

FROM THE MINISTER

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BBC Charter Review Consultation
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A chara,

TOMORROW'S BBC - CHARTER REVIEW CONSULTATION – BBC TRUST

As Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the north of Ireland I have a particular interest in broadcasting and I welcome this opportunity to respond to your consultation. My response at this stage will be at a high level because I intend contributing to the remainder of the Charter Review process in a more detailed manner following engagement and consultation with the other devolved regions and the broadcasting sector here.

Striking the balance

Public broadcasters have, I believe, neglected the north of Ireland leaving it comparatively invisible in the networks. Broadcasting power and production has seldom moved beyond the south east of England and our production facilities have remained largely dependent on network commissioning. A concern remains that the BBC does not take a leading role in developing the screen industries and arts infrastructure in the north of Ireland. This is neither sustainable nor acceptable in the future. The BBC needs to focus its resources in future in a way which promotes, encourages and develops broadcasting capacity and production in the north of Ireland.



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Accountability

All public service broadcasters, including the BBC, should be accountable and answerable to the Assembly. This would help ensure that we receive economic and cultural value from public service broadcasting. A regulatory and accountability role for the Assembly would give the north of Ireland representation and value within the BBC.

Decision making

Funding decisions that may impact upon or be of relevance to the north of Ireland and which relate to the Devolved Administrations should be made locally.

Public Purposes

The BBC must continue to embrace and develop its commitment to its Public Purposes and to public good generally.

Governance

Governance arrangements should focus on how the appropriate Vision and Values can be systemically revitalised within the BBC. Within whatever governance and regulatory structures that emerge it is critical that there is specific representation for the north of Ireland.

Section 75 obligations

The BBC, as a publicly funded organisation which carries out public duties in the north and is in receipt of public money, should be designated as a Section 75 public body. The BBC's unwillingness, to date, to be designated is a matter of considerable concern.

Quotas.

Audiences within the north of Ireland have been poorly serviced by the BBC over the last charter period. This cannot be sustained in the future. The level of funding for local programming has declined dramatically over the charter period (only counter balanced to a degree by third party funding for Ulster-Scots and Irish Language programming) while the level of network



programming from the north of Ireland has been almost nil until the last few years of the charter.

This lack of investment in content produced in or portraying the north of Ireland is reflected in the significantly lower approval ratings that the BBC receives from audiences here.

The very recent increase in focus on commissioning of network programming produced and/or portraying the north of Ireland is encouraging and must continue within a regularised framework.

Quotas in relation to content production from the Devolved Administrations and regions should be retained. There is no evidence that the quality of content production is reduced by this forced distribution model, not least because talent in the form of individuals and companies is extremely mobile and will gravitate to where opportunities arise. Regulated quotas are likely to be more efficient than targets, which have a tendency to attract more bureaucracy and are open to distortion.

The enthusiasm for the television drama *The Fall* across both Ireland and Britain and further afield illustrates clearly that appropriate content can be produced from within the north of Ireland that works for all audiences.

Future Ideas for the new Charter

The very broad mix of programming broadcast by the BBC (news, current affairs, entertainment, comedy, children's, factual and drama) should remain. It is also critical that the BBC ensures unbiased reporting across its news and current affairs programmes.

There has been a failure to date by the BBC to provide balance and equal recognition of Irish and British identities within the north of Ireland. The commitments set out in the Good Friday Agreement 1998 – an internationally recognised treaty – around respect and equality of treatment for the identity and ethos of both communities in the north of Ireland should be upheld by the

BBC. There is also, I believe, a duty on the BBC to ensure unbiased reporting across its news and current affairs programmes.

Inform

Through the Charter process, the BBC's clear obligation to provide services for all of its communities should be fully met in relation to indigenous language broadcasting so that these services are protected.

The BBC should more proactively support the 'Economic Social and Cultural Issues' commitments of Strand Three of The Good Friday Agreement 1998 ('Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity') by encouraging and providing financial support for Irish language film and television production in the north of Ireland

Educate and Entertain

Unfortunately the broad mix of the programming broadcast is not replicated for audiences here with drama, children's and comedy almost never produced from or portraying the north of Ireland. This is a very considerable omission and I would wish to see these omissions addressed through network commissioning and increased local commissioning. The CBBC drama series, Dani's Castle, is a good example of local output which can and should be built upon.

Given the unsuitability of the commercial market for children's content, it is critical that the BBC retains and ring-fences its spending in this area.

Is mise le meas,

CARÁL NÍ CHUILÍN

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