

*"Working for quality
and diversity in
British broadcasting"*

Founded in 1983 by Jocelyn Hay CBE



The Old Rectory Business Centre
Springhead Road, Northfleet
Kent, DA11 8HN

Tel: 01474 338716 email: info@vlv.org.uk
Fax: 01474 325440 web: www.vlv.org.uk

RESPONSE BY THE VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER (VLV)

TO THE BBC TRUST SERVICE REVIEW OF NETWORK SPEECH RADIO

BBC RADIO 4, BBC RADIO 4 EXTRA, BBC RADIO 5 LIVE, BBC 5 LIVE SPORTS EXTRA

February 2015

**RESPONSE BY THE VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER (VLV)
TO THE BBC TRUST SERVICE REVIEW OF
NETWORK SPEECH RADIO
BBC RADIO 4, BBC RADIO 4 EXTRA,
BBC RADIO 5 LIVE, BBC 5 LIVE SPORTS EXTRA**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Information about the VLV	3
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Question 1: How well does the BBC serve audiences with speech radio?	4
Question 2: How well are Radio 4, Radio 4 Extra, Radio 5 live and 5 live Sports Extra performing against the terms of their service licences?	7
Question 3: Are Radio 4, Radio 4 Extra, Radio 5 live and Radio 5 live Sports Extra well positioned to serve audiences well in the future?	10
Question 4: Should the service licences for Radio 4, Radio 4 Extra, Radio 5 live or Radio 5 live Sports Extra be changed?	11

**RESPONSE BY THE VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER (VLV)
TO THE BBC TRUST SERVICE REVIEW OF NETWORK SPEECH RADIO
BBC RADIO 4, BBC RADIO 4 EXTRA,
BBC RADIO 5 LIVE, BBC 5 LIVE SPORTS EXTRA**

INFORMATION ABOUT THE VLV

Voice of the Listener & Viewer Limited (VLV) represents the citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and speaks for listeners and viewers on the full range of broadcasting issues. It uses its independent expertise to champion quality and diversity in public service broadcasting, to respond to consultations, to produce policy briefings and to conduct research. VLV has no political, commercial or sectarian affiliations and is concerned with the issues, structures, institutions and regulations that underpin the British broadcasting system. VLV supports the principles of public service in broadcasting. It is a charitable company limited by guarantee (registered in England No 4407712 - Charity No 1152136).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. VLV believes that, overall, the BBC's speech radio services are of high quality and serve a range of audiences well.
2. It is our members' view that there is no other service in the UK which compares with BBC Radio 4 in its provision of range, depth, and variety of content. It provides this material across a range of genres, from news and current affairs to more subject-specific analysis and discussion, to drama and comedy programmes. Its presenters, reporters and contributors are expert at providing radio which is both intelligent and engaging.
3. In its last Review of Radio 4 the BBC Trust made a recommendation that Radio 4 needed to do more to engage a wider, more diverse audience. We believe that the main area of weakness for Radio 4 is its appeal to diverse audiences. It is our view that more work needs to be done for the station to reflect the diversity of UK culture and society however we support the view that it should do this *without compromising its distinctiveness* and its commitment to high standards.¹
4. With reference to the other recommendation by the BBC Trust, namely that Radio 4 needed to address the balance of its international news coverage, we believe that this has improved significantly since the last review. Perhaps this is partly due to the merger of BBC News and the World Service. There has been a distinct change in the tone and content of foreign news since the merger which we welcome.
5. With limited funding, Radio 4 Extra provides a useful platform for BBC archive content and we believe it contributes effectively to the BBC's public purposes.
6. Radio 5 live covers domestic and international breaking news stories and sports coverage with energy and confidence and makes a notable effort to include a wide range of experts. It does, however, need to ensure that its sports coverage remains

¹ BBC Annual Report 2014, p 16

distinctive and remains high quality, avoiding a tendency towards excessive 'blokeishness' and aimless chat.

7. Radio 5 live Sports Extra provides welcome live coverage of sports not available elsewhere, such as club rugby and cricket, including county championship cricket.
8. We do not believe the service licences should be changed for any of the stations being reviewed.
9. VLV is keenly aware that the future of these four stations is very much dependent on the upcoming licence fee settlement and we would want to see a settlement which allows them to continue to broadcast the high quality, engaging content which they currently provide.

