BBC Trust Impartiality Review:

BBC coverage of Rural Areas in the UK

June 2014





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TRUST CONCLUSIONS

Summary

This impartiality review is the sixth carried out by the BBC Trust into a significant area of BBC coverage. It considered how rural affairs in the UK were covered by the BBC in its television, radio and online output. The Trust's conclusions are set out in full below and summarised here:

- Overall, the BBC's coverage of rural areas in the UK is duly impartial. There is no evidence of party political bias, and a wide range of views is aired.
- In the devolved nations, coverage of rural affairs is strong, with a good spread of interviewees and a nuanced understanding of the issues.
- Network factual programmes which focus on rural matters, such as Countryfile and Farming Today, are very highly regarded and broadcast a wide range of opinions and thoughtful analysis.
- However, this is not the case across the whole of network news, current affairs output and other factual output leading to a deficit in network reporting of rural affairs in England.
- Audiences feel network news coverage can be simplistic and, on contentious stories, too often focuses on protest rather than the underlying issues.
- Some rural audiences across the UK feel the BBC has a metropolitan bias.
- A small number of charities and organisations have a disproportionate influence on the coverage of rural affairs at network level.
- We will ask the Executive for an oral report in six months' time on the steps it has taken to address the deficiencies identified, and a written report in September 2015 which we will publish. The areas we will want further information on are set out in full at the end of this document.

Full Conclusions

The BBC is uniquely placed to reflect the lives – and the events that shape them – of people throughout the United Kingdom. It has reporters across the four nations with extensive grass-roots knowledge able to feed into and support network output. This is central to the BBC's work and is reflected in the Public Purpose that the BBC should "represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities". It is essential that the BBC speaks to the lives and experiences of all licence fee payers in order to retain the support and trust it has built up over decades.



The BBC should reflect the lives, concerns and experiences of rural areas in the UK for people living in those areas and also because it is important for those in urban areas not to be disconnected from the rest of the UK. It is important that as a society, we should all be able to fully understand and take account of the opinions and concerns that exist across the UK.

The BBC Trust undertook this Impartiality Review into the BBC's Coverage of Rural Areas in the UK to assess:

- how well the BBC reflected the concerns of rural UK whether a wide range of voices were heard and a breadth of sources drawn on so that rural issues were covered in a way that was impartial
- whether the BBC reported in an impartial way on stories that were specifically rural in their nature and which related to controversial subjects
- whether stories which were of general interest to licence fee payers were considered from a rural perspective.

The Trust appreciates the substantial work undertaken by Heather Hancock, supported by research from Loughborough University and Oxygen Brand Consulting, and welcomes the clear conclusion that, taken as a whole, the BBC's coverage of rural areas in the UK is impartial. This is a significant finding because it is fundamental to the Trust's role in ensuring the impartiality of BBC output. In particular, Trustees note that:

- Overall, the BBC's coverage of rural areas in the UK is duly impartial. There is no evidence of party political bias, and a wide range of views is aired.
- In controversial stories, the BBC's approach is impartial and its reporters use language that is fair and neutral.
- In the devolved nations, coverage of rural affairs is strong, with a good spread of interviewees and a nuanced understanding of the issues.
- Network factual programmes which focus on rural matters, such as Countryfile and Farming Today, are very highly regarded and broadcast a wide range of opinions and thoughtful analysis.
- Network factual programmes that travel across the UK, such as Question
 Time and Any Questions?, air opinions and stories from rural areas that are
 not otherwise heard at network level.
- In the devolved nations, audiences are appreciative of their own national output and consider the BBC reflects their lives in a way that is authentic and honest.



The Trust also welcomes confirmation that the audiences value the BBC's output relating to rural affairs and have higher expectations of the BBC than of other news organisations and broadcasters.

However, the report highlights a number of concerns about the BBC's coverage of rural areas and issues.

- The wide spread of voices and opinions that can be heard on some programmes that focus on rural issues is largely absent from network news and current affairs output and from more general network factual programmes.
- Rural news items originating in the English regions will too rarely be perceived as significant enough to be carried at network news level.
- The limited coverage of rural issues in network news and current affairs and in network factual output has led to a deficit in the BBC's coverage of rural affairs in England.
- This is a source of frustration for audiences in rural England, while audiences in urban areas in England appear to consider rural issues are not relevant to them.
- Regional sensitivities, for example in the West Country, receive scant attention at network level yet are as significant as those in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- Some rural audiences across the UK feel the BBC has both a metropolitan bias and a London bias.
- At network level, a small number of charities and organisations have a disproportionate influence on the coverage of rural affairs.
- News reporting tends to focus on conflict and adopt a binary approach –
 favouring stories that are about protest. Trustees note that audiences
 repeatedly say they want to understand more about the underlying story.

