

Audience Engagement:
Public consultation by the
BBC Trust
**Appendix A: Summary
of responses received**

1. Introduction

The BBC Trust's consultation on Audience Engagement launched on 14 May 2007 and closed on 3 August 2007.

As part of the project, the BBC Trust invited responses to an open consultation questionnaire. The questionnaire was posted on the BBC Trust website, and a leaflet version, including a pre-paid response section, was distributed to public libraries, BBC buildings, universities and other educational institutions, and at BBC events and programme recordings.

346 members of the public responded to the consultation. In addition the BBC Trust's Audience Councils and the Central Religious Advisory Committee submitted responses (see appendix B). This summary document reflects the key issues raised in these submissions.

2. Summary of responses to consultation questions

2.1 Introduction

There was a limited awareness of the BBC Trust, and its role, which ultimately meant that many people did not understand exactly why the Trust should be engaging with the public, and what would be the result of such engagement. Therefore, many respondents suggested that there was a need to raise the profile of the Trust, and to stress its role as a body which represented the interests of licence fee payers.

However, those who did have knowledge of the work of the Trust almost unanimously agreed that engagement with the public was vital. However, it must be clear that such engagement would have an impact on the decisions made by the Trust. If the Trust was unable to explain why it wanted to engage with the public, and what may result as a result, then the public was unlikely to want to waste time in participating in engagement activities.

It was clear that respondents wanted to have regular communication from the Trust about its work and the decisions it had made. It was suggested that the BBC itself should be the principal mechanism through which the Trust 'talked' to the public. It was also felt that any written communication should be audience focussed, written in easy to read language - both jargon and spin free.

There was some support for the BBC Trust working with interest groups in order to hear from a wide variety of voices. However, there was concern that this could lead to a minority of people being over represented.

Although there was a low awareness of the BBC's Audience Councils, most respondents thought that such bodies were a good way of involving the public in the Trust's decision making process.

2.2 Summary by question

Question 1 – What do you think about the plans to be 'open to all' as outlined in this document?

There was a general agreement that the BBC Trust should be doing as much as possible to be open to all. However, this was accompanied by a high level of scepticism as many considered the BBC to be an organisation which had, to date, failed to act on the views of the audiences. There was also a belief that, in general, there were too many consultations which had failed to make an impact.

Respondents noted that it was important that any such activities must be genuine, with the BBC Trust both listening to and acting on the information gained from the public. Any signs that exercises were simply lip service would lead to further scepticism.

There was uncertainty about how it was possible to be open to ALL, and a concern that if a wide range of opinions was not sought then any consultation would be dominated by those who have the loudest voices and single issue agendas.

Questions were asked about how it was possible to reconcile a large number of conflicting views into a cohesive policy. There was also a warning that the BBC Trust should not respond to the latest fad, and needed to ensure that by involving audiences in the development of policy did not lead to 'dumbing down'.

The Audience Council Wales noted that many under represented groups were considered 'hard to reach', however they themselves may consider the BBC to be hard to reach, and as such the BBC Trust must engage with them on their own terms.

A large number of respondents stressed that there seemed to be an over-reliance on the web and other new media technology. This would mean that a significant proportion of the population would be unable to take part.

It was also noted that there needed to be visibility for any engagement, and a key way of doing this would be to use the BBC's channels and services.

Question 2 – What else, if anything, should the BBC Trust be doing to encourage licence fee payers to have their say?

The key issue for respondents was that the Trust must demonstrate effective engagement and follow through, and show that decisions had been made as result of listening to the public.

There was widespread agreement that the Trust needed a higher profile, and the public needed more direct access to the Trust if they were to understand its role.

A number of respondents suggested that there should be some form of incentive for taking part in consultations and other engagement activities. Suggestions for possible incentives ranged from financial, in the form of a discounted licence fee or payments per participation, to tours of television sets, meeting talent, and exclusive entry into competitions.

There was acknowledgement that the majority of people probably had no desire to engage with the BBC. Therefore, the BBC Trust should exercise caution about trying to do too much, as even active participants could start to lose interest if there was 'engagement saturation'.

Finally, several people suggested that the BBC Trust should not spend money on engagement activities as the licence fee was to pay for programmes.