INTRODUCTION

10. VLV welcomes the opportunity to respond to this review. These four radio stations - BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 4 Extra, BBC Radio 5 live and BBC Radio 5 live Sports Extra – are core listening for many of our members and Radio 4 has been central to the concerns of VLV since our foundation in 1983. We have encouraged our members to make individual responses and this submission is from the Trustees and other senior policy advisors within VLV.
11. We have structured our submission in response to the questions posed by the BBC Trust as requested.
12. We have focused our comments mostly on Radio 4 and Radio 5 live. We would not want it to be assumed that because we have not commented widely on Radio 4 Extra or 5 live Sports Extra that we do not support them in the mission to deliver the BBC's public purposes, we just do not feel we have the necessary expertise to comment on their performance in detail.

Question 1: How well does the BBC serve audiences with speech radio?

13. It is VLV's view that the BBC serves audiences well with its offerings on the stations under review.

Radio 4

14. It is our members' view that there is no other service in the UK which compares with BBC Radio 4 in its provision of range, depth, and variety of content. It provides this material across a range of genres, from news and current affairs to more subject-specific analysis and discussion, to drama and comedy programmes. Its presenters, reporters and contributors are expert at providing radio which is both intelligent and engaging.
15. We note from Ofcom research that the weekly reach of Radio 4 rose between 2008 and 2013 by 15%² but that the audience is dominated by people aged 35 or over who

² Ofcom, PSB Annual Report 2014, Annex 5, p 59

are of the ABC1 demographic.³ The age profile of listeners has not changed significantly since 2008.⁴

16. When the BBC Trust last reviewed the performance of Radio 4 in 2011 they found that it was performing very well overall and that it was high quality and offered truly distinctive public service broadcasting. VLV agreed with the Trust's conclusions at the time and agreed that *Radio 4 is considered by many of its listeners to be a 'national treasure' and to be at the heart of public service radio broadcasting.*⁵
17. In its report, the Trust made a number of recommendations which included aiming to increase the station's appeal amongst different demographic groups and consider the balance of its international coverage - in particular, its coverage of Europe and the rest of the world, compared with America. It also suggested that the challenge for Radio 4, along with Radio 3 and Radio 7 (which later became Radio 4 Extra), was to *gradually extend its core appeal without jeopardizing its distinctiveness.*
18. With reference to the goal to increase the station's appeal among different demographic groups, we are not convinced this has as yet been achieved and more work needs to be done for the station to reflect the diversity of UK culture and society. We note the comments in the BBC Annual Report 2014 that audience councils were keen that Radio 4 should extend its reach outside the South of England, including in the devolved nations, and we support the view that it should *continue to look for ways to broaden its appeal across the UK without compromising its distinctiveness.*⁶
19. However, with reference to the other recommendation by the Trust to address the balance of its international coverage, we believe that this has improved significantly since the last BBC Trust review. Perhaps this is partly due to the merger of BBC News and the World Service. There has been a distinct change in the tone and content of foreign news since the merger which we welcome and we do not underestimate how difficult it has been to achieve.
20. We note that by its very nature, Radio 4 is a network that is not always going to appeal to everyone. When exploring ways to attract a wider range of listeners to Radio 4, it is the view of VLV members that Radio 4 should not compromise its approach. Any attempts to 'dumb it down' in an attempt to attract a wider demographic audience would, we think, be a mistake, particularly when the BBC has a portfolio of other services designed to cater for a range of tastes.

Radio 4 Extra

21. With limited funding, Radio 4 Extra provides a useful platform for BBC archive content including a good range of comedy, providing the opportunity to listen again to gems such as *Old Harry's Game*. In this way we believe Radio 4 Extra contributes to the BBC's public purposes.

