

**BBC Trust Public Value Test  
BBC Three (Plus) Proposals  
Audience Council Northern Ireland  
Advice to the Trust  
February 2015**

Audience Council NI has engaged with a range of young people in Northern Ireland to understand their views about the BBC's proposals to close BBC Three as a linear channel alongside a range of other changes to BBC services.

Working through a number of youth organisations in the voluntary, charitable and education sectors, Council members hosted ten discussion events with young people aged between 14 - 30 years, from different parts of Northern Ireland and from across the social demographic spectrum. The Audience Council has also drawn on feedback from members' own networks.

This document outlines key areas that the Trust may wish to consider in more depth, as part of its public value test of the BBC Three (plus) proposals - based on audience feedback and Council's discussions - and forms the basis of Audience Council NI's advice to the Trust.

## **Executive Summary**

### **A strategy for Youth**

Overall, BBC Three was highly valued by a significant number of young people we spoke with. This audience expressed a preference for BBC Three to remain as a linear channel, alongside their views on the possible implementation of a BBC Three online service.

Whilst younger audiences are increasingly digital natives, and there were young people open to a BBC Three online approach, many of the young people we spoke with, including regular and more occasional viewers, expressed deep disappointment and a sense of abandonment at the possible closure of BBC Three. A general understanding that the proposal was motivated by the need to make financial savings was coupled with a sense of loss and deemed by some as "unfair" and "an attack on young people". Furthermore, young people questioned the rationale and potential savings achieved with the closure of BBC Three allied to investment in, what were perceived to be, "non-essential" changes to other BBC services.

The proposals, in the context of young people's feedback, prompted questions about the BBC's overall commitment to younger audiences. Many of the young people expressed bewilderment at a collection of changes that appeared to further enhance provision for older sections of the audience at the expense of a highly valued TV channel for young people, and asked whether any alternatives to closing the linear channel had been fully explored or considered by the BBC. Suggestions voiced by some of the young people in discussions focused on changes to other BBC services of lesser, or no, appeal such as merging BBC Two and BBC Four.

As digital consumers Netflix, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter played a significant role in young people's media consumption habits. However, feedback clearly indicated a demand for a linear TV channel, focused on providing a range of content of interest and relevance to younger audiences.

Council would ask the Trust to consider the risk of irrecoverably alienating sections of the younger audience, and to ensure that the BBC's longer term strategy for young people is a matter of priority for the Executive. Council would wish to highlight the diverse audience needs across the 16 - 34 age range and perceived gaps in provision, as well as the needs of audiences for whom digital access is a significant barrier. Council also noted the valuable contribution of BBC Three content to the delivery of the BBC's citizenship and education remits and would wish to ensure that this continues to be reflected in BBC Three content.

### **Accessibility**

Universal access to BBC services has been an enduring theme in Council's work, on behalf of audiences across Northern Ireland. Audience feedback highlighted ongoing access issues experienced by some sections of the audience and the associated risk, in this proposal, of further widening the digital divide. Problems experienced involved access to quality broadband, especially in rural areas, as well as issues around the affordability of digital access - such as the cost of broadband and mobile services, and digital devices themselves. Many young people also pointed out that the only internet access they have is via a smart phone which is more suited to short video clips than long-form content.

Discussions around access and media consumption prompted questions around the timeliness of the proposal, viewed by a number of the young people as "premature". It was clear from audience feedback too that, whilst broadband provision might improve and digital devices develop in sophistication, the affordability of digital access, including devices, may continue to be an issue for some sections of the audience.

### **The future of the BBC**

Audience feedback would suggest that "going fully digital for younger audiences" carries significant risks around the alienation and disaffection of sections of the younger audience who are, in essence, an audience of the future. Consideration needs to be given to the BBC's connection with younger audiences, mitigating the risks of alienation, and how its relationship with young people can be sustained and strengthened in the longer term. Feedback pointed to such things as - investment in youth content on other linear channels (BBC one and BBC Two) to bridge a potential gap and loss of audience; greater use of social media to signpost and engage young people in BBC content; more representation and portrayal of young people from around the UK; nurturing talent; and involving young people more in the making of programmes for young people.

Further clarity on the Executive's vision for a digital BBC Three service - its identity and impact in an increasingly competitive digital space - would also be helpful. Audience feedback pointed to the possibility that a digital BBC Three could become "lost in the ether amidst a vast volume of online content".

