

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



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VLV Response to BBC Trust service review of the BBC's national radio services in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

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 welcomes the opportunity to respond to this BBC Trust review following from our response on the BBC UK Services - Radios 3, 4 and 7.

The approach of this submission is to make comments on the overall strategy for radio in the nations; commenting on developments since this consultation was launched.

1. The Cultural and political diversity of the United Kingdom

The UK is a diverse group of nations and regions. In England BBC radio broadcasting is based on 38 local radio services that reflect the diversity of these communities. In the other three nations of the UK there are three national radio Services and two non-English Services.

We have not made detailed comments on the programmes broadcast by the national Services as we have not been able to undertake original research into the preferences of their listeners; in particular we regret the absence of research into the views of speakers of Welsh and Gaelic. However at appendix one we offer some general comments.

2. The 2006 Agreement between the Secretary of State and the BBC

VLV considers that radio broadcasting in the Nations is central to the public service remit of BBC Radio. Radio broadcasting in the Nations is an integral part of the 2006 Agreement between the Secretary of State at DCMS and the BBC. Under the purposes of the BBC there is a section devoted to the need to represent the UK, its Nations, Regions and communities. Under BBC services there is a section outlining the radio services to be provided in the Nations.

3. The BBC Strategy - Putting Quality First 2010

Since mid 2009 the BBC Trust and Executive have been devising new plans to fulfil the Agreement noting *the strategy for fulfilling it needs to evolve over time*. (Page 3 of the final Strategy Document December 2010) While radio, especially in the Nations and Regions, did not feature in a major way during the evolution of the strategy the final conclusions do have an impact on Radio Services in the Nations.

VLV is pleased that one of the four key elements of the final strategy is that the BBC should do more to serve all audiences. We especially welcome the requirement for the Director General to publish clear statements *about what the BBC intends to offer the audience in each of the Nations* (Page 12 of the final Strategy Document). We expect this to give full details of the future of Radio in the Nations particularly as the total annual budget for the five Services given in the current service licences is £67.7 million.

VLV is concerned that the cuts exercise already in place, combined with the consequences that will follow from the 2010 licence fee settlement, will severely damage the quality of the five radio Services. We do not consider there is any further scope for cuts in the production budgets of these Services. *The licence fee could be made to work harder, not by cutting programme budgets, but by slimmed down management structures and perks.* (Page 10 of VLV response to The BBC's strategy Putting Quality First May 2010)

4. Digital Radio

We comment specifically on this aspect of transmission of radio to the Nations as the geography of these areas presents the biggest challenge to the broadcasting of these services using digital technology. We note that the final strategy only makes a commitment to evaluate *options for improving the DAB coverage of BBC Nation's radio services*. This may be a sensible way forward given the considerable expenditure incurred to ensure the current generally good coverage by FM and the potential high cost of further build out. The reception of radio services in vehicles is particularly important in these three Nations with large rural areas where there is still poor reception for digital radio.

At Appendix Two we comment on the decision to imminently remove the two Scottish national radio Services from the Freeview platform along with the BBC UK Radio Services.

5. Radio in England and the other Nations of the UK

We note at section one above that there is a difference in the approach to radio in England and the three other Nations of the UK. Each of the three Nations have a national Service but similar large regions in England do not have an equivalent service e.g. for the North East or West of England. However, and by contrast, distinct smaller communities in England do have good local BBC radio provision denied to equivalent communities in the Nations e.g. in Wales there is no distinctive local service for the rural areas of North Wales or the valley communities of South Wales. The exception seems to be Radio Foyle which provides a service to North West Ulster similar to a BBC local radio Service.

12th January 2011

Appendix One

Comments on programme output from VLV members

1. The National Radio Services have an identity problem in attempting to achieve for their respective nations what Radios 1, 2, 4 and 5 manage for the whole of the UK.
2. Some listeners value the old style Radio 2 programmes with a national flavour.
3. There is praise for the morning and evening news programmes and the general coverage of events in the Nations.
4. There is support for the phone-in programmes as at their best they enable a conversation to take place about issues relevant to that part of the UK. They ensure a high level of “talk radio”.
5. There is a strong coverage of rugby on Radio Wales and of football on Radio Scotland. This enables radio to reach a demographic and audience which is often characterised as not being part of the heartland BBC audience. However the same service elements can be off-putting to non-enthusiasts.
6. In Scotland the two local opt-outs for the remote communities of Orkney and Shetland are both excellent examples of public service broadcasting that involves the local communities in the programmes. They also provide an independent source of news.
7. We commend the performance of BBC Radio Nan Gaidheal which produces a wide range of programmes on a very small budget. It also encourages non-Gaelic speakers to sample the service as, unlike Radio Cymru, it has a bilingual website.

Appendix Two

Removal of the two Scottish national radio Services from the Freeview platform

On December 21st the BBC Trust announced that in Scotland BBC Radio Scotland and BBC Radio Nan Gaidheal along with all the UK radio Services will be removed from the Freeview platform every evening to enable TV Alba, the Gaelic television channel, to have a place on the platform. We note that on the basis of the audience research conducted in January 2010 the decision may not affect many listeners. The successful switchover to digital television in the most challenging reception areas of Scotland during 2010 has now enabled most of the population of these areas to receive digital radio via a TV. The research cited here may therefore be out of date.

We note that this change is ahead of the rest of the UK which will review the use of Freeview for radio when DAB coverage approaches FM equivalence. The use of digital television for radio will be included in the 50% listening to digital devices that will trigger the closure of much FM broadcasting.

Confidentiality Statement

No part of this response is confidential.

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