

**BBC Charter Review White Paper:
A public service for all: the BBC in the digital age
DCMS, March 2006**

**Views of Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig,
Gaelic Media Service (GMS)**

The Gaelic Media Service (GMS) continues to support the views contained in its earlier response to the BBC Charter Review Green Paper. GMS was pleased to note the strong support for a sustainable strategy for Gaelic broadcasting which was expressed in other responses to the Green Paper, including those by the Scottish Executive, Scotland's Screen Industries Summit Group (SISG), Scottish Screen, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, Comunn na Gàidhlig, An Comunn Gàidhealach, Scotland's Cultural Commission, VLV Scotland, PACT and by the BBC.¹ We wish to make the following comments, in response to the BBC Charter Review White Paper.

Support for Dedicated Gaelic Digital Channel

There is now clear commitment to the establishment of a dedicated Gaelic digital channel. The recent approval in principle by the Board of Governors of the BBC and the Gaelic Media Service to co-operate to establish the channel serves to underline the general consensus.

We believe that it is realistic to aim to launch the channel in 2007, but would stress that a secure and sustainable settlement is required as quickly as possible to facilitate development and to maintain the confidence of the Gaelic language production sector.

¹ See responses to the BBC Charter Review Green Paper by the Scottish Executive, Scotland's Screen Industries Summit Group (SISG), Scottish Screen, Comunn na Gàidhlig, An Comunn Gaidhealach, Scotland's Cultural Commission and VLV Scotland on the BBC Charter Review website at http://www.bbccharterreview.org.uk/gp_responses/organisations/organisations.html ; and the BBC response to the Green Paper on the BBC website at http://www.bbc.co.uk/thefuture/green_paper/green_paper.shtml .

The Gaelic Media Service Partnership with the BBC

GMS is pleased that the Government has clearly reaffirmed in the White Paper that:

“...our policy is for the BBC to continue to play a crucial role in safeguarding Gaelic cultural heritage.”²

GMS has positive experience of working in partnership with the BBC, most recently in a joint BBC/GMS Working Group which was formed to look at a range of editorial and operational issues associated with the setting up of a new Gaelic Digital Service.

The Working Group was established in August 2005 under the independent chairmanship of Professor Sir Neil McCormick, following discussions between the GMS Chair, Neil Fraser, BBC Chair, Michael Grade and the BBC National Governor for Scotland, Jeremy Peat. The Working Group has proposed two mutually acceptable models for the operational partnership:

- an unincorporated joint venture 'partnership' operated as a BBC-licensed service (the “BBC-L model”); and
- an incorporated joint venture, the terms of which would provide that the BBC and GMS would become shareholders in a company which would be licensed under Ofcom, (the “JV model”).

After considering a range of pros and cons, GMS’s considered view is that the BBC-L model could have considerable advantages, mainly because of the BBC’s outstanding track record of support for Gaelic language and culture, its potential ability to marshal adequate resources and the probability that this would allow a greater proportion of resources to be dedicated to content. Tangible benefits should accrue from the fact that, as the White Paper notes, the BBC has been broadcasting Gaelic for over 80 years.³

If the BBC-L model does not proceed, however, then the JV model should certainly be considered as a possible alternative. In either eventuality, the partnership agreement must ensure that GMS and the BBC are equal partners.

It is also both essential and entirely appropriate (particularly in view of the Government’s own clear policy statement on the crucial role of the BBC) that the Corporation’s Gaelic commitment should be **explicitly** covered in its renewed Charter.

² White Paper, *A public service for all: the BBC in the digital age*, DCMS, March 2006, p. 20, par. 3.5.10, on the BBC Charter Review website at http://www.bbccharterreview.org.uk/have_your_say/white_paper/wp_home.html#WP.

³ White Paper, *A public service for all: the BBC in the digital age*, DCMS, March 2006, p. 19, par. 3.5.8, on the BBC Charter Review website at http://www.bbccharterreview.org.uk/have_your_say/white_paper/wp_home.html#WP.

Funding

We support the licence fee as the basis for BBC funding and urge the Government to take into account the cost of providing an enhanced contribution to the Gaelic Digital Service in establishing the licence fee settlement.

