

Digital Britain - Interim Report

A response from

'Sound Start' and the National Campaign for Children's Radio

As advised we are treating the Interim Report as a formal request for input on implementation and execution. We also apply for representation in discussion forums through the next phases.

Our focus is making sure that children share and benefit in UK broadcasting developments - in particular in the expansion of digital audio [DAB] broadcasting. The needs and rights of younger listeners have been disgracefully neglected in analogue services and, despite many promises to improve matters, children have remained at the back of the queue as the listening poor of the nation.

Children's television is protected in UK broadcasting law but not so their radio. Conversely adult listeners [designated as 15 years and above] have their rights and choices in radio protected and enjoy many hundreds of stations. This would seem to flout the UN Convention on Children's Rights which commands their access to media; information; education; play; social development; participation in the arts and cultural life, and for their voices to be heard and listened to - all most certainly the business of radio!

We do not understand what leads policy makers to consider radio to be less important than television for children. To communicate we must first learn to listen and prominent educators and language specialists consider radio to be the preferable medium - especially in the early years. The English language is our greatest export and we should be leading the world in children's radio. TV made for children under the age of three is now banned in France and in the US channels made for babies are a cause of growing concern. Radio can bring a necessary balance to the increasingly predominant screen and keyboard culture.

The Arts Council manifesto says:

"When children and young people experience high-quality arts, it helps them to develop not only their own artistic skills and cultural understanding, but also encourages the development of their talents in other aspects of their lives. The future of the creative economy depends on opportunities for children and young people to participate in arts and creativity being provided today". This must include radio.

A BBC Interim Report - 2004 said:

"The BBC should be encouraged to increase the amount of original children's programming on BBC7, and, as the audience appetite for its children's radio services becomes clearer, consider increasing investment and hours broadcast ..."

The BBC Trust's Review of Children's Services - 2009 says:

"During this review the BBC Executive has acknowledged that the existing arrangements for children's radio at the BBC will need to change in the light of consistently low audience numbers and has undertaken research to assess the options available".

The Director General of the BBC says:

"Radio is at the heart of the BBC's public service mission and millions of listeners rely on its quality, range and integrity every day..."

Nonetheless, every day there are millions of listeners who are losing out in the BBC's PSB mission. In the vast expansion of analogue and digital space children suffer diminishing access to Radio-land, which is not only grossly unfair and discriminatory but robs young citizens of an essential element in their cultural enjoyment and development.

After many years of shuffling young listeners from slot to slot and network to network, yet again the BBC has been forced to concede that its children's radio is still scheduled in the wrong place and giving poor value for the £1.6 million a year invested. Considering that the BBC spent over £460m on Network and Nations radio services in 2007-08 [NAO figures] this meagre budget underlines the disdain the corporation has developed for young listeners, and successive governments have done little better with Broadcasting Acts that protect radio only for those aged 15+.

The BBC Trustees have now called for a change in arrangements because ratings for radio shows on Radio 4 and BBC7 are too low. Significantly they also want "practical partnerships" to bridge the public service broadcasting funding gap of up to £235m a year. Children's Radio is a very practical place to begin.

Sound Start – A proposition

Under the chairmanship of the Baroness Warnock a group of broadcasters and leading professionals in child-care and education have devised the blue-print for a timely and progressive PSB partnership of the kind the BBC Trust has called for. The BBC has run out of digital space for children and under the working title **Sound Start** the plan is to establish a national children's radio service using one of the vacated DAB networks on the Digital One multiplex in proposed collaboration with the BBC.

During a previous DCMS consultation on the BBC's new national DAB networks [2001], an independent MORI survey polled a proposed network for young children at 56%. - placing it 18% above R7 which then became the primary driver of receiver sales. Had the children's service been included it is likely sales would have been greater - significantly in the reluctant car market where, unsurprisingly, families confirm they would most welcome free-to-air children's radio.

Digital Britain reports the UK's best ever digital radio listening figures with nearly 30% of homes using DAB digital radio as by far the most popular digital platform for radio listening but the report also warns that digital radio take-up will need car manufacturers, retailers and the BBC to 'increase the attractiveness, availability and affordability of DAB'.

Designed with these factors in mind the **Sound Start** would use available national DAB capacity in cost effective and achievable partnership to create an "extended family of the airwaves" of the kind the public wants.

The proposition has been circulated to the BBC Trust and Executive, to Ofcom and various government departments and to the Scottish Broadcasting Commission. It enjoys strong backing across the political parties in both the

Commons and the Lords and from leading professionals in education and child-care, as well as children and parents throughout the country. The concept was piloted with private funding, under the title abra**caDAB**ra! across Greater London from 2002 to 2005 and represents an intelligent and affordable use of public space to fulfil a proven national need. Billions from the public purse are being committed to improve child and family wellbeing and the added value of a dedicated children's radio network would complement, enhance and support these investments.