Question 3 – What would encourage you to take part in a consultation?

An overwhelming majority of respondents said that the key factor which would encourage them to take part was evidence that they were being listened to, and their views would make a difference. At present there was little indication that actions had been taken as a result of points raised by the public.

They also said that there needed to be an ongoing demonstration that the BBC does care about the public's views. Several people remarked that the only feedback programme on network television was Points of View, which was seen as a lighthearted vehicle for Terry Wogan rather than a meaningful way of eliciting audience responses.

In practical terms the principal drivers were:

- Awareness that a consultation was happening – with suggestions including links within bbc.co.uk, local public meetings, leaflets delivered to households, the use of BBC radio and television to publicise the consultation
- An interest in the subject of the consultation
- The ease of response. Consultation questionnaires should not be over complex or time consuming, and should be able to be completed at home
- Financial or other incentives – such as visits to studios, participation in free draws, BBC tokens which can be saved to 'purchase' BBC products
- Evidence that the system was open, robust and genuine, with what was 'up for grabs' being clear at the start of the process.

Audience Council Northern Ireland noted the importance removing obstacles to involvement. This included provision to meet access and support requirements for people with disabilities and particular needs, such as childcare.

Question 4 – What would prevent you or put you off participating?

Unsurprisingly, given the points raised in response to the previous question, the majority of respondents would not take part in a consultation if it seemed that their views would be ignored and there was little or no evidence of action being taken as a consequence.

Respondents noted that the aims and objectives of a consultation should be made clear from the outset – if they were not then there was little point in participating.

There were also some people who felt that consultations were often carried out even if decisions had been made, and research results were used to rebut the views of those who took the time to take part in the consultation.

Other factors included:

- The questionnaire being too complicated, with a lot of cross referencing to other information, resulting in a time consuming exercise. It was felt that often consultation questionnaires were too technical and used too much jargon, rather than being written in user friendly language.
- Respondents said that questionnaires should not include too many open responses, as while this gave the feeling of openness, it might lead to issues beyond the scope of the consultation being raised. This would then be very difficult to analyse.
- If the subject of the consultation was not tangible. Most respondents stated that they would take part in consultations about programming or services, but were unlikely to do so if it was about overall policy or strategy.
- A lack of awareness about the consultation, its aims and objectives
- If the method of consultation did not suit their everyday lives. Online questionnaires as the sole method of participation being cited as a way which would not work for everyone.

There were several people who said that they would not take part in consultations if they were prevented from doing so anonymously.

Question 5 – How should the Trust communicate research findings to the public?

People were clear that the BBC Trust should use as many methods as possible to communicate research findings. It was thought that at present they were only available via obscure publications and through media experts. Mass communication tools were very important. In particular it was felt that the BBC Trust should use the BBC's programmes and services as a way of reporting to audiences.

Several people said that they were perplexed that the BBC tended to report research findings from and about other institutions, yet it did not do this with BBC Trust research findings. Examples were given of initiatives such as HDTV and Freesat, where it was felt that had other companies been running these then they would have featured on the BBC News. It

was suggested that if the BBC was worried about being seen to 'blow its own trumpet' this research should be backed up by discussions with informed commentators.

It was also felt that the BBC Trust should be using promotional opportunities between programmes to report research findings, rather than endlessly publicising programmes and other corporate messages. These could be accompanied with details of the BBC Trust website for anyone wanting more details.

Other outlets for communicating research findings were the BBC and BBC Trust websites, and Radio Times, which many people considered an appropriate place for the Trust to report to the public.

Audience Council Scotland noted the importance of distributing this information to organisations, groups and/or sectors on the community involved in the engagement process, thus turning it into a 360 degree exercise.

In terms of the content of reports, people suggested that they should be written in easy to read formats which had a summary of the facts, rather than glossy publications filled with pictures and other artwork. E-publishing was seen as cheapest and most efficient method, though hard copies should be circulated to establishments such as libraries where they could be kept for reference. Hard copies should also be available to individuals on request.

It was also noted that they should also be made available in formats for disabled people, such as simple English, Braille and audio.

Question 6 – What would be the most effective way for the BBC to work with interest groups to understand licence fee payers?