There continues to be an immediate need for clarification and resolution of the funding arrangements for Gaelic broadcasting, particularly for the new Digital Service. The arrangements need to be sustainable and sufficient to facilitate access to content across all digital media and to embrace interactivity.

We trust that the BBC has taken into account the need to support the Gaelic digital channel service in arguing for an enhanced licence fee settlement. It will also be important for subsequent BBC funding reviews to bear in mind the impact that any changes might have on the BBC's contribution to Gaelic services.

Availability and Access

GMS wholeheartedly agrees with the aim implicit in the title of the White Paper "A public service for all: the BBC in the digital age". It is of crucial importance to the Gaelic community that the all-inclusive principle of universal access is put into practice in relation to all Gaelic programme services.

GMS is committed to developing a quality Gaelic media service which is accessible through all electronic media, including television, radio, internet and 3G platforms, with interactive and on-demand content and with the capacity to adapt to further developments in technology such as HDTV.

GMS also urgently requires recognition of the need for gifted DTT spectrum for the Gaelic digital television channel on a par with other public service channels, as an essential element in ensuring universal access for the potential audience for the dedicated digital Gaelic service.

Radio will continue to be an important part of a multi media Gaelic service. The Gaelic Media Service would expect the BBC to take full responsibility for the development of Radio nan Gaidheal into a fully fledged service available throughout Scotland funded from the licence fee.

Content

It is widely recognised that it is essential for programme content to be high quality, innovative and engaging in order for Gaelic broadcasting to fulfil its pivotal role in language maintenance and development. A broad range of programming is also essential for GMS to meet its legislative remit for establishing a digital Gaelic service with a wide and diverse range of high quality programmes.

The baseline target agreed between the Gaelic Media Service and the BBC is that the new television channel service should include an output of 1.5 hours of original television programming each day, rising to 3 hours a day of original programme output by the conclusion of digital switchover, supplemented by programme repeats and a sustaining service.

For this critical mass to be achieved the BBC must make a significantly increased contribution in real terms to the Gaelic service.

It is important to address the undoubted potential for further development of audiences for Gaelic programming which will complement growing Gaelic medium education and arts provision, and the new initiatives stemming from the Scottish Parliament's Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005.

MORI research commissioned by Ofcom⁴ has illustrated that Gaelic rates as the fourth highest priority among programme genres (excluding news) in Scotland.

The BBC should therefore continue to broadcast Gaelic on its own analogue television channels after a dedicated Gaelic digital television channel is created.

⁴ *Programmes in the Nations - A deliberative audience research project conducted by MORI for Phase 3 of Ofcom's PSB Review*, MORI, February 2005, Figure 4, Section 3, at <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/psb3/>.

Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) Status

GMS was pleased to note Ofcom's clear statement in the final part of its public service broadcasting review that "We remain of the view that broadcasting in indigenous languages is an essential element of the UK PSB mix."⁵

It is important that the PSB status of Gaelic broadcasting services is formally recognised, particularly so if the delivery mechanism for the new digital channel evolves under the JV rather than the BBC-L model. It should also be made clear that this PSB status also conveys entitlement to carriage across a mix of platforms, including satellite, broadband and DTT.

GMS awaits with interest the results of Ofcom's work to further develop its thinking about how a public service publisher (PSP) may work as a way of helping to sustain public service broadcasting.⁶ We continue to emphasise the importance of ensuring that the Gaelic community has access to enhanced public service broadcasting provision, including interactive and on-demand content, which is seen as an integral element in any PSP proposition which ultimately comes to fruition.

**Gaelic Media Service
May 2006**

⁵ *Ofcom Review of public service television broadcasting: Phase 3 – Competition for quality*, Ofcom, 2005, p.48, par. 3.40, on the Ofcom website at <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/psb3/>.

⁶ *Ofcom Annual Plan 2006/2007*, Ofcom 2006, p. 7, par. 3.7, on the Ofcom website at http://www.ofcom.org.uk/about/accoun/reports_plans/annual_plan0607/statement/.