



From the Director, Public Policy

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Andrew Ramsay Esq
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Creative Industries, Broadcasting and Gambling Group
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
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Dear Andrew,

BBC DIGITAL CURRICULUM

On 10 December 2001, the Prime Minister backed the *Curriculum Online* initiative, a partnership between the Government, public and private sector broadcasters and software producers, to provide innovative interactive learning materials covering all elements of the National Curriculum. To stimulate and support the market, the Prime Minister announced that £50m would be made available in the 2002/03 school year to fund "Electronic Learning Credits" with which schools could buy commercial curriculum resources. The BBC strongly welcomed all elements of this announcement.

Over the last eighteen months, there has been widespread discussion of the BBC's role in providing a core Digital Curriculum service – first through the BBC's own public consultation document published in September 2000, then through the DfES *Curriculum Online* document in April 2001, and subsequently in detailed discussions between the BBC and other key industry players. These included roundtable discussions brokered by the DfES, first during September 2001 then during December and January.

Following this extensive process of consultation and discussion, I am now writing to seek the Secretary of State's approval for the BBC to develop and

launch the Digital Curriculum, a new public service comprising interactive online learning materials in support of the school curriculum.

Approval is sought under Article 3(b) of the Royal Charter and in accordance with the Guidelines for the Approval of BBC Public Services. The BBC also invites the Secretary of State to direct the BBC, using her power in clause 10.1(a) of the Agreement, that licence fee funding may be used for the funding of such a service.

This letter follows the pro-forma based on the Government's criteria for the approval of new BBC public services, and I attach:

- A detailed description of the proposed new service (Annex 1)
- Full details of the public consultation carried out by the BBC regarding the provision of a digital curriculum (Annex 2)

A third Annex, an independent Market Impact Assessment prepared for the BBC by PricewaterhouseCoopers, will be forwarded to the Department shortly.

We will also as soon as possible send to the Department the results of the Proof of Concept exercise referred to below.

1.1 Description of the proposed new service

The detailed proposition is attached at Annex 1.

The BBC's proposed service is the latest development of the high quality educational resources which the BBC has provided since the 1920s.

The proposition is for the provision of a coherent online service, accessed via the internet, that would harness the power of interactivity to offer users exciting new ways in which to learn. Students would have access to a rich mix of learning resources, mapped from the school curriculum. A broad range of media would be used, creating a distinctive mix of interactive learning resources. The individual resources would be presented as a coherent whole within a 'Virtual Learning Environment', an online software application which provides the flexibility to navigate through the service and allows teachers to personalise and manage the resources.

1.2 The requirement for approval

Approval is required because Article 3(b) of the Royal Charter requires that the Secretary of State's prior approval must be sought if the BBC wishes to launch a new Ancillary Service. A direction under clause 10.1(a) is sought because the provision of this particular new service would not constitute the use of the licence fee "for the purposes of the Home Services" as defined in the Royal Charter.

1.3 Licence fee funding

The BBC Board of Governors has approved a spend of £150m of licence fee funds (at 2001/02 prices) to the end of 2006/07, which may be supplemented with revenue and contributions from other sources. The minimum amount of public money would be used to cover the net costs of providing the service taking into account any revenue or contributions from other sources.

The BBC intends to spend half of any licence fee funding for content on commissioning content from external suppliers.

The Governors have assessed the proposed service against the requirements of the Charter and Agreement and against their criteria for new public services. Those criteria require that, to justify licence fee funding, the BBC's public services must:

- Provide high quality programmes or content
- Uphold the BBC's editorial values
- Offer a distinctive mix of programming or content
- Contribute to the achievement of the BBC's public objectives
- Demonstrate public value or appeal to licence payers
- Be free at the point of use and universally accessible

The Governors' assessment of the proposal against these criteria is set out below.

Provide high quality programmes or content

The BBC's existing online educational resources are of high quality and there is independent evidence that they are educationally effective. For example, a report for the Students Across Europe Learning Network, carried out by the University of Durham, determined that the BBC's *GCSE Bitesize* service contributed to the achievement of better grades by those pupils who used them. The BBC would apply the same requirements of high quality and effectiveness to these materials.

The BBC tested interactive materials in 10 schools early in 2000 as part of proof of concept pilots funded by the DfEE in relation to its Educational Broadcasting Services Competition. The feedback to the BBC from teachers and students in those schools suggested that the resource was highly flexible and could improve all lessons. It left teachers more free to concentrate on the quality of learning and allowed students to proceed at different rates and on individualised tasks. In end of trial interviews with class teachers carried out by researchers from the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) on behalf of BECTA, the Government's education technology advisers, 15 out of 17 teachers said the quality of the materials was good or very good, with the remaining two saying it was satisfactory. Asked to compare it to other classroom resources, 16 out of 17 said it was as useful or better.