## KEY THEMES IN AUDIENCE FEEDBACK

### BBC Three

All the young people we spoke with had an awareness of BBC Three and a significant number - though not all - expressed an interest in the service. There were regular viewers who appeared to be relatively loyal to the brand, actively choosing BBC Three as the default channel to watch, or have in the background whilst doing other things. This audience expressed a strong preference for BBC Three as a linear channel, rather than an online service. Others, including regular and more occasional viewers, were open to the idea of a BBC Three online service, recognising a rationale for the proposed move to an online platform. For some, however, the quality and range of content was of primary importance over the platform of delivery.

The majority of the most regular BBC Three viewers appeared to be in the teenage age range. Many spoke passionately about the service and the programmes they most enjoyed. For these viewers, BBC Three offered a good range of genre - factual, “edgier” documentaries, entertainment and comedy - and programme formats. Feedback from young people in their 20s/30s reflected a more mixed picture of views and attitudes with some regular (and passionate) viewers and others more occasionally and casually engaged with the service. Many in this age range expressed a relatively strong appetite, and need, for more serious, challenging and intelligent content on BBC Three, including more news and current affairs. They believed that giving the channel “a more serious edge” would attract more young people.

Overall, BBC Three was perceived and valued as “the channel for younger audiences” and there was wide support, from regular and occasional consumers, for a BBC TV service targeted at, and focused on, young people.

*“BBC Three is my life”.*

Views about content focused mainly on quality and programme genre - comedy, entertainment, factual and drama - resonating with the BBC’s new editorial pillars Make Me Laugh and Make Me Think. Many spoke of BBC Three as a trusted source of less traditional programmes that offered something “new and interesting”, with mixed views expressed on the quality of content, described by some as “hit and miss”. Many of the young people we spoke with highlighted a gap in provision for the 12-18s, commenting that BBC Three was “the only thing that filled the gap”. Rather than close BBC Three, some expressed the view that the BBC should “extend and reinvent” BBC Three as a linear service to provide more of the type of content young people - across all ages in the target age group - want. A common theme in feedback was the need for adequate space for the “voice of young people”, and a range of content that authentically reflected young people’s lives and connected them with real-life issues of most interest and relevance. There was an appetite too for BBC Three archive content to be made available e.g. during the day on BBC Three, and for greater representation and portrayal of Northern Ireland in the channel’s output.

Catch-up viewing was not confined to laptops and tablets, with many young people preferring to catch up on TV either via the iPlayer or watching BBC Three programme repeats. Repeats were highly valued by some young people for this purpose.

*“It’s a nice channel to go to ... it has repeats and random stuff you don’t get anywhere else”*

*“Some programmes flop and some are great, but you always know you’ll get some new programmes”.*

Many of the young people we spoke with valued programme trails as a means of raising awareness of forthcoming programmes across the range of platforms. There was also a view that the BBC could make greater use of social media and apps to raise young people’s awareness of BBC Three, and wider BBC, content.

*“I saw a trail for Call the Midwife on BBC Three and I watched it ... it’s more for older people but I enjoyed it ... the storyline was about teenage pregnancy ... I wouldn’t have known it was on only I saw the trail”.*

### **BBC Three Comedy**

Comedy was highly valued by the majority of young people we spoke with and BBC Three perceived as an important platform/showcase for this genre, where new ideas and talent had been, and could continue to be, launched and piloted. Whilst there was a strong appetite for comedy per se, there were mixed views on the quality of BBC Three comedy ranging from “very good” to “sometimes patronising”. Favourites included Russell Howard’s Good News, and Family Guy and American Dad were particularly valued as a “light distraction from other more serious things”. Many of the young people expressed an appetite for more investment in “good quality” comedy.

### **BBC Three Drama**

BBC Three drama was popular with this audience and there was a strong appetite for more drama “involving young people that reflected young people’s lives”. Described as “gritty and relevant”, BBC Three drama was perceived as “tackling the harder issues” that are important and relevant to younger audiences. There was some concern expressed that further investment in BBC drama, as part of the overall BBC Three proposal, would be directed to “high-end productions that do not deal with gritty, real-life issues”. BBC Three drama was an important and valued ingredient in the channel’s overall offer and appeal.

