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Response to BBC Trust Consultation on the Asian Network

The Asian Network should be replaced with an inclusive radio network to serve and support young children and their families in all our communities

What they say:

"...one of the difficulties of the Asian service is its concept. It broadcasts in a number of different languages to an audience that varies from younger to older [listeners]."

"It is trying to cater for many disparate groups simultaneously. We are wrestling with how to best serve this audience and whether one whole network is the right way to do it." **Caroline Thomson, BBC Chief Operating Officer - House of Lords, 2010**

"You could argue that we should have launched a children's channel as part of our DAB [offering]... I think that would be a legitimate thing to argue. As it is, we did a partial service and that has not quite worked" **Caroline Thomson, Westminster e-Forum, 2009**

"Providing outstanding children's content is one of the BBC's five editorial priorities as set out in the 'Putting Quality First' strategy. We believe it is very important that the BBC serves children across all its platforms as part of its public service mission" **BBC Trust Decision on BBC's Strategy for Children's Audio, 2011**

"The BBC has one mission: to inform, educate and entertain audiences with programmes and services of high quality, originality and value ..." **Mark Thompson, BBC Director General, 2010**

"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..." **Mark Thompson, Director General of the BBC, 2008**

"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". **Tim Gardam's recommendations for BBC Digital Radio, 2004**

"The number of children with language delay is worryingly high. Radio is an ideal medium to help them learn to concentrate and to listen without visual distraction. Parents often tell us they don't know enough stories or nursery rhymes, and shared radio listening would support them and give them confidence". **Speech and Language Therapist, Gila Falkus.**

The Asian Network should be replaced with an inclusive radio network to serve and support young children and their families across all our communities

History:

The Asian Network has enjoyed a test run of nine years at a cost to the licence payer of £60m. It is by far the most expensive of all BBC radio formats.

- **Asian Network Remit:** to provide speech and music output appealing to British Asians aged up to 35years, with a strong focus on news and current affairs

In February 2010 the network was singled out as being badly managed and returning low value for public investment. BBC chief operating officer, Caroline Thomson, told the House of Lords Communications Committee, *"It is trying to cater for many disparate groups simultaneously. We are wrestling with how to best serve this audience and whether one whole network is the right way to do it."* Thomson said the corporation remained committed to serving an Asian radio audience, but said the idea of a single station aimed at all Asian people in the UK reflected a *"rather British" view that if you come from the sub-continent ... you must somehow be the same"*

Ed Vaizey, the Shadow Culture Minister welcomed BBC proposals to close digital stations 6 Music and the Asian Network website as *"intelligent and sensible"*.

With an annual spend of £9m to £13m and a target audience of British Asians under the age of 35, this is by far the most expensive radio format per listener. Having struggled for nine years, with a redrafted remit in 2004, the network has cost the public over £60m. It stands charged with lax management and poor listening figures and was announced for closure in the 'Putting Quality First' report in March 2010

During a prolonged consultation stage, the BBC Trust received 1,572 online responses, 1,437 email responses and 42 letters related to the BBC Asian Network but upheld the plans for closure. However, high profile protests gained a u-turn from the executive and plans for part time local medium-wave services as one possible replacement were shelved. A BBC Trust Review of the Service Licence was announced on October 6th, including a second public consultation period on the future of the service.

Executive proposals to extend the target audience to 45 years, reduce the budget and make cuts to drama and foreign language output will still make it a costly exercise, based on no credible research and with no guarantee of success

BBC Trust Guidelines to this consultation give the impression that the future of this digital network is under review but the executive has already committed it to selected British Asians in a given age range. The focus on six distinctive content areas: BBC news, music and entertainment, Asian culture, discussion, languages and specialist music appears to be set in stone with only some internal tweaks open to public and industry consultation.

This is misleading and time-wasting for members of the public and organisations who are keen on making more practical use of public money and broadcasting space.

Reforms BBC Management have proposed in Delivering Quality First are:

- Maintain Asian Network as a national service
- Broaden the existing audience to encompass British Asian listeners between 25 and 45
- Focus on six distinctive content areas: BBC news, music and entertainment, Asian culture, discussion, languages and specialist music
- Remove drama and documentary programmes from the station
- Reduce the amount of weekday language programmes
- Close the station between midnight and 6am
- Cut 34% from the annual budget of £12.1million

The BBC Trust will base its judgement of the Asian Network as follows:

The framework is based around the four drivers of public value: Reach, Quality, Impact and Value for money and it includes measurement of the five content characteristics, as described in the BBC Agreement: high quality, challenging, original, innovative and engaging.