In addition, interactive materials for teaching literacy and numeracy have been tested in around 50 primary schools throughout the UK. Research into the effectiveness of these materials has been carried out by the Department for Education and Skills in England. The results of this research have yet to be published but anecdotal evidence suggests a highly positive response from teachers.

The Digital Curriculum Proof of Concept outlined below will however provide the key opportunity to assess key elements of the proposition itself.

As well as aiming for high standards of content produced in-house, the BBC would ensure that externally produced content reaches the same high standards. Each external commission would include clear responsibility for ensuring delivery of every component.

Upholding the BBC's editorial values

The proposed service would be subject to both the BBC's Producers' Guidelines and its Online Guidelines, which guide the activities of all BBC staff and those working on behalf of the BBC, including commissioners and in-house and independent content producers. Both sets of Guidelines are published and can be found on the BBC's website. In essence they commit the BBC to:

- Impartiality
- Accuracy
- Fairness
- Giving a full and fair view of peoples and cultures
- Editorial integrity and independence
- Respect for privacy
- Respect for standards of taste and decency
- Avoiding the imitation of anti-social and criminal behaviour
- Safeguarding the welfare of children
- Fairness to interviewees
- Respect for our diverse audiences
- Independence from commercial interests

Offering a distinctive mix of content

Over the last few years, a number of commercial companies have designed electronic educational content, supporting curriculum requirements. The BBC has developed its Digital Curriculum vision to represent a distinctive contribution to the marketplace and so make a positive impact on electronic learning and the raising of educational standards.

The range and mix of content available through the Digital Curriculum would ensure that distinctiveness, in particular through:

- The breadth of coverage: providing materials for subjects which represent around three quarters of curriculum subjects for 5-16 year-olds, and

covering the curricular requirements of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

- The spread of coverage: 25% of funding would go to core subjects, 35% to non-core, and 40% would be invested in remaining areas, which could include curricular variations in the Nations, materials in the Welsh language, minority subjects, cross-curricular areas, and materials for those with special educational needs or access requirements.
- The range of materials: students and teachers would have access to a mix of learning resources employing a broad range of media, drawing on the BBC's vast multimedia experience and resources and thus creating a rich, cohesive offering of learning experiences.
- The balance of investment: no more than 50% of the curricular learning outcomes for any one subject would be covered, delivering a coherent service across the range of subjects, as well as one which would complement alternative commercial offerings and thus promote variety and choice for learners.

Contributing to the achievement of the BBC's public objectives

Education has since the formation of the BBC been one of the central pillars of its public service. Since the 1920s, the BBC has sought to provide high quality and useful educational resources, first via radio and in print, then via television and most recently through the BBC's highly successful and widely valued education websites. The proposed service would enable the BBC to continue to deliver its educational mission into the twenty-first century, harnessing the undoubted educational benefits of Information and Communications Technologies.

The Governors also believe that this new service would complement the BBC public services generally, contributing significantly to the BBC's Object (at Article 3(b) of the Royal Charter) of providing, "as public services, other services whether or not broadcasting or programme supply services".

The BBC's specific objectives for 2001/2002, approved by the Board of Governors and published in its 2000/2001 Annual Report, include making "a compelling case for the BBC leading the development of a UK-wide digital curriculum and [preparing] the BBC to play this role". The Board believes that this proposal does indeed make such a case.

Demonstrating public value or appeal to licence payers

An independent review of the DfEE-sponsored Educational Broadcasting Services Competition pilot, by the University of Sheffield, concluded that teachers and students were very positive about the BBC material as a learning and teaching resource and that positive comments far outweighed negative observations and experiences.

The BBC's own public consultation on the proposed Digital Curriculum service (see section 1.6 below) demonstrated clear and widespread support for the provision of such a service.

Although the BBC has tested the production, delivery and use of interactive learning materials through earlier Government-supported pilot projects and the content of BBCi education sites, the Digital Curriculum proposition envisages functionality of a different scale, and therefore it is important to test its deliverability and effectiveness in a Proof of Concept exercise.

The Proof of Concept is currently operating in 23 schools and is due to end on 10 May. It will enable us to determine that:

- the new service model would be effective and deliverable in practice;
- the functionalities that would be offered by the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) application would work with different audiences;
- the new pedagogical approach and types of content would be effective when presented through this VLE interface;
- all aspects of the proposed service would work effectively.

The results will be scrutinised and submitted to Executive Committee and the Board of Governors at the end of May. Their conclusions will be submitted to the Secretary of State, so that she can take full account of them in reaching her decision on this request for approval.

