the priorities we have identified this year, as well as issues such as value for money and improving the offer for those sections of the audience who tend to consume less BBC content

There have been many positive developments over the Charter period, ranging from the growth in BBC network television programmes commissioned in NI to increased investment in Irish and Ulster-Scots content and enhancements to local business coverage. Audiences here have also been represented in the many, often more evolutionary, improvements brought about by the Trust's rolling programme of reviews of all BBC network and local services.

Universal access has continued to be a theme as technology and consumption patterns have evolved. Key developments have included BBC involvement in the launch of Freesat, which provided free to air access to digital TV for those households who could not receive Freeview; a successful digital TV switchover, extended DAB coverage for network and local services, and the launch of Radio Foyle on DAB. Local audiences have also benefited from wider developments, most notably the launch of BBC iPlayer. Key issues, as the BBC enters the next Charter period, include: ensuring that BBC services are developed to take account of audiences who have less access to digital technology; the impact of growing viewing of the BBC 2 high definition channel, which does not carry local opts or promotions; digital radio switchover; and the development of BBC NI's digital offer.

The BBC has made very significant savings over the current Charter period, with more challenges to follow as a result of the latest licence fee settlement. It is a major achievement that reach, quality, impact and value have, on the whole, been sustained, whilst the BBC has adapted to evolving audience needs with greatly reduced resources. BBC NI faces particular challenges, with tight budgets and few opportunities for economies of scale. Local services are central to the BBC offer for many audiences and it is vital that the quality and range of these services is protected and developed. We welcome opportunities for significant capital investment, the development of BBC NI as a centre of excellence in archive based projects, and further development of local partnerships

with the creative industries and others. These are all areas where progress, and the resulting benefits, should be monitored.

We believe that the BBC should be especially mindful in the next Charter period of those sections of the audience who receive notably less value for their licence fee because they consume less BBC content. And all audiences, including those who are heavy consumers of BBC content, want to be assured that every penny of the licence fee is spent wisely in the pursuit of the BBC's public purposes.

Future priorities and considerations for the BBC Board

Audience Council Northern Ireland invites the new BBC Board to consider the following issues, which reflect some of the enduring themes for audiences in NI:

- 1. *Listening to audiences:*** Find innovative ways to build on how the BBC listens to its audiences, with particular attention to sections of the audience that are less well connected with the BBC and its services.
- 2. *Young audiences:*** Be relevant to young audiences and deliver value for them.
- 3. *Portrayal:*** Deliver a fuller portrayal of a contemporary Northern Ireland and its communities to UK-wide audiences; increase the volume and range of network content from Northern Ireland.
- 4. *News:*** Meet evolving audience needs for news – strengthen network reporting of the devolved UK; do more to reflect the pace of political, social and demographic change in Northern Ireland and to report the local angle on UK and international issues. Enhance the depth and range of BBC News Northern Ireland online, seven days a week.
- 5. *Access to services:*** Continue to work to close the digital divide so that all sections of the audience benefit from the full range of BBC services.
- 6. *Protecting and developing local services:*** Ensure that audiences in NI continue to receive value from local services as the strategy for savings and reinvestment is implemented.