There was a large degree of uncertainty about whether interest groups should be specifically targeted by the Trust as a way of understanding audiences.

People felt that many interest groups were already too powerful, and additional engagement would result in over serving an unrepresentative minority. This was seen as going against the Trust's remit to represent individual licence fee payers. Most respondents said that they were not members of an interest group and would not, therefore, be represented if the BBC Trust decided this was the most effective way to engage with the public.

However, some people suggested that this would be a useful way for the Trust to fill gaps in their knowledge of the public and to help the Trust understand certain sectors of the population which might otherwise be unrepresented. However, the Trust should not be unduly swayed by such groups.

It was, however, important that no single issue interest group should not dominate, and the suggestion of working with a variety of interest groups in mixed fora was made.

The Central Religious Advisory Committee has stressed the role they have played to date in offering advice from an overview of a series of communities of interest, rather than being a single interest group with a homogeneous point of view.

Question 7 – The BBC Trust will be consulting on its complaints framework later this year – we are not, therefore, asking in detail about the complaints system as part of this consultation. But if you have any initial observations, please do let us have them here.

Responses to this question differed widely with many people giving examples of poor responses they had received, which were impersonal and failed to address the issues which had been raised. This led to a feeling that the BBC took no notice other than to the most serious of complaints. There were, however, some people who said that they had been very happy with the response to their complaint.

There was a view that the complaint system should be independent from BBC management. At present, the initial response from the BBC tended to be defensive and seemed to work on the assumption that the programme was correct and the complainant wrong.

Respondents were unclear about the role of the BBC Trust in the complaints procedure, particularly how they monitored the BBC's complaints handling; for example, did they rely on BBC management to provide the information, or did they take an independent assessment. It was also felt that in many cases the BBC Trust should be the first point of contact, as they were there to represent the public. Some respondents reported dissatisfaction that a complaint which had been made to the Trust had been responded to by BBC Information, rather than the Trust itself.

There was also a view that the complaints system was skewed towards web users, with very little promotion about how to make a complaint being transmitted on television and radio.

On the other hand it was suggested that the BBC might have too many ways to complain, ranging from the formal complaints process to programmes such as Newswatch, Points of View and Feedback, and Have Your Say section of the website. It was unclear which of these had the most validity and which would produce the most rapid and effective response.

Finally, a significant number of people said that the BBC should be wary of complaints. They noted that only a small minority of the public complained, and the BBC should not spend disproportionate resources on them. It was felt that the BBC should encourage positive as well as negative comments, and suggested that the complaints section on the website should be renamed Feedback.

Question 8 – What can Audience Councils do to represent people like you?

There was a very low awareness amongst respondents of Audience Councils and their work. Most people expressed an interest in the work of Audience Councils but did not know

about them. People also wondered how an Audience Council could represent the public when the public does not know they exist.

However, in spite of this low awareness, people suggested that Councils should ensure that they have a good mix of members, which might require targeted recruitment. There should, also, be a regular turnover of members, both to allow as many people as possible to participate and to ensure that members did not get stale. Respondents thought that it was important that Audience Councils were clearly independent of the BBC. They should ensure that they established links with other organisations, and by doing so they would be able to put forward the views of the wider public rather than simply their own views. Several people asked whether there was a need for such bodies as they seemed to add another level of bureaucracy. In particular, there was a danger that Audience Councils could be seen as a way of preventing direct interaction with the BBC Trust. There were also suggestions that rather than a formal committee structure, which seemed very archaic, that a virtual forum which would allow far more people to participate would be more effective mechanism. Finally some respondents asked whether it was possible for 12 people to represent the interests of a nation, and suggested that consultation and formal research would be a more effective way to reflect the views of the public.

Question 9 – How might you want to get involved in the work of Audience Councils?

It was noted that it was difficult to answer this question without knowing more about the work and the effectiveness of the Councils. However, some of the suggestions for involvement included:

- Attending an Annual Meeting held by the Council
- By joining a Council
- By joining an internet participation group run by the Councils, this was particularly welcomed by those in rural and remote areas
- By attending a public meeting held locally
- Offering financial or other incentives to take part in Council work

A number of people said that while they were interested in the work of Audience Councils, and thought it was a good way for the Trust to understand the public, they felt that the time commitments were probably too great, particularly for those who worked full time and would not be able to take time from work to attend committee meetings.

