

Response to DCMS consultation on sustainable, independent and impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions

The response below is a collective response from a variety of organisations in Birmingham and the West Midlands (public, private and voluntary sectors represented) with an interest in establishing local television services to provide a voice for public service programming and information, meet the needs for community enrichment and offer acceptable entertainment programming to the communities and individuals in the West Midlands conurbation.

The group has met informally to further the common goals and shared interests that will progress the development of local television in the region, although some of the organisations may respond individually and separately there is a consensus view represented in this response.

GENERAL COMMENTS

1. Although the DCMS consultation document is focussed on seeking views specifically on the provision of news both nationally and regionally, it is our view that it is not possible to consider the provision of news in isolation and these services should be considered within the broader context of the viability of providing 'public service' and 'commercial entertainment' content at a local level.
2. In particular the Digital Britain Report drew attention to the risks relating to the diminution of provision of high quality children's programming and the loss of opportunity to deliver educational content across a broad spectrum ranging from media literacy to accredited learning.
3. To that end there are key requirements to create the favourable legal, financial and social climate for this mixed local television scenario to be achieved.
4. This includes ensuring a level playing field for each potential legitimate bidder/contributor in terms of supportive legislation, a realistic financial regime and clear criteria for licensing and monitoring performance

DCMS CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Questions for feedback to help shape response to DCMS consultation on sustainable, independent and impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions

1. Do you agree that securing plural sources of impartial news for the Nations, locally and in the regions should be a key priority?

Plurality of provision of news content is a priority at all the levels indicated above. In the regions it is vitally important to ensure there is more than one source of news although it may be that broadcast television isn't the only vehicle through which impartial news can be delivered. The increasing volume of 'hyperlocal' news content delivered through blogs and websites offer an alternative way to aggregate news content at a regional level.

The ultimate aim should be access to a variety of local news sources, some of which have a specific remit to be impartial. This is critical for viewers to achieve informed views.

2. Do you agree that sustainable, impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions is likely to require some top-up public funding?

It is not clear whether there is a viable standalone financial model for the delivery of 'impartial news' – both hard and soft – that ensures the editorial quality demanded by this objective. There is not a sufficient definition of 'public funding' within the consultation document to be clear whether this funding would support or undermine impartiality. Some thought should be given to the distinction between newsgathering, and the costs therefore incurred, and the role of gate-keeping. The role of newsgathering is increasingly being undertaken by active citizen journalists, largely this is done at little cost. The gate-keeping role, to produce an impartial aggregation of this content would require some form of additional funding. Creating a sustainable, commercial business case for this form of news production is unproven so some form of public subsidy would be appropriate.

3. Do you agree that the Television Licence Fee should be used to support impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions in addition to BBC services?

Given that the BBC utilises public funding to deliver its regional news services then it should therefore follow that a new, impartial regional news service would also receive public funds. This question be shaped to ask whether there should be a single impartial news licence fee that would cover all providers, rather than lumping a separate debate in to the discussions around public funding for the existing public broadcaster.

4. Do you agree that any funding within a contained contestable element of the television licence fee not required for impartial news should potentially be available to fund other forms of essential public service content, or should such funding be limited to news?

If the proposed changes to ITV regional licenses result in a complete removal of ITV's regional public service obligation then this would indicate that all forms of regional PSB are not sustainable through a commercial funding model. It would follow therefore that public funding is necessary to sustain other forms of this form of programming. More detailed work would need to take place to ascertain the extent to which viewers value other forms of essential public service broadcasting.

5. Are there alternative funding mechanisms that you believe would deliver the above objectives more effectively?

This is a distinct possibility but more research on other successful models combined with market testing and feasibility studies of translating these for the UK is required before these become credible options.

Some consideration should be given to current funding models being used to sustain hyperlocal news services. This might offer forms of innovative, low-cost solutions but more research is needed into their long-term viability.

6. Do you agree with the proposal to set a maximum percentage of Television Licence Fee revenue which could be set aside as a contained contestable element?

The group that met did not discuss this question in detail.

7. Do you agree that amending the BBC Agreement could provide the necessary protection to the BBC's future funding and independence?

Yes as importantly it would re-define/confirm the purpose of the BBC as a publicly funded broadcaster and content producer

8. Do you agree that the use of any contained contestable element within the Television Licence Fee should be restricted to the public purposes set out in the BBC Charter?

Not necessarily as once public funding is directed towards a plurality of impartial news providers there may well be a requirement to redefine the purpose of the public funding. Regional consortia/interest groups should have some of autonomy over how funding is utilised. This would better reflect the conditions within each region.

This response was produced by Digital Birmingham during a meeting held on 18th September 2009 at which the following organisations were present:

Aquila TV
Advantage West Midlands
Birmingham Post
Biz TV
Central Vision
British Telecom (Chairing role)
Chamber TV
City TV
Digital Birmingham
Projects in Motion
Rhubarb Radio
Screen West Midlands
Skills Channel TV
Talk About Local

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