### **BBC Three Factual**

Feedback highlighted young people’s strong appreciation for factual programming on BBC Three which, in their belief, was not available elsewhere. Documentaries, including the Stacey Dooley Investigates series were highly valued, from a both personal and societal perspective, for delivering quality, informative and educational content that explored sensitive and challenging real-life issues relevant to younger people - such as eating disorders, domestic abuse, unemployment and child exploitation. Young people valued learning through visual documentary and fly-on-the-wall formats. The youth workers involved in working with the young people also highlighted the value of this type of content, drawing

regularly on BBC Three factual output in structured youth education programmes. Programmes such as *Murdered by my Boyfriend* helped to engage young people, within and outside education, in conversations about difficult and particularly relevant issues - amongst themselves, with youth workers, teachers and parents - and fulfilled an important public service citizenship role.

There was an appetite for more (of) factual/documentary output and discussion formats that offered young people the opportunity to engage on social issues of interest. BBC Three factual content was also perceived to provide a stimulus for further discovery and enquiry, and a pathway into other (similar) BBC content across other platforms.

*“Instead of a teacher speaking for 20mins about something, a BBC Three documentary is much more powerful in getting the message across”.*

*“BBC Three does a lot of shows about unemployment and what it’s like to be a young person in prison. You don’t get that anywhere else or on satellite channels”.*

*“BBC Three makes you think about things like drugs”*

A number of young people believed that BBC Three documentaries were “a bit dumbed down” relative to similar content on Channel 4 and Sky which, in their view, appeared to “be willing to take more risks” and were becoming increasingly popular with younger audiences.

### **BBC Three as an online service**

There was a general understanding of the rationale for the proposal, though a view that moving BBC Three to an online service was perhaps “premature”. There was a consistent view in feedback that the proposal carried a “high-risk” of alienating even the most loyal BBC Three viewers in the short and possibly longer term. Whilst an online service had the potential to offer additional value through e.g. more interactivity and personalisation, many of the young people we spoke with highly valued the communal, casual and spontaneous viewing opportunities that, in their view, only a TV service could provide ... “online viewing was seldom, if ever, spontaneous”. Young people pointed out that, when online, they would usually be engaged in several activities simultaneously e.g. talking to friends on Twitter or Facebook and, therefore, less likely to focus on watching programme content online – “when you watch TV, that’s what you’re focused on”.

Online viewing did appeal to some, particularly the convenience of on-demand and viewing around lifestyle. However, many expressed the view that young people would not naturally gravitate to BBC Three Online to watch (video) programme content. Online and TV viewing experiences greatly differed. Online viewing involved a “conscious and deliberate effort” to “log in” and search for content – a “lean in” experience – which some young people also closely associated with study. In contrast, TV involved a more laidback, “lean out” experience of “switching on and flicking through channels” or viewing with friends and family. There were those too who preferred to watch long-form programmes on a TV (large screen) rather than a laptop/ tablet and others who commented that pop-ups and other distractions would compromise the quality of the online viewing experience. A

number of young people highlighted the social interaction generated when younger audiences “chatted” on social media about BBC Three programmes watched (or to be watched). There was a widely held view that this type of interaction would be irrecoverably lost on the closure of BBC Three as a linear service.

*“You watch BBC Three because it’s there: if Three goes online people will have to make a choice – BBC Three online or TV? – and most will go to TV.”*

*“BBC Three will lose young people ... I wouldn’t go to a laptop to watch BBC Three, I prefer watching it on TV with friends.”*

*BBC Three had “a presence on TV but it mightn’t have so much of a presence online”.*

*“Moving Three online isn’t necessarily a bad thing, just a bit premature. In a few years more people will have smart TVs, but not now!”*

*“I don’t like watching anything online... it’s ok if it’s a short clip but not a full length programme or film ... I would never watch iPlayer on my phone”.*

Many young people also expressed a view that the Online market was already well established, and they were unclear about BBC Three’s “fit” in a relatively mature online space where the service would be competing against major content providers such as Netflix and YouTube. There was a strongly held view that BBC Three Online would need to heavily promote the service to attract an audience - “BBC Three online would be competing against the world”.

*“Young people will need to be kept informed of what’s on ... they won’t naturally go to it! (BBC Three online)”.*

There was also a consistent view that, should BBC Three be transformed to an online service, the BBC needed to make greater provision on mainstream channels - BBC One and Two - to meet the needs of a younger (linear) TV audience, and a view that “all the savings from closing BBC Three should be invested in content for young people”.