Question 10 – How can the BBC give you the confidence that it will take action?

Almost all respondents were clear that only by taking action could the Trust gain the public's confidence. The Trust should also demonstrate that the action taken is a result of a reasoned consideration, taking into account the views of the public, but not simply accepting those views to be right.

Given the low awareness of the Trust, respondents felt that it was particularly important for the Trust to take action and report widely on this action, this would help the public fully understand the Trust's role. They stressed that all decision making should demonstrate openness and transparency. It was, however, acknowledged that it will take time for a new body such as the Trust to gain the confidence of the public.

Audience Council Scotland again stressed the need for the Trust to be more visible, in particular in feeding back to licence fee payers about decisions made. It noted that Audience Councils could play a key role in the process by being closer to the audience in their area. It suggested that Council and the Trust should work together to develop systems which allow for visible responses to uses used and robust reporting back to audiences of the results which they have achieved.

Respondents also said that they felt that anyone taking part in a consultation should be informed about the outcome of that consultation.

Question 11 – What do you most want to hear about in terms of the Trust's decisions and the BBC's performance?

People were primarily interested in how the licence fee had been spent, in the form of an assessment of the BBC's performance, highlighting both the successes and failures, and what was going to happen as a result of poor performance. This should be fact based and not spin. There was a feeling that the Trust might simply act as a mouthpiece for the BBC, rather than acting in the public interest and any reports must make it clear that this is not the case.

It was stressed that it was not the decisions but the actions as a result of these decisions which really mattered.

Question 12 – How should the Trust's decisions be reported to you?

There was widespread feeling that the Trust's decisions should be reported clearly and in as many ways as possible. There was a consensus that the BBC itself should be the principal method; not doing this could mean that the Trust lacked credibility amongst the public. In terms of using the BBC's airwaves, amongst the suggestions were a programme about the BBC Trust and its role; a regular programme in which the Trust reported on its decisions and publicly held BBC Management to account, and more regular news reporting by the BBC about the Trust's decisions. There was also strong support for using Radio Times as a way of talking directly to the BBC's audience, perhaps a regular pull out section written by the Trust. It was felt that the BBC Trust seemed 'coy' about using the BBC to explain its role. The BBC spent a great deal of time explaining how other institutions work (coverage of Parliament and its committees was cited as an example) but seemed unwilling to explain the workings of the BBC itself.

There was agreement that there should be an annual audience-focussed report, which should contain key issues and actions, reported in a spin and jargon free way. This could either be sent out with the licence fee, or a form could be sent with the licence fee which

allowed people to request this report. Some people suggested that in order to maintain an ongoing relationship with the public, there should also be frequent, though not over frequent, Trust updates.

People noted that the internet was a cheap and effective way of distributing information, but many people did not use the web and therefore, it should not be the only way.

Once again respondents noted that it was important not to spend too much money reporting back to the public, as the licence fee should be primarily used for programmes.

Finally, several people noted that reporting was not particularly important - it was delivering actions which really mattered.

Question 13 – Is there anything else you would like to say about the way the BBC Trust should engage with the public?

Respondents again stated that the public needed to understand more about the Trust in order to make engagement authentic, and therefore there should be visibility and transparency for the Trust and the decisions it makes. It was, however, noted that it would take time for the public to fully understand the work of a new body such as the Trust.

It was stressed that the Trust should listen, consider and take action, while explaining the rationale behind its decisions and actions. It was important that the process of engagement and consultation was seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

It was important for the Trust to listen to the public, and to consider what they have to say. However, the public should not be allowed to set the agenda, rather the Trust should reach its decisions by considering all relevant evidence.

The Trust should remember that all licence fee payers are not made in their own image, and therefore must try to hear from as many different people as possible.

Audience Council Wales noted that many BBC audience members feel disenfranchised by the use of the phrase licence fee payers. Groups such as older people who do not pay the licence fee feel that they are not entitled to make their views known about BBC output because they are not licence fee payers.

Finally, the Trust needs to clearly position itself as the voice of the public – and one which will challenge BBC Management on behalf of the public.