³ Ofcom, PSB Annual Report 2014, Annex 5, p 50

⁴ Ofcom, PSB Annual Report 2014, Annex 5, p 61: In 2013 34% being 65+, 20% 55-64, 19% 45-54, 15% 35-44,

⁵ BBC Trust Review of Radio 3,4 and 7, February 2011, p 15

⁶ BBC Annual Report 2014, p 16

Radio 5 live

22. In 2014 Radio 5 live attracted an audience of just over six million each week, while 5 live Sports Extra attracted one million.
23. VLV believes that Radio 5 live covers domestic and international breaking news stories confidently with an accessible approach and good audience interaction. It has a light-touch wit and intelligence in tackling subjects which makes its approach distinctively different from that of Radio 4 which has a more serious tone. It makes a notable effort to include a wide range of experts and news makers.
24. Radio 5 live also plays an important role in covering sports, especially football, and we welcomed the recommendation of the BBC Trust in its 2012 Review that Radio Five live should try to include more sports of minority interest. We welcome any research being conducted as part of this review to show whether Radio Five live has been successful at fulfilling this recommendation.
25. Another recommendation of the 2012 BBC Trust Review was that Radio 5 live should examine its news coverage and strengthen it. From evidence published in the recent BBC Trust Review of News and Current Affairs, it appears that the station has been successful in making progress with this.⁷

Radio 5 live Sports Extra

26. We agreed with the Trust's Review in 2012 that *5 live Sports Extra is valued for its additional high-quality coverage of a range of sporting events. We believe it is performing well as a complementary service to Radio 5 live and that it should continue to offer sports coverage that cannot be accommodated on other BBC radio stations.* Some of our members especially noted that 5 live Sports Extra provides welcome live coverage of sports not available elsewhere such as club rugby and cricket, including county championship cricket.
27. The loss of the live television rights to subscription stations has made Radio 5 live Sports Extra's contribution increasingly more important. One VLV member noted that Radio 5 live Sports Extra was their only way of following the earlier rounds of the Australian Open Tennis recently. (BBC Television only carried live coverage of the Women's and Men's singles finals.)
28. Another VLV member commented, *'I greatly appreciate the increased coverage of County Championship Cricket that started last year and would like to see this extended. I am not alone in sometimes watching a match while listening to the commentary. Test Match Special was a unique, intelligent and civilised programme that also appealed to listeners who were not necessarily cricket fans. It remains the best place to listen however I am concerned that the most recent commentators are not of the standard of their distinguished predecessors with a tendency towards trivialisation'*.

⁷ BBC Annual Report 2014, p 16

How well does the BBC support a wide range of genres?

29. We believe Radio 4 supports a wide range of genres providing content across drama, news, current affairs, science, religious programming, documentaries and comedy.
30. We note that Radio 4 has consistently delivered more volume of content in key genres than it is required to by its service licence since 2008.⁸
31. In response to this consultation one VLV member commented: *'Radio 4 includes some excellent drama and an impressive range of informative documentaries. The 9 - 9.45am slots on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday often provide example of PSB at its best. I have not found another radio station in this country or abroad of such continuous high quality as BBC Radio 4. It has its faults but without out it British society would be very much the poorer'*.
32. One recommendation, which we have made in the past, would be to further strengthen drama output by modern playwrights such as Edward Bond, Sarah Kane, Harold Pinter, Lucy Prebble, Arnold Wesker and others.
33. Another VLV member remarked that *'One of the joys of Radio 4 is the serendipity provided by its mixed schedule. Programmes, which I would not have suspected I would have enjoyed or indeed have had any interest in, are part of the schedule for the morning, afternoon or evening when I am driving or doing something at home - and I don't immediately switch away to another network. By selecting Radio 4, I become a captive member of its audience - prepared to give its programmes a chance to inform, educate and entertain me.'*
34. Radio 4's long form journalism plays an important role in providing a more in-depth analysis for stories we may have been introduced to during news output. It also provides us with the opportunity to hear a diverse range of voices and opinions which otherwise may not find a place on a broadcast platform.
35. Radio 4 also provides more in-depth coverage of business issues than anywhere else on the BBC's output, with strands such as *In Business* and *The Bottom Line*.
36. Radio 4's service licence commits it to broadcasting at least 180 hours of original comedy each year. VLV believes the 6.30pm comedy slot works effectively in the schedules, providing a regular appointment to listen for those who enjoy Radio 4's comedies.
37. We welcome Radio 4's preparedness to take risks by providing new comedy programmes while continuing to broadcast some of its popular, long running comedy series. We encourage it to continue to experiment and promote fresh and new ideas and explore new formats.