Being free at the point of use and universally accessible

The materials would be accessible through the BBC's existing BBCi online site, free to homes and schools and universally accessible by all those with a PC and an internet connection, or other suitable receiving devices.

The full Digital Curriculum proposition is conceived as a broadband service, but one of which the majority of materials will nevertheless be accessible in an appropriate form and an effective way via narrowband connections. The service would be designed to be able to identify the speed of the online connection and to tailor the materials offered accordingly to provide the most rewarding possible interactive experience.

All users with an internet connection and a PC, whether at school or in the home, would be able to obtain the service. Users with a standard narrowband connection would be able to access 70% of the content (ie. less the richer media elements) online via the internet. Schools with narrowband connections can enhance the learning experience by downloading 100% of the materials from the Digital Curriculum site in advance of using them, and storing them within the school. In addition, those schools that have fast Internet connections and/or a cache server (a device that can store large amounts of content) would be able to obtain the entire content portfolio live over the internet.

The BBC would use its existing media to ensure that licence fee payers and their families were aware of the service the BBC was providing as part of the overall *Curriculum Online* provision.

1.4 Value for money

The Board of Governors has approved the proposed budget for this new service and believes that the Digital Curriculum will offer excellent value for money for the licence fee payer.

The BBC aims to provide a core public service which it expects to form part of a wider set of services in which a complementary range of resources would be offered commercially by other providers. Through working with government and others in the industry, it is the BBC's aim to provide a service which makes the best use of the available public funds, providing maximum value for users, offering choice but avoiding wasteful duplication.

Moreover, by encouraging user confidence in electronic learning resources as a whole, and, specifically, through contracting out an average of 50% of the production of the content for the core service over five years, the BBC would support the UK video, multimedia and software production and post-production base, and help to stimulate the market.

1.5 BBC approvals

The proposals have received the approval of the BBC's legal, regulatory and policy advisers, including the Head of Fair Trading, and were approved by the Executive Committee on 23 April and by the Board of Governors on 25 April.

1.6 Public consultation

Although not required under the terms of its Royal Charter and Agreement to carry out a process of public consultation before launching a new Ancillary Service under Article 3(b) of the Charter, the BBC nevertheless has consulted the public on plans for the launch of a digital curriculum service. The results of the consultation provide good evidence of public demand for interactive learning resources from the BBC. The public consultation ran for six weeks from 11 September to 20 October 2000 and was trailed on television. The consultation document was available on the BBC's public website and on request by post. It was also sent to a range of organisations and individuals known to have a particular interest in education and/or broadcasting.

A total of 1,336 responses were received. Forty per cent of these said they were replying on behalf of an organisation, mostly schools or organisations involved in education. Nine out of ten respondents supported the BBC's proposal for a digital curriculum. A summary and full details of the results of the consultation are attached at Annex 2.

Both before and since the public consultation exercise, the BBC has worked closely with the Department for Education and Skills, education organisations, the teaching profession and other providers to discuss the proposed development and produce pilot material, and has sought very many opportunities to discuss its thinking publicly. It published its response to the DfES's *Curriculum Online* consultation in the summer of 2001. Over the Autumn of 2001 and again around the turn of the year the BBC took part in several months of round table discussions, brokered by DfES, with other industry players. The BBC used the opportunity to consult the industry on its plans and to adjust them where appropriate in the light of those discussions.

1.7 The timetable

The Secretary of State's approval is sought by July 2002, to allow plans to proceed allowing the BBC to meet its target launch date.

1.8 Proposed launch dates

It is intended that the service should be introduced from Easter 2003.

1.9 Further details of the proposals

See Annex 1.

The Digital Curriculum would be subject to the BBC's Fair Trading processes and procedures. If approved by the Secretary of State, the service would be operated in line with any undertakings given in this approval request and any conditions which might be placed upon its approval by the Secretary of State. The fulfilment and observations of such undertakings and conditions would, by virtue of Article 7(1)(f) of the Royal Charter, be the specific responsibility of the Board of Governors to monitor and supervise.

The BBC has commissioned an independent, economics based report on the market impact of this proposal from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). Their report, forming Annex 3 to this letter, will be forwarded to the Department in the next few days.

The BBC strongly supports the Government's initiative to provide Electronic Learning Credits for schools to buy electronic learning resources from commercial providers. The BBC believes that such public funding, if maintained over the next few years, would help ensure the development of a vibrant marketplace, offering choice and diversity for users through the *Curriculum Online* initiative, as well as commercial opportunities to UK companies.

1.10 BBC contact

I will be very happy to answer any questions which the Secretary of State may have about our proposals.

best wishes,

Caroline

Caroline Thomson