### Access

Access to a BBC Three online service presented a significant barrier to some sections of the audience. This was a consistent theme in audience feedback across all the groups of young people involved in sharing their views. Internet access was a serious problem in many rural areas across Northern Ireland due to issues around broadband provision. There were also issues of affordability for some young people who spoke about having access to the internet at College or University, but not at home. Youth workers stressed that, contrary to general belief, not all young people owned laptops or tablets and, that whilst the majority of young people owned a smart phone, data limits and tariffs constrained their use for content streaming. Young people who used smart phones to access content online also spoke of issues around the quality of video streaming to mobile devices. Some young people said they would like to see greater provision of “downloadable” content which would be particularly

helpful to “people who don’t have internet access at home”. Others noted buffering problems which compromised the quality of online viewing.

*“If young people had online access they might watch BBC Three online, but the problem will be they don’t have access”.*

### **BBC One + 1**

There was some speculation that a BBC One + 1 channel would be of value to some sections of the audience, especially the older audience, some of whom either don’t have or wish to engage with online on-demand/catch-up services.

Many of the young people questioned the logic of a +1 channel in the context of catch-up opportunities via BBC iPlayer. The value of a + 1 was questioned further in the context of the limited availability of the channel. There was a strong view that this discriminated against audiences who could not avail of the channel, and concerns were expressed about audiences’ perceptions of the offer, once the limitation on universal access was more widely understood.

The +1 channel was not of particular interest to the majority of young people, with a general view that it was not particularly “original”. The general perception was that older audiences would benefit most at the expense of a channel dedicated to younger audiences.

### **Drama on BBC One**

There was an appetite for more drama on BBC One. However, a significant number of young people questioned the rationale of “taking BBC Three away from young people to put more drama on BBC One”. There was a view that older (BBC One) audiences would benefit at the cost of provision for younger audiences. Young people wanted drama on BBC One to cater for all audiences – younger as well as older, particularly in the context of the possible closure of BBC Three. There was little or no appetite for more BBC period drama.

### **Enhancement to BBC iPlayer**

The proposal to host premieres on the BBC iPlayer was welcomed, though not a priority for younger audiences vis-à-vis the availability of a BBC Three linear TV channel.

Young people’s on-demand and catch-up viewing habits involved access via laptop, tablet, gaming consoles and TV. Some commented that they would prefer to watch repeats of BBC Three programmes than catch-up on the iPlayer and appreciated repeat content. There was a view that, as the popularity of smart TVs increases, TV would be a main point of access for catch-up and on-demand services.

A number of the young people commented that they were not “huge fans of BBC iPlayer”. Feedback focused largely on the availability of content, the iPlayer’s search functionality and the find-ability of content, as well as problems experienced with uploading content and buffering. Audiences had experienced delays in uploads, and commented that they would welcome improvements in the iPlayer’s search functionality to help audiences find content more efficiently.

Set Boxes were very popular with younger audiences and there was a strong interest in more content being available on the iPlayer and for longer, with particular reference to complete series volumes with all episodes, archive content and local programmes. Series content premiered would, for some, only be of interest if all episodes were available together on launch. A significant number of young people preferred to have the option to watch several or all series' episodes together on-demand, though some preferred to watch programmes series on a weekly basis rather than "binge watch".

There was a strong view that a BBC Three online service would need to be closely linked with the BBC iPlayer to draw young people's awareness and attention to the service. There was an appetite too for more BBC content on YouTube "where young people would find it", as well as an interest in understanding more about the offer of third party content on the iPlayer and what, in practice, this would mean.

*"There's definitely a future for TV ... on demand is big, but sometimes I get annoyed with broadband and I like to just sit and watch TV".*

### **CBBC**

A number of the young people we spoke with were mothers with young children. Overall, CBBC was valued as a trusted source of high quality programmes and educational content. The channel was compared favourably to other children's services such as the Cartoon Network and Disney Channel. Some commented, however, that their children were more often engaged with playing games on tablets than watching children's programmes on TV.

There were mixed views expressed about extended CBBC hours, with a majority view that repeat programming offered little, if any, additional value to audiences. For many parents, the closure of CBBC at 7pm marked "bedtime" for their young children and a 9pm close would (potentially) prove disruptive to the bedtime routine.