The Trust is grateful for the thoughtful and constructive recommendations made by Heather Hancock, which are intended to ensure the BBC stays in touch with rural issues and reflects the lives and concerns of people in rural areas. We note that many of her recommendations reflect her conviction that the BBC already has the expertise and skills to deliver better output – and that a significant difference can be made by building better links and forming closer working relationships between different output producers and programmes.

Trustees are aware of the challenging financial circumstances faced by the BBC and consider that it has never been more important for the BBC to make the best possible use of its wide network of producers, reporters and journalists.

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The Trust welcomes the Executive's commitment to covering rural affairs and notes that it has acknowledged the importance of reflecting all aspects of rural life in BBC output.

We note that the BBC accepts the limits of binary, conflict-based reporting in news — it is aware this point was made repeatedly by stakeholders and in the audience research and is also borne out by the content analysis.

We are pleased that in Northern Ireland and Scotland – where some specialist posts have closed – the Executive is considering how it can better use the existing knowledge of BBC staff. However, we agree with Heather Hancock that specialist reporters have a depth of expertise and a range of contacts that bring significant value to BBC output. We note that, in Wales, the BBC is committed to maintaining its coverage of rural affairs in both the English and Welsh language services.

The Trust notes that the Executive has responded to the concern about the apparent deficit in the coverage of rural affairs in England by stating that three senior journalists already working in the English regions will be charged with taking on specific network responsibilities in this area. We welcome the Executive's intention that this will allow it to better "sense the pulse of England beyond the South East".

We also note that the Executive is adopting measures to improve links between different programmes and output areas and to increase the expertise that feeds into television and radio network news output.

We welcome the Executive's decision to accept Heather Hancock's recommendation that a senior editorial figure should be given editorial oversight of rural issues and champion relevant output.

We note that the Executive is also committed to introducing new ways of working to build better links between BBC colleagues. We welcome, too, the Executive's commitment to improve journalists' contacts, to hold regular meetings between output producers working in this area, and for the Director of News to sponsor a meeting with external stakeholders to bring their knowledge to the BBC in this area.

Trustees have asked the Executive to give an oral report to the Trust's Editorial Standards Committee in six months' time and a written report to the Trust in September 2015. That report will subsequently be published and should, in particular, include information about:

 How the Executive's proposal to give three reporters in the English regions extra responsibility to provide rural stories to the network, has translated into stories on the network. Evidence of the network news and current affairs coverage of rural issues in England that has resulted from this.

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- How the Executive's proposal to identify a senior editorial figure to champion rural output has improved coverage of rural issues from the regions and nations. Evidence from output of the items or programmes that have resulted from this and evidence of improved working between programmes and output areas.
- How network factual programming outside news and current affairs has extended coverage of rural issues – whether through new commissions or through broader coverage in existing programming.
- How the Executive's acknowledgement of the limitations of binary news reporting has been reflected to newsrooms at network level, in the devolved nations and in the English regions. How the tone of coverage has changed.
- How the Executive's proposals for the better use of non-specialist staff in Scotland and Northern Ireland is improving coverage of rural issues.
- What has been done to ensure better collaboration between different programmes and output areas.

Heather Hancock has written a very constructive and thoughtful report and we are keen that the Executive should take full advantage of the helpful suggestions she has made. We agree with Heather Hancock that it is vital to forge better, wider, networks and relationships throughout the BBC. We consider the approach she has suggested would help to revitalise the BBC's understanding of the UK as a whole, would see it make better use of the talent within its workforce and would strengthen the BBC's output in all areas, in particular rural affairs.



BBC COVERAGE OF RURAL AREAS IN THE UK BY HEATHER HANCOCK

Preface

In May 2013, I was commissioned by the BBC Trust to undertake this review into rural affairs coverage by the BBC. My report was submitted to the Trust in February 2014. My report is entirely independent and the views, conclusions and recommendations presented are my own.

I come to the subject with a deep and long-standing commitment to the countryside and the many purposes it serves. Having initially worked as a land agent (an agricultural land manager), I subsequently spent many years in the public sector in Whitehall and in Yorkshire. My responsibilities have covered running a National Park Authority, the regional response to foot and mouth disease, the economics of reforming the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy, and investing in environmental and cultural projects in rural Britain. More recently, I spent a decade working in London as a Senior Partner in Deloitte, commuting weekly from my home in North Yorkshire. In the Yorkshire Dales, I have a small Highland beef fold helping to manage the upland environment, but I am by no means a farmer. In the last three years, my family commitment to rural regeneration and economic growth has helped create almost 50 new jobs in the countryside, through our local pub, a new restaurant, and rural retail. I hope this gives me a broad, informed but non-partisan basis on which to approach the subject of the review.

