

Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee Inquiry - BBC Charter Review

Submission from the Ofcom Advisory Committee for Scotland (ACS)

The ACS formally advises Ofcom on matters relating to Scotland. It addresses a wide range of issues and feeds into Ofcom's policy process, along with its sister Committees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The ACS seeks to ensure that Ofcom is aware of the Scottish context in its policy and decision making, alert to developing trends and to the concerns of Scottish consumers in relation to the vital services Ofcom regulates.

The ACS wishes to make ten key points as its input into the BBC Charter Review. It does not seek to comment here on the future governance or regulation of the BBC.

1. The BBC has been, and should continue to be, of major significance to Scotland as the principal mainstay of public service broadcasting. The significance of the BBC's role in Scotland's polity, economy and culture cannot be underestimated. It is essential for the future of devolved Scotland that the BBC remains a strong force in broadcasting, and should also be so throughout the UK. To say this does not mean that the BBC should not change, after reasoned and well-informed debate has been the basis for setting out new parameters.

2. BBC Scotland has a crucial role to play in helping the wider BBC to understand Scotland and to feed into and support network coverage and the wide-ranging portrayal of Scotland to the rest of the UK. BBC Scotland also has a vital role to play in helping portray the great diversity of Scotland to the Scottish audience - a key part of its future that should be strengthened. The BBC, moreover, as a network broadcaster has a role – and a duty – to portray the full diversity of the UK to all its citizens and, in the context of far-reaching political change, to pay especial, and increased attention, to the nations and regions.

3. The BBC needs to be a broadcaster catering for all of the UK's population, with its role in popular entertainment, news and current affairs all remaining important, noting that there are changing markets for content. It is recognised that the entire media ecology is presently in radical flux: the principle of public service needs to be intelligently adapted to changing circumstances. The ACS considers that the BBC should continue to serve a wide range of interests competitively across all genres, maintaining its pivotal role in the UK's diversifying polity, culture and society. It should certainly not be limited merely to addressing 'market failure' elsewhere in content provision. Its priority has to be to continue to produce distinctive, quality content, while ensuring it continues to maintain broad appeal.

4. There is debate to be had about the BBC's scope and scale in a diversifying media environment in which it has been a leader in catch-up services (iPlayer being a major innovation by a public service institution). There has been significant development of its web presence in a variety of ways. The ACS considers that playing across platforms is both appropriate and necessary if a public service media provider is

to remain relevant and attractive. The website and online news content, in particular, are a proper and natural development of the BBC news output and data gathering and help maintain the BBC's contemporary reputation for reliable and trustworthy content accessible through a variety of platforms. That said, there is proper debate to be had about the BBC's impact on commercial competition. The ACS does not think that the BBC should be required to abandon any platforms as a matter of principle. There is room to debate the corporation's scope and scale, bearing in mind that a public service institution must appeal across the range of platforms available now and in the future, or be condemned to marginality or irrelevance.

5. The principle of public funding for the BBC should be maintained. The licence fee as the vehicle for collecting that funding is increasingly outdated and unappealing in its present form and alternative means need to be devised. The ACS favours an open public debate about the merits of a range of propositions for public service media finance. Any new method of collection must be capable of taking account of the future costs of new platforms for the delivery of BBC content which currently fall outwith the scope of the present licence fee, as well as consider the range of other purposes to which such funding is applied. The most important consideration is that the BBC should remain publicly funded, publicly accountable for the use of that funding, and not competing for income with commercial broadcasting through advertising. Some have mooted subscription as a way forward. The ACS wishes to retain the principle of universality of contribution and universality of service. That does not preclude a range of income-contingent options.

6. The BBC plays a crucial role in stimulating and supporting the creative industries in Scotland, ranging from television, radio and the internet to drama, comedy, heritage and music. There is considerable concern in Scotland about the fragile state of the home-based creative industries and the BBC's future is of considerable consequence for the wider Scottish creative ecology. The capacity of the creative industries in Scotland to play a full part in the delivery of content for 'in Scotland' use, to feed into the UK network, and also to access global markets depends, to a significant extent, upon the decentralisation of commissioning and finance within the BBC. The ACS considers that there is a need for a growth of operational scale and greater decision-making autonomy within Scotland. In particular, it is widely agreed here that the local commissioning of creative content is key, as is an end to a 'lift and shift' approach to meeting quotas. The ACS is also concerned that there is a lack of local accountability within Scotland for Scottish originated output. The current situation means that formally the Audience Council for Scotland needs to provide feedback to the BBC Trust who then provide feedback to the BBC Management in London who then feedback to the BBC Scotland Management team. There is no direct line of accountability.

7. The ACS shares the widespread concern that has been aired in Scotland about the poor quality of BBC Radio Scotland's output. While commercial radio is seen as being particularly successful in Scotland, it should be noted that in many rural areas there is limited access to commercial radio, so for these audiences the BBC is effectively the sole service provider.

8. The ACS sees no immediate need to revise the BBC's public purposes but considers that these should nonetheless be tested once again for their appropriateness in a changing UK.

9. The ACS notes recent proposals by the Scottish Government that a second English language channel should be introduced on BBC Radio Scotland to provide a better variety of programmes for the radio audience in Scotland, and that a second BBC television channel should be established in Scotland, helping the independent production sector and improving the range of content for Scottish audiences.¹

It is important that these ideas be fully debated and carefully considered and that the future of broadcasting is thought through in relation to the post-Smith Commission settlement presently being worked out in detail. It will be important in considering any proposals for the expansion of the BBC's scope in radio and television that the market impact of such developments is assessed and audience demand is tested, and its financial feasibility be carefully examined.

10. ACS considers that the BBC's future international role remains strong and needs to be capable of adapting to changing world events. The BBC has played a hugely important role throughout much of its history in the global information ecology and in representing the UK. Given present global challenges, it is essential that the BBC remains able to fulfil this crucial role.

Conclusion

The ACS recognises that the BBC's scope, finance and purposes need to be revisited, and that it is not by any means beyond criticism. However, the ACS is committed to the principle of public service communication as essential to a healthy public sphere. It regards as essential the need to sustain as strong and independent an institution as possible in the rapidly changing field of media and communications, in which there are growing concentrations of power.

At a time of far-reaching change, the BBC needs to adapt carefully to the new demands it faces in Scotland, the UK and the wider world. The Charter Renewal process needs to offer the space to address that requirement fairly. The ACS notes with regret the present tendency to make secret back-door deals and short-circuit the proper process for which the Charter Review was set up. Only by fair and exacting scrutiny, coupled with the exercise of transparency and scrupulous use of evidence in the upcoming process, will the British public be properly served in arriving at a new settlement for one of its key institutions.

Ofcom Advisory Committee for Scotland, October 2015.

¹ <https://firstminister.gov.scot/a-bold-and-ambitious-bbc/>