⁸ Ofcom, PSB Annual Report 2014, Annex 5, p 14

38. One member regretted the decommissioning of *Ed Reardon's Week* which they described as '*clever acerbic and funny and the kind of intelligent comedy that is rarely to be found elsewhere.*'

Question 2: How well are Radio 4, Radio 4 Extra, 5 live and 5 live Sports Extra performing against the terms of their service licences?

Radio 4

39. We believe Radio 4 is performing well against the terms of its service licence although more could be done to engage a more diverse audience to its content.
40. We note from the service licence of Radio 4 that its remit is to be a mixed speech service, offering in-depth news and current affairs and a wide range of other speech output including drama, readings, comedy, factual and magazine programmes. The service should appeal to listeners seeking intelligent programmes in many genres which inform, educate and entertain.
41. With reference to the public purposes, it supports delivery of all the purposes effectively through a range of content across a variety of genres.
42. Radio 4 sustains citizenship especially through its news and current affairs programming. It stimulates creativity and cultural excellence through its drama, documentaries and comedy. It promotes education and learning especially through its documentary output. Numerous programmes, on subjects as varied as the law (*Law in Action, Unreliable Evidence*), *Farming Today, Tweet of the Day* and Robert Peston's *The Price of Inequality*, contribute to this purpose.
43. Radio 4 fulfils the global purpose, bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK, through its news, current affairs and documentary output and VLV believes in recent years the station has successfully become more international in tone and content. This can be seen particularly in its non-news content. Coverage of the wider world, outside news, plays an important role in providing audiences with a more rounded picture of life in other countries. We commend the efforts that Radio 4 has made in this area in recent years.
44. The only public purpose which needs more attention on Radio 4 is to reflect the UK's nations, regions and other communities. As highlighted by feedback from the BBC Audience Councils in 2014, the audience of Radio 4 is predominantly ABC1 and there is a perception that it is based in the south of England. We would encourage Radio 4 to continue its efforts to engage a more demographically diverse audience while not undermining its basic principle to provide intelligent, engaging content which informs, educates and entertains.

Radio 4 Extra

45. We believe that Radio 4 Extra is performing well against the terms of its service licence.
46. The remit of Radio 4 Extra is to provide speech-based entertainment. We note its schedule should include comedy, drama, stories, features and readings. Most output

should come from the BBC archive, but the station also broadcast some original content, particularly of types of output rarely found on BBC Radio.

47. We note that the remit for Radio 4 Extra to provide content for children was dropped in 2014. We understand the rationale behind this move, but would encourage the BBC to continue to work hard to attract younger audiences to audio content.

Radio 5 live

48. We believe that Radio 5 live is performing well against the terms of its service licence.
49. The remit of BBC Radio 5 live is to provide live news, especially breaking news, and sports coverage. VLV believes it is particularly good at engaging a different audience from that which listens to Radio 4, aiming to be more accessible and involve the audience to a greater degree.

Radio 5 live Sports Extra

50. We believe that Radio 5 live Sports Extra is performing well against the terms of its service licence in terms of providing extra value to licence fee payers by providing a greater choice of coverage of live sporting events.

Are the services delivering high quality and distinctive content?

51. VLV believes that Radio 4 is distinctively different from any other radio output available in the UK. It combines long-running series which are popular with new, often one-off programmes which introduce us to new talent or subject areas.
52. Radio 5 live provides an alternative news and current affairs offering which is more accessible and interactive than that provided by Radio 4. It also provides live sporting coverage which is not available on any other BBC stations.

To what extent are licence fee payers using the services, and are some demographic groups better served than others?