I had free rein in deciding how to go about this review. BBC programme makers, journalists and executives have been generous with their time in conversations and meetings, as have a wide range of contributors from outside the BBC [Annex A]. I have benefited from their frank, insightful and thoughtful contributions. I have visited Aberystwyth; Bristol; Inverness in the Scottish Highlands; Hull; Lincolnshire; London and Cookstown in Northern Ireland to discuss and hear about BBC output. I invited individuals and interest group representatives with a perspective on a wide range of rural affairs to share their views in 1:1 meetings or round-table discussions. The latter included some members of the BBC's Audience Councils. I also had informative meetings with the editors of some specialist rural magazines. The BBC in England and in Scotland has Rural Affairs Advisory Committees that exist to offer programme makers a sounding board on rural issues: I attended and heard views from the England Council, and met some individual members of the Scotland Council. I also received a small number of

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^[1] The BBC Trust has Audience Councils in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. They provide the Trust with insights about the views, needs and interests of audiences in their respective nations and on how well the BBC is serving these audiences and delivering its public purposes.



written submissions from rural interest groups – I am grateful for this input and all these interviews, meetings and comments informed the review. A list of contributors to this review is annexed to this review [Annex A].

Of course, I have read, listened to and watched many BBC radio and television programmes and online reports, including output from the devolved nations, regional and local stations, but I cannot pretend this was anything other than a selection of programmes relevant to the countryside and the communities living there.

I have carefully considered – and heavily drawn on – the findings of the two new elements of research that were commissioned by the BBC Trust to support this review: a content analysis of BBC output by Loughborough University's Centre for Communication Research and the qualitative audience research into BBC output carried out by Oxygen Brand Consulting. I am grateful to both research teams for the thoroughness of their work and for their considered reports.

In 2003 the BBC Governors, commissioned a team of three people – of which I was one – to undertake an independent review of rural affairs coverage. While that was an internal review, a summary of its conclusions and recommendations was published in the Annual Report for 2003/4. I have revisited those conclusions and recommendations and the information that was carried in the Annual Report is annexed to this review [Annex B].

The terms of reference for this review were unusually wide – they were far wider than the Governors' 2003 review of rural affairs coverage and wider than the previous five BBC Trust impartiality commissions. My report relates to the BBC's output at three levels: the "network" level – this means programmes that are broadcast UK-wide; at the national and regional level (that is, output produced for the devolved nations: Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and also output produced in the twelve English regions); and at local level, which is almost always through local BBC radio. The services the BBC offers in two of the UK's indigenous minority languages were also included: BBC Alba in Scotland is the Gaelic language television service and BBC Radio nan Gàidheal a radio counterpart; BBC Radio Cymru is the Welsh language radio service. The terms of reference also included the BBC's online output. I was asked to consider bias and impartiality in the BBC's news, current affairs and factual programming. This specifically excluded The Archers, which is classified as drama by the BBC, but I have commented on the significance of this long-running Radio 4 programme.

I have considered the impartiality of the BBC's coverage of rural matters generally – whether the lives and concerns of people in rural areas are accurately and impartially reflected in its output. I have considered the coverage of specific, contentious news stories that are related to rural areas and I have considered the extent to which the rural voice is heard in more general news reporting.

The interviews and consultations I undertook had been completed before the great floods of Winter 2013/14 took hold, so there are no specific observations

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from consultees on this. However, where appropriate I have included evidence points or parallels from the BBC's coverage of the flooding.

Finally, I had excellent support from the BBC Trust throughout this review. Alison Hastings, Chairman of the Trust's Editorial Standards Committee and National Trustee for England, offered wise counsel and a sounding board. Victoria Wakely was my guiding hand as we initiated the review; when she was enticed away to Radio 4's Today Programme, Leanne Buckle picked up the reins to bring us to a conclusion including the Herculean task of brigading my content sensibly. Both were expert in explaining the jargon, structure and "ins and outs" of the BBC. They had a nice line in gently challenging my odd wild assertion. Kate Whannel provided administrative support, and Helen Nice research back-up. I hope they have enjoyed the experience as much as I have.

My intention in this review is to be helpful. There is a great deal that the BBC gets right in its rural affairs output. I hope that the conclusions I have reached and the suggestions I make enable the BBC to be even more effective in meeting the needs of rural audiences, and reflecting to the wider audience a full picture of the countryside, in the future.

