

## **The BBC Trust Review of the BBC's Children's Services - A Response by Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV)**

1. Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) welcomes the BBC Trust's decision to review the BBC's children's services, and, while finding the 15 consultation questions useful as a check-list, believes these may be in danger of being too prescriptive and could lead to complacent conclusions. Therefore, while we will refer to them, we do not think it would be helpful to link our responses only to the questionnaire.
2. The review is taking place against a background of severely reduced PSB expenditure on children's services, notably by ITV, but also Five retreating from programming for the 6-12s and Channel 4 limiting its renewed interest in the area to the 10-15 age-group. Thus, while it is to be hoped that some degree of PSB plurality will be maintained, the role of the BBC in the provision of a diverse, high quality children's service will certainly be greater in the future than it has been in the past, and will therefore require enhanced commitment and expenditure. It is particularly in the area of providing indigenous content aimed primarily at our own children in the UK that the BBC will need to be an even more important player in the future.
3. While the BBC has been, and should continue to be, responsive to changes in the media environment (i.e. the creation of the BBC's two dedicated digital channels and its online and interactive provision), it is important for at least the foreseeable future that children's output is given an assured place in the main TV schedule, particularly on BBC1. There has been some recent erosion of this, with the transfer of some output from BBC1 to BBC2, and the replacement of *Neighbours* by *The Weakest Link* on BBC1, resulting in the provision for children ending 20 minutes earlier than before.
4. As the principal commissioner and producer of children's programmes it is very important that the range and diversity of the BBC's output is closely monitored. We recommend that the Trust undertakes an historic examination of this area, in order to provide a template against which current and future output can be compared. There are recent indications that programming for the older end of the age group under review (9-12s) is suffering, and that the range of both drama and factual programmes has narrowed. Answers to Consultation Question 8 about the BBC providing 'a safe environment' should not be interpreted as an endorsement of a perceived move away from more challenging, realistic programmes.
5. Various statements by BBC executives, including the Director General, give the impression that the children's area is not one of high priority. The BBC, according to Consultation Question 12, spends approximately 3% of the licence fee (and less than that of its total income) on children's. It would be useful to know what the percentage is of the total spend on programmes and content – ITV in its heyday spent 10% of its programme budget on the area, and the BBC (although there is of course no exact comparison) should spend no less.

6. VLV does not believe that the BBC is succeeding as well as it did in the past in reflecting ethnic and other diversities (Consultation Question 7), and that the monitoring exercise referred to above should therefore cover this aspect. This is not intended to suggest specific targets, but to encourage commissioners and producers to take account of these issues.
7. VLV considers that the BBC's response to the various campaigns for more radio provision for children (referred to in passing in Consultation Question 5) has been too thin and inadequate to be located by the target audience, and consideration should be given to a major daily provision for children, which should probably be found a home on Radio 1 or Radio 2.
8. *Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) is an independent, non-profit-making association, free from political, commercial and sectarian affiliations, working for quality and diversity in British broadcasting. VLV represents the interests of listeners and viewers as citizens and consumers across the full range of broadcasting issues. VLV is concerned with the structures, regulation, funding and institutions that underpin the British broadcasting system. VLV does not handle complaints.*
9. *In 1995 VLV formed its Forum for Children's Broadcasting and since that date has held annual conferences on the state and future of children's radio and television in the UK.*