



## **Digital Britain: the interim report**

### **A response by MG ALBA**

MG ALBA (the operating name of Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig or Gaelic Media Service) has formed a partnership with the BBC to broadcast BBC ALBA, the Gaelic digital television channel, which was launched in September 2008.

MG ALBA was originally established (as the Gaelic Television Committee) under the Broadcasting Act 1990, and its current remit under the Communications Act 2003 is to secure that a wide and diverse range of high quality programmes in Gaelic is made available to persons in Scotland. MG ALBA is funded by the Scottish Government and regulated by Ofcom.

MG ALBA welcomes the opportunity to comment on “Digital Britain: the interim report”. Our comments will focus on the objectives and actions that most affect Gaelic broadcasting as part of the public service landscape post-switchover, and those affecting Scottish audiences, including important issues of infrastructure and access to digital content, and we hope that these comments will be taken into consideration in drafting the final Digital Britain report.

#### **Next Generation Access (NGA)**

Improvement in digital access is crucial for rural Scotland. The Digital Britain report notes, following the Caio report, that at least half of the UK population can reasonably be expected to have next generation access if current plans for investment are carried to completion, but those based in remote and rural areas of Scotland are unlikely to be among this group. Significant infrastructure development will be required to bring digital connectivity to rural Scotland, an objective unlikely to be met by market-led investment.

The Western Isles and Highlands & Islands, which are home to a large proportion of the audience for Gaelic television, and many other areas of Scotland are currently poorly served with high speed broadband, although community initiatives and local authority interventions have provided broadband access at lower speeds. We welcome the proposal to establish a set of standards to provide ready-made template solutions for local communities to adopt (Action 4) as a means of ensuring consistent provision of high speed broadband throughout Scotland.

We also welcome the commitment to establish a universal level of service for digital access (Actions 17 and 18). We note the report’s reference to demand for speeds of 20Mbps, but that the universal service commitment is proposed for speeds of up to 2Mbps only, which is unlikely to be fast enough for end users to watch high quality video and is certainly not fast enough for broadcasters to enable tapeless file transfer of content. We note the concern that first generation access is already becoming congested and is

likely to become more so. The speed guaranteed under the universal service commitment must anticipate future demand on networks throughout the UK. We are pleased that the interim report acknowledges the danger of a gulf in access developing if upgrades to NGA do not become available to the estimated 10% of the population in “not-spots”.

### **Future of public service broadcasting (PSB) and investment in content**

MG ALBA welcomes the interim report’s recognition of the need to secure adequate provision of content for the UK’s nations and regions in the context of any new PSB model. This should include content in the indigenous languages of the UK. Evaluation of the options for future PSB provision should also take account of the recommendations made to the Scottish Government by the Scottish Broadcasting Commission in 2008. Meeting targets for the increased proportion of network production spend outwith London and in the nations and regions will also impact on the industry in Scotland, both for English and for Gaelic production, and the final Digital Britain report should take cognisance of this.

We recognise the significant pressures on public service broadcasters and the need to develop more efficient models for content production and for nurturing talent in the creative industries. MG ALBA has implemented new content procurement models that create significant efficiencies while at the same time providing stability and sustainable business models for key suppliers. MG ALBA has also agreed terms of trade with PACT and will keep these under review. MG ALBA is committed to the principles set out in Skillset’s Sector Skills Agreement for the Creative Industries Scotland 2008-11 and in particular to developing skills and training for the Gaelic content production sector, through the Gaelic Television Training Turst, through our digital shorts competition FilmG and through partnerships with other industry bodies. We welcome the emphasis that the interim report places on developing skills and making the transition from education to business simpler for employers and new entrants.

### **BBC ALBA – Gaelic broadcasting**

BBC ALBA is a dedicated Gaelic language television channel broadcasting to the UK on digital satellite. The channel aims to fulfil the UK’s obligations in respect of Gaelic as they arise from Article 11 of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. The channel is of wide appeal due to the nature of its content offering and attracts many times more viewers than there are speakers of the language in Scotland. BBC ALBA is due to be carried on cable in the near future and the BBC Trust will review the service in 2009 with a view to determining whether the service can be carried on the BBC’s digital terrestrial capacity. BBC ALBA provides a full range of public service broadcasting genres – including news, sport, children’s programmes, factual and entertainment – and should be afforded universal carriage to viewers in Scotland.

The availability of NGA will undoubtedly have implications for BBC ALBA’s distribution during the next two decades and MG ALBA aims to secure the distribution of BBC ALBA on all available and emerging digital platforms on a free-to-air basis.

“Ofcom’s Second Public Service Broadcasting Review: Putting Viewers First” has described the future of Gaelic broadcasting as “relatively secure” although it acknowledges concerns about access to BBC ALBA while its carriage on Freeview is still to be secured. BBC ALBA is however a BBC licensed

service whose content is funded in the most part by MG ALBA, and until MG ALBA has a secure legislative and funding basis concerns will remain about the long term viability of public service broadcasting through the medium of Gaelic.

**Digital Switchover and the digital future**

MG ALBA welcomes the development of a public service champion (Action 19). The champion's team should include Gaelic speakers and information should be made available in Gaelic so as to encourage take-up in the Gaelic community. MG ALBA is willing to work with Digital UK and other agencies in disseminating information about Digital Switchover and promoting media literacy more generally, and we agree that the BBC can play a leading role (Action 20) in driving take-up of digital technologies. MG ALBA is developing a media literacy plan and intends to sign the UK Charter for Media Literacy.

We will be happy to answer any questions relating to this consultation response.

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