MORI and Capibus Ipsos Mori surveys in 2001 and 2010 placed a network for young children and their families at the top of public preference for a licence-funded network for the public to listen to and each placed the Asian Network at the bottom. Further research in October 2011, to inform this response, placed a network for young children and their families equal to Radio 4Extra with the Asian Network again polling lowest at 7%. [It is likely that media coverage of the threatened closures, protests and reprieves to 6 Music and the Asian Network, together with the high-profile launch of R4Extra have weighted results in favour of these three networks].

The Sound Start Group has proposed an in-depth evaluation of radio's role in children's lives, with published outcomes, to inform government, regulators and the radio industry. This would be undertaken in partnership with the BBC and other non profit organisations. The pilot study could operate across a local, regional or national framework deploying capacity and budget savings from the Asian Network, which, we recommend, should be replaced with a more inclusive network aimed at families with young children,

Research also confirms that families with children listen to radio most in cars, making **Children's Radio** an intelligent choice in the government's **Digital Radio Action Plan**, and a logical '6th C' in Ed Vaisey's five objectives: Content, Consumers, Coverage, Certainty and Cars. It is time to give the public what they want. **S.S. 20/12/2011**

Supporting documentation:

2001 Research Data: <http://www.sound-start.co.uk/?p=71>

2010 Research Data: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/poll-public-demand-for-a-childrens-radio-network-ipsos-mori-tables.pdf>

2011 Research Data: http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/Sound_start.pdf

Appendix 1: Summary of BBC's Strategy for Children's Audio - Sound Start Group



Children's radio: a vital medium

Impact of the BBC's Strategy for Children Audio

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20/12/11

What they say:

"It is really quite simple. Put the best in front of children - whether radio or literature or art or dance or drama - encourage them to reach for it, and they will grow well. Deny them the light of the arts and they will be stunted. We all know this - government, educators, artists, writers, broadcasters. Yet there is resistance amongst so many to the idea, the old idea that what you sow you reap. How short-sighted folk are.

Give children back their radio. If they were a minority adult group, they'd have it; but they're just children. There's the rub. Give them pap, cheap pap preferably, or nothing at all, because the ratings aren't good.

Self defeating and self destructive, and sad" **Michael Morpurgo May 1999**

"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". **Arts Council Manifesto**

"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 ..." **BBC Interim Report - 2004**

"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..." **Mark Thompson - Director General of the BBC**

"Our culture brings audiences from across the world and we are particularly adept at producing world-leading performers and artists. "To remain in such a strong position we need to be sure that we are giving children the best start in their cultural education."

Culture Minister, Ed Vaisey

"Every child should be exposed to rich cultural opportunities. Too often, this is a privilege reserved for the wealthy few. This must change"

Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove

Impact of the BBC's Strategy for Children Audio

Background:

Radio choice and access is protected in UK law, only for 'adults' aged 15 years and above.

Prior to re-launching R7 as R4Extra the BBC made significant changes to the R7 Service Licence which could further expose children to harm, offence and commercialisation.

The core duty to provide a non-commercial radio home for children was deleted and provision of a home for fans of science-fiction, fantasy, horror and stand-up comedy was retained. The two remaining hours of daily radio for listeners aged under seven were replaced with internet down-loads, averaging 16 minutes, that parents say need extra equipment, time and skill to access and are a poor substitute for pre-set, push-button radio that very young children could tune to. Families in the 26% of UK homes with no internet are missing out and these are likely to include children in the most needful group. To mitigate cuts of 75% content and 50% budget, trading of BBC archive with commercial rivals was prioritised.

For listeners aged seven to 14 all references to *programmes for children* were replaced with the more ambiguous *programmes that appeal to children*, which factors back in adult listeners who had been selectively discounted from audience figures on R7, to justify the instant cut of 75% in children's radio. This will inflate R4Extra figures to make the strategy appear successful. Children's radio was targeted separately from 'Delivering Quality First' and so avoids unwelcome comparison with lesser cuts of 16-20% across other BBC departments, spread over five years.

Ofcom's Codes and BBC Guidelines forbid broadcast of unsuitable adult content at times when children may be listening and, for years, the BBC struggled to shoehorn children's radio into adult-speech networks R5; R4 and R7, amid constant complaints from planners and listeners. In February 2009, before the axing of 'Go4it' - the last children's programme on BBC mainstream radio - the BBC Trust Review of services for children stated:

BBC 7 and Radio 4 are primarily stations aimed at a much older audience and it is therefore unlikely that children will develop an affinity with these channels or go looking for content when it is available. The positioning of children's programmes on these channels is also unpopular with some adults who have complained that the content is unsuitable for the stations' core audience.