53. We noted the BBC Trust's recommendation in its last Review of Radio 4 that it should aim to increase the station's appeal amongst different demographic groups.
54. To quote: *Our analysis shows, however, that listening does vary significantly amongst different audience groups. Radio 4's weekly reach is higher amongst older audiences, those from better-off households, those living in London and the south east and white audiences. This partly reflects the difference in audience taste for speech radio, which tends to be higher amongst older, better-off audiences. We also note that the BBC has a broad portfolio of services with different remits that are intended to serve audiences in different ways. We would therefore, expect levels of listening to vary significantly amongst different audience groups.*⁹

⁹ BBC Trust Review of Radio 3,4 and 7, February 2011, p 14

55. From 2014 Ofcom research it appears that the Radio 4 audience is still very much weighted towards ABC1 older listeners, but we would welcome any more recent detailed research conducted as part of this review to find out how Radio 4 is progressing in its mission to attract a wider demographic. It is our view from the research currently available that more work needs to be done if Radio 4 is to reflect adequately the different communities and regions of the UK.
56. Having said that, there has recently been much discussion about the under representation of women as presenters and experts in news and current affairs coverage. BBC speech radio has gone some way to addressing this under representation with two new female presenters now featuring prominently and appearing regularly. Mishal Husain and Ritula Shah have both brought a welcome change in tone to their respective programmes, *Today* and *The World Tonight*.
57. Radio 4's news coverage has also become more reflective of the multicultural nature of UK society through the significant change in the tone of its foreign reporting as a result of the growing number of World Service reporters who now appear on Radio 4 news programmes. We welcome this.

Are the services making an effective contribution to delivering the BBC's public purposes?

58. Both Radio 4 and Radio 5 live are effective in delivering a number of the BBC's public purposes through their news programmes and current affairs content. We believe that Radio 4 is particularly successful in the depth, range and quality of its news and current affairs coverage and that Radio 5 live provides distinctive coverage of breaking news.
59. We believe that non-news programmes broadcast by Radio 4 make an important contribution to achieving the other purposes, as stated above.

Are the services delivering good value for money?

60. We believe that both these services are delivery good value for money.
61. Whilst Radio 4 is the most expensive BBC radio service, we believe that it represents excellent value for money overall. Many of our members would suggest that Radio 4 on its own would be well worth the licence fee.

Question 3: Are Radio 4, Radio 4 Extra, Radio 5 live and Radio 5 live Sports Extra well positioned to serve audiences well in the future?

62. VLV believes that the BBC's speech radio services are well positioned for the future. They have a loyal and growing audience and they have successfully evolved their coverage.
63. However, we acknowledge the BBC Trust's concerns about the potential long-term decline in Radio 4's reach to the 'replenisher' audience group. This term refers to

those who may have an interest in speech radio, but tend to be slightly younger and lighter listeners than the Radio 4 core audience.¹⁰

64. We would encourage Radio 4 to continue its work in increasing its reach among 35-54 year olds as well as extending its demographic reach among BAME audiences.

Are the services responding effectively to changing audience expectations and listening habits, primarily in response to technological shifts?

65. We acknowledge that the way people listen to the radio is also continuing to evolve as technology advances and more people want to listen on the move or on different devices, and we encourage the BBC to innovate and explore different ways to maintain its reach continually. We note in its service licence that *Radio 4 should use new technology to ensure its audiences have the maximum opportunity to access programmes as and when they want.*

66. While for most of our members, radio is the primary platform they use to listen to live audio broadcasts it is useful to have access to the iPlayer to listen to programmes one may have missed live. We value the useful background information provided for programmes on many parts of the BBC website.

Do their strategies and funding allow them to do so?

67. We note the increase of 6.9% in the Radio 4 budget between 2008 and 2013 and the reduction in the BBC Radio 5 live budget of 12.9%.¹¹
68. VLV is keenly aware that the future of these four stations is very much dependent on the upcoming licence fee settlement and we would want to see a settlement which allows them to continue to broadcast the high quality, engaging content which they currently provide.

Question 4: Should the service licences for Radio 4, Radio 4 Extra, Radio 5 live or Radio 5 live Sports Extra be changed?

69. We do not believe the service licences should be changed for any of the stations being reviewed.

February 2015

¹⁰ BBC Trust Review of Radio 3,4 and 7, February 2011, p 13

¹¹ Ofcom, PSB Annual Report 2014, Annex 5, p 28