Most reviews and consultations of this kind take at least a year to produce, a year for responses and a further year or more for any implementation but we should remember that just three months is a long and precious time in the development of a young child's basic skills, of which listening, speaking, understanding and play are perhaps the most important.

Radio can play a vital role in this and, since the key elements are already in place, we believe the department should make this timely proposal one of the first implementations.

'Sound Start' and the National Campaign for Children's Radio

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'Sound Start'

*An exciting opportunity to create a world first and achieve lasting gains
in the lives of our youngest citizens ...*

National digital [DAB] radio space lies vacant and idle due to closure and delay of a number of adult focused stations. Owner - Digital One - has now advertised for a range of innovative services to take up the capacity. This offers the opportunity to develop a new network of children's leisure and learning in a valuable public broadcasting space.

Since 1997 the government has invested £25 billion in early-years education and care. The DCFS has pledged £4bn to expand and improve services in this sector over the next three years. The National Academy for Parenting Practitioners [NAPP], endowed with £30m, has been launched.

The EYFS has been adopted; nursery places for two-year-olds are promised and Sir Jim Rose is conducting a Review of the Primary Curriculum. The Bercow Review has recommended vital improvements in children's communication skill for which £52m has been allocated. The government has published its Speech, Language and Communication Needs Action Plan including 'Every Child a Talker' and a proposed Year of Language and Communication. Never before has there been greater focus on the need and wellbeing of early years and family life in the UK.

A dedicated radio service can support, promote and enhance this essential work - with particular regard to developing listening and communication skills.

Sound Start, as a complementary addition to our child-care, education and leisure services, will prove a most cost effective and accessible tool. Its potential value for money is unprecedented.

Operating as a not-for-profit public/private partnership the service will:

- *use the unique medium of radio, broadcasting into homes, nursery settings and schools, to support and enrich key aspects of children's early development including listening, imagination, concentration, communication, language acquisition and social, physical and emotional growth*
- *work in partnership with parents and the growing network of early years provision, to promote high quality learning through music & movement, stories, songs and rhymes, together with family guidance and information*
- *operate as an open-learning resource, with dedicated faculties for music, literature, arts, health and wellbeing*
- *broadcast predominantly in English, and thus have world-wide relevance*
- *recognise and respect all established faiths, celebrate diverse cultures and include integrated multicultural strands*
- *deliver supporting publications, a complementary World Wide Web service and audio on demand*
- *support children with special educational or social needs, including children with particular talents*
- *support families learning English as an additional language*

- *support home-schooled children*
- *support those marginalised families in isolated rural and deprived inner city areas who may find it hard to access services*
- *encourage and improve basic literacy and mathematics in adults who are struggling.*
- *inform parents and carers of their social and legal responsibilities and rights*

Sound Start would support and enrich the growing network of public and privately funded early years provision – including the Sure Start Children’s Centres that are planned to increase in number to 3.500 over three years.

Of the DCFS £4bn grant, £175m has been earmarked across three years to support the private, voluntary and independent sector providers of early education and childcare. As a powerful ally for all three, **Sound Start** can make a strong case for a share of this funding.

The service would be structured to encourage the child’s natural propensity to discover and learn through play: reinforcing the key aspects of development, for which radio can provide unique support

It would take account of the Primary National Strategy’s objectives for communication, language and literacy, including paving the way for phonic work and laying the foundations for reading, writing and mathematics. It would provide a nationwide resource through which to promote and share best practice across a wide range of early-years provision and to deliver Central Office of Information [COI] public service messages on health, safety and welfare, financial and social benefits and the wide range of care services.

Sound Start would work hand-in-hand with family and child serving organisations in the UK, including The Parenting Academy, The National Children’s Bureau, The Voices Foundation; National Youth Music; The National Literacy Trust; Book Trust; I CAN; The Reading Agency; Every Child a Talker; Every Child a Reader; local libraries, speech and language specialists, the Reggio Emilia, Montessori and Steiner School networks and similar bodies throughout the world.

Sound Start would provide a long-term and sustainable resource for children, families and early-years staff in every community.

Programming of the service would be overseen by qualified professionals in child care and education and produced and delivered by professional broadcasters.

Through an integrated training scheme, teachers, the child-care work force and children too would be given the opportunity to acquire the skills to produce and deliver programmes in their own dedicated fields and interests.

NB: ‘**Sound Start**’ is a working title for this enterprise.

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Copied to: The Scottish Broadcasting Commission; BBC Trustees; DCMS; DCSF; DfH;
Ofcom and other interested parties