Parents had also complained that R4 was unsuitable for their children and yet the only remaining content for seven to 14 year-olds is re-scheduled on adult speech station R4Extra. This network meets the new 'family friendly' obligation with 'The 4 O'clock Show', on Monday to Friday at 4 - 5pm. 'Big Toe Books' devoted this whole hour to children but the 4 O'clock Show consists largely of promotional cuts from adult speech station, R4, linked by a 'Daily Dalek' challenge showcasing celebrity interviews from 'Front Row'. Programmes end with a ten minute story serial ranging in age appeal from 'James and the Giant Peach' and 'Mrs Pepperpot' to 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas'. 'Keep it in the Family' was a weekly quiz hosted by Fred MacAulay which ran for one series and is not due back until next year.

On Sundays an hour of drama for adults and children airs at 9am, repeated at 4pm - usually in two half hour episodes from different series. In all, well under an hour a day of BBC radio is designed especially for children: less than 'Children's Hour' provided in the 1940s when the Home Service was the only delivery platform. By contrast, the vast expansion in analogue and digital space provides thousands of stations for grown-ups.

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Impact of the BBC's Strategy for Children Audio - Continued

R4Extra - a home for young listeners?:

The BBC's own research consistently shows that children are not drawn to an adult-speech network and also that this format tends to favour a middle class audience. Moreover 'speech-based' radio inhibits programming for children, who need a wide variety of listening to open their minds, inspire them and develop their critical faculties. Music and song are integral to our cultural development. Speech, music and sound are the key tools of sound broadcasting and should be left to producers' discretion rather than to percentage quotas policed by bureaucrats.

Segregating music and talk allows higher bitrates for music radio, leaving less bandwidth for talk formats, yet some of the best radio combines the two: Desert Island Discs; Soul Music; Something Understood; Kenneth Clark's Jazz Greats; Inheritance Tracks, and so on. It is significant that R4 is featuring more music, R3 is examining the prose of Dickens and R2 has been instructed by the BBC Trust to include more speech content in its daytime schedules.

Radio has no watershed and successive regulators have fought against setting one. The remit to provide *science-fiction, fantasy, horror and stand-up comedy* is bound to result in conflicted schedules which will be unsuitable for listeners aged seven to 10 ... if not for the 11 to 14 year olds. Younger siblings may also like to share the radio experience with their families. Why not?

Clashing schedules:

Random sampling of R4Extra demonstrates the conflict. 'The Seventh Dimension' at 6-7pm, prior to bed-time, boasts dark horror stories, drama and tales of the supernatural, including Dracula, Frankenstein and werewolf fiction 'The Quick and the Dead' was a drama about necromancy; 'Man in Black' themes have featured a psychopath who incarcerates a vagrant girl with her murdered parents; the ghost of child who bribes a bereaved mother to care for her with promises to lead her to her dead son; an alcoholic who watches his wife's body cremated and tries to cut out his donated liver. 'Blaze' is a poignant but harrowing serialisation of novel by Stephen King, as is the painful docu-drama, 'Mary Barnes'.

'Lady into Fox' is a story about a man whose wife, Sylvia, metamorphoses into a vixen and 'prostitutes' herself with a dog fox, producing a litter of five cubs. Consumed with jealousy, he considers cutting his throat with a razor but relents. However, 'Sylvia' is eventually mauled to death in his arms by a pack of hounds who also leave him with multiple wounds. All are well told, sophisticated and complex tales but entirely unsuitable for young children.

'Strangers and Brothers' leading up to the 'family hour', ended with a woman's suicide by overdose. A 'Smiley' script, contained the line "*You're a bloody spastic ...*". The 'Help', a drama set in the southern states of America, carried a description of a bloody miscarriage and included the line, "*... some nigger got shot or somethin*". An announcement warned that the language reflected 1960s Mississippi but this doesn't help listeners who miss the start.

Today's stand-up comedy tends to favour 'adult' humour and, to fulfil its brief, Radio4Extra is reflecting this. 'Arthur Smith Sings Leonard Cohen' included the song 'Chelsea Hotel' with the line, "*Giving me head on an unmade bed...*". Panel games, such as 'Heresy,' lean towards an adult take on racy subjects and even the largely family friendly Count Arthur Strong's scripts are peppered with "Sodding" and "Bloody".

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Impact of the BBC's Strategy for Children Audio - Continued

Programmes frequently feature content that would need a watershed or warnings on TV and podcasts for adult shows are posted alongside the downloads intended to appeal to families. Children's radio is unlikely to thrive or even survive in this inapt arena

The BBC has a rich public archive of family friendly sit-com and Goonery; the finest documentaries such as the Soundscape wildlife productions and The History of the World in a Hundred Objects; superior dramatisations, including Dickens, Barrie, Michael Morpurgo's 'War Horse' and Herge's 'Tintin'. The run-up to Christmas always airs more child-friendly radio but children are for life, not just for Christmas, and when their radio is juxtaposed with adult content, much of which, it could be argued, might also 'appeal' to more curious and precocious children, it causes confusion and dissension:

"Dad, we listened to The Sorcerer's Apprentice so why can't I listen to The Man in Black? It's on at the same time." "Cos your mother says no!"