A number of the young people, in their mid-late teens, reminisced about programmes they had enjoyed on CBBC. Several commented that they still watched some CBBC content and would enjoy seeing repeats of older CBBC programmes, if these could be offered on an extended CBBC schedule.

The BBC Three channel was viewed as the only BBC service bridging the gap between CBBC and mainstream services – BBC one and BBC Two. Many of the young people who had had a close connection with CBBC progressed to watching BBC Three, with little content of interest elsewhere on other BBC TV services. This progression prompted questions around the relationship between CBBC audiences and the BBC, and how the BBC might sustain younger audiences in the longer term (including CBBC consumers) who would/could not adopt a BBC Three online service.

### **BBC News**

There were mixed views about BBC news and news content across the BBC. A significant number of the young people preferred to consume news content in short "bites" that were easily understood and digested e.g. the 60 seconds format. The humorous and upbeat approach of BBC Three's Russell Howard's Good News programme had wide appeal. Some

young people would prefer less news whilst others expressed an appetite for more news that provided in-depth context and explanation of the headlines. Some expressed the view that the School Report format would provide a useful model for news content on BBC Three – “news written for young people by young people”. There were those, particularly at the mid-higher target age, who expressed a strong appetite for more current affairs content, targeted at the younger audience, to help engage more young people in politics and challenging local politicians, especially in the context of the forthcoming and future elections. The BBC, in their view, had an important role in providing a platform for young people to actively engage on important social issues and express their voice.

*“We need more programmes like the Nolan Show involving young people”*

BBC Online was viewed by a number of young people as a more useful news resource than TV. Consumers could actively choose news stories of most interest and research in as much depth as required, navigating through BBC and other available online news sources. There was also a view that an online platform may help to create more opportunities for young people to air their voice “*in live chats*” on topical and relevant real-life issues.

There was a general appetite amongst the younger audience for more “positive news” - especially in a local context - and whilst world news was of general interest, for some, local and regional news was a priority. Some young people expressed an interest in brief sports news/updates on BBC Three e.g. sports results.

*“Quick snippets of information are ideal”*

## **Conclusion**

There was a view in audience feedback that the media in general (including the BBC) “either patronises young people or treats them like they are a waste of space; the over-riding perception of young people in the media is that they are a problem ... the reality is ... we have some of the most responsible young people ever”.

Young people are an intrinsically important audience for the BBC and their needs must be at the heart of the BBC’s strategy for this audience.

Audience feedback on the Executive’s BBC Three (plus) proposals provided Council with a valuable insight into young people’s general perceptions of the BBC and BBC content, and more specifically, BBC Three.

BBC Three offered teenagers a highly valued alternative to BBC One, Two and Four, with interesting and relevant content for younger audiences across a range of genres and formats. For many, BBC Three bridged the gap in BBC provision for teenagers with BBC One, Two and Four viewed as “older people’s channels” and far removed from the CBBC of their pre-teenage years. Young people in their 20s and early 30s expressed an appetite for more intelligent content on the channel, including news and current affairs that challenged young people to become more involved in issues of public interest and debate. For some, BBC Three provided a pathway into BBC One and BBC Two content.

More generally, there was a strong appetite for a refresh of the BBC daytime schedules to include more programming for younger audiences e.g. repeats of BBC Three programmes. News was generally valued and the importance of balanced and impartial content noted by some. There was some concern that the BBC, perhaps due to funding constraints, had become “very safe” and “risk averse”. A lack of advertisements on the BBC was widely valued by the young people, although a relatively small number expressed no objection to commercial or mixed economy funding models.

A recurrent theme in feedback was the need for universal access to relevant and interesting content for younger audiences. Council was particularly interested to note that linear television remained a valued point of access for this audience in today’s digital, multiplatform ecology.

Council believes that the key priorities for this audience revolve around a well-defined strategy for young people that provides for a diverse range of needs across the target age range (16-34yrs) as well as universal access to content. The diverse needs of younger audiences are fundamentally linked to the future of the BBC and need to be embraced in the BBC’s strategy for the future. The alienation of today’s younger audience has significant implications for the uptake of BBC services in the future, and the full extent of the risk of irrecoverably losing this audience should not be underestimated.