

Department of Culture, Media and Sport
Media Ownership Consultation Responses
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Dear Sir/Madam

CONSULTATION ON MEDIA OWNERSHIP RULES

Following on from the consultation on the Communications White Paper, The Highland Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the above proposals.

In particular the Council is delighted that the proposal to revoke the rules preventing local authorities from owning media companies is being taken forward. While your paper indicates the purpose of such a move would be to enable information services to be delivered by local authorities to the public, the Highland Council believes that a much wider remit is possible.

The proposed change to the ownership rules offers an opportunity for local authorities to use a radio licence for much wider purposes than dissemination of information. The Highland Council has over the past six years supported the development and training of a network of community radio stations across the Highlands. Through partnership working with the public, private and voluntary sectors the Council has taken the lead in developing training and qualifications appropriate to the needs of local radio. The recently Scottish Qualifications Authority approved Certificate in Local Radio Broadcasting being one example. The Council has also within its Community Radio Strategy clearly identified and acknowledged the benefits of radio as a medium to develop individual skills and confidence. The Council supports the use of radio as an effect tool for building community capacity and has also developed targeted projects aimed at young people within identified areas of social exclusion.

The costs of operating a licence can be significant for a community and the Council foresees real potential as a licence holder to ameliorate some of those costs. This could be achieved through local authorities holding a licence covering the whole geography of its remit. The Council suggests this would not only be for the purposes of providing an information service but to support education, vocational training and community capacity building. Through creating access to radio the Council could enable small communities and interest group to articulate their views on a wide range of issues to the Council and the wider community. Clearly such an approach could

significantly enhance the democratic process, particularly in areas where communication and participation are restricted by distance and the transport infrastructure.

There are also links to current development within e-governance and the potential to create access, for example, to community produced radio programmes through a wide range of media including the Internet. Within the delivery on mainstream education the Council as a licence holder could in a very practical way support a range of study in schools and develop routes from school not only into further and higher education but into employment in the media sector.

The Council therefore supports the revoking of the ownership rules in relation to local government ownership of media companies with consideration being given to the broadest possible application rather than restricted to the provision of information services. Clearly such a role would need to remain within existing law requiring any service to be non-party political in nature.

The Council has on a number of occasions raised concerns over the potential impact of the digitisation of television services to the Highland area and the potential loss of a free to air services. This situation will arise if analogue services are discontinued and resources are not available for relay stations, including those owned by communities to be upgraded to deal with digital signals. In addition as digital signals operate on a 'line of sight' basis for reception, those in the Highlands currently receiving an adequate signal indirectly (e.g. bounced off hills) will also potentially lose their free to air service. Clearly there are some potential solutions but at present all of these involve additional cost to the consumer over and above existing television licence fees. The Council raises this point, as any change in ownership rules which potentially accelerates the process of delivering services in digital format, (while potentially benefiting the majority of householders in the UK), may have the reverse effect on households in remote area such as the Highlands.

I hope these points are of interest, should you require any further detail of the Highland Council's Community Radio Strategy, the VQ in Local Radio Broadcasting or the Council's support for community radio please contact, Evelyn Johnston, Community and Policy Officer at the above telephone number or e-mail address.

Yours sincerely,

BRUCE ROBERTSON
Director of Education, Culture and Sport