R4Extra is licensed to fulfil children's listening needs. Of course they're likely to be listening!

In defending the cuts to children's radio the BBC has made much of this year's Hay Festival '500 Words' children's story competition and its Schools News Reports but these are drops in the vast ocean of opportunity to engage children through imaginative radio enterprise.

Conclusion:

It follows that young listeners are likely to be evicted from yet another public service radio network as an irrelevant nuisance, too problematic to include alongside the 'adults', yet, with the wealth of capacity, there's no need for children's and adult's radio to conflict. It would be far more sensible for the BBC to schedule a dedicated family friendly network, unbridled by shocking or distressing news, adult comedy, drama, occult, horror, etc..

30 July 2008, the BBC Executive Submission to the BBC Trust's Review of Services for Children aged 12 and under promises to:

- Inspire children's imagination and open their minds to new worlds
- Help children understand themselves and their place in the world
- Encourage children to be responsible citizens
- Inspire children to be creative and active
- Provide moments when they can laugh out loud
- Reflect the diverse lives of children
- Provide positive role models of children for children
- Engage and support children in their learning

All these goals can, and should, be fulfilled by radio but, having failed to do so, the BBC plans to mitigate that failure by trading young ears and content to support its commercial rivals. This not only commercialises children but also sets a precedent for top-slicing by the back door.

It is hard to believe the BBC deliberately licensed the only remaining radio content for children alongside adult stand-up, fantasy, sci-fi, horror, murder and serious crime. This must have resulted from the need to find immediate cuts in the least militant quarter. **Continues >>>**

Impact of the **BBC's Strategy for Children Audio - Continued**

The way forward:

The unique value of radio in children's development, for their listening, language and vocabulary acquisition, imagination, discovery, understanding and memory cannot be overstated and must not be overlooked. The way forward is to reserve a network where younger children and their families can listen in a safe and sound environment, leaving parents and carers free from the need to police yet another source of content which is potentially damaging to their children.

Research shows this to be what the public wants and the Sound Start Group has proposed an in-depth evaluation of radio's role in children's lives, with published outcomes, to inform government, regulators and the radio industry. This would be undertaken in partnership with the BBC and other non profit organisations overseen by independent governance.

This pilot study could operate across a local, regional or national framework deploying capacity and budget savings from the Asian Network that is currently under review. At £9.2m per annum, with a target audience of British Asians under the age of 35, this is by far the most expensive radio format per listener. Having struggled for nine years, with a redrafted remit in 2004, the network has cost the public over £60m.. it stands charged with lax management and poor listening figures and was announced for closure in the 'Putting Quality First' report in March 2010, however the flurry of high profile protests has gained more than a year's reprieve.

Executive proposals to extend the target audience up to 45 years, halve the budget and reduce drama and foreign language output will still make it a costly exercise, based on no research and with no guarantee of success. In year 2007/8 the network spent £13m. Trust approval is required for any planned or actual change in annual expenditure on the service of more than 10% in real value and the public needs to know when this was sought and granted.

The BBC Trust will base its judgement of the Asian Network as follows:

The framework is based around the four drivers of public value: Reach, Quality, Impact and Value for money and it includes measurement of the five content characteristics, as described in the BBC Agreement: high quality, challenging, original, innovative and engaging.

These criteria were found wanting in attempts to provide young listeners with commercial-free radio but, rather than fulfilling their public duty to serve this deserving community of listeners, the BBC abandoned its children's radio remit and relocated the greatly reduced 'family friendly' content to the even less suitable platform of R4Extra.

Three independent research studies into the BBC's digital [DAB] radio options, conducted in 2001, 2010 and 2011, placed the Asian Network lowest in public preference, with a network for young children and their families on the top line in each case. Research also confirms that families with children listen to radio most in cars, making Children's Radio an intelligent choice in the government's **Digital Radio Action Plan**, and a logical '6th C' in Ed Vaisey's five objectives: Content, Consumers, Coverage, Certainty and Cars. It is time to give the public what they want.

Documents relied on >>>

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2011 Research Data: http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/Sound_start.pdf

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Hart and Risley (1995)

Bercow Review (July 2008)

Frank Field Report on Poverty and Life Chances (December 2010)

Allen Report (January 2011)

Reg Bailey Report - Letting Children be Children (June 2011)

Darren Henley Report - Music Education in England (February 2011)