Heather Hancock Arncliffe, North Yorkshire February 2014



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review of impartiality has looked across the whole sweep of BBC rural affairs output, at network, devolved, regional and local level; on television, radio and online; and in the indigenous minority language services. Over several months, I have spoken with scores of external stakeholders and audience members across the UK, and consulted widely within the BBC. We have had the benefit of expert, independent audience research and content analysis commissioned by the BBC Trust.

Across the output that was covered in my terms of reference, I found no significant failures of impartiality. Loughborough University's content analysis indicated BBC journalists were scrupulous in their efforts to use fair language when reporting contentious stories and that, across the BBC's output, a range of voices and opinions were heard. There was no evidence of political bias and the audience research indicated that even where viewers and listeners were uncertain about the facts of a matter, they felt the BBC was striving to be impartial.

I found a good spread of output and some outstanding programmes that reflected the real diversity of life in rural areas in the UK. Flagship programmes, including Countryfile and Farming Today, were warmly appreciated by their audiences. The presence of rural UK on BBC2 and Radio 4 is commendable. Their controllers¹ and programme makers are keenly aware of the audience appetite for this output. In the devolved nations too, the range of programming and the detailed knowledge of editorial staff meant output had a depth of understanding that was impressive – this was particularly true in the indigenous minority language services.

However, there are significant concerns. The array of voices that explored rural issues in the devolved nations and in the BBC's flagship programmes was not generally found in the network output.

That the BBC does not, in its network output, reflect as wide a range of voices and opinions in its rural coverage as it could is the greatest threat I found to its impartiality.

Output produced in the devolved nations mitigated this effect in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. However, in England, where there is no separate national output, there was a deficit in the reporting of rural issues. Audiences in rural England felt the frustration that their lives were not sufficiently reflected in the BBC's network output. While urban audiences in England did not register this absence, I am concerned that the BBC's public purposes include reflecting the lives of people across the UK and one of its aims is to educate – it is difficult to

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¹ At the time of the review, the controller of BBC2 was Janice Hadlow. It is now Kim Shillinglaw.



see how this can be achieved if life in rural England is not properly covered at network level.

In network news, the content analysis suggested that too narrow a range of voices found their way to air. Audiences, too, were critical that the BBC took a "binary" approach to news that led to simplistic "pro" and "anti" arguments. They noted that where contentious issues were reported, too often the news story would foreground the conflict, not the underlying issue that was at the heart of the matter.

There is an overdependence on a small number of bodies for comment and input. There are other pitfalls too – the choice of pictures in television and online content prompted audience members and stakeholders to query whether the BBC was unconsciously favouring one side of an argument. The inclusion of celebrities in news stories also led to criticism – audiences and stakeholders wanted interviewees with depth of knowledge and were mistrustful of celebrity.

The content analysis indicated how much the news agenda was driven by events in Westminster. This, in turn, had an impact in terms of how stories were covered and what voices were heard. I think that at network level the BBC may risk overlooking valid and important rural stories originating from the regions and from the devolved nations, which have a significance beyond the purely local – widespread local concerns about flood protection measures are an example of where a strong story could have been picked up earlier.

The devolved nations led the way in terms of looking at significant issues through the prism of life in rural areas. Stories about health, education and employment reflected the experiences of people in rural areas in the devolved nations and the regions – but received scant consideration at a network level. Rural affairs policies are almost entirely determined at the devolved level, but at network level there was little reflection of this.

I have looked at those parts of the BBC that really cover rural affairs well to see what lessons can be learned from them. I have made a number of recommendations that I believe will strengthen the BBC's rural output at network level and in non-specialist programmes.

There is already a good deal of expertise within the BBC – I have tried to suggest ways that it can be better used, so that it informs a broader range of output.

The landmark programmes Farming Today and Countryfile fulfil a very significant function – I believe the BBC should capitalise on the credibility and deep knowledge of these programme teams to build on the rural affairs coverage across its output. The BBC should nurture these flagship programmes but be realistic about their capacity to absorb any more load.

People who live in the countryside are largely well served by their most local BBC providers. Presenters and programme makers at the local level are plugged into



rural stories. The BBC can make better use of these local staff – finding ways that allow stories to be developed and, where appropriate, brought to a wider audience.

The BBC has shown that it has access to a wide range of contacts who can speak on various rural matters – but those voices need to be heard across network output, not just in specialist programming or solely in output in the devolved nations. News journalists, in particular, must widen their range of sources and improve their contacts books in order to ensure a breadth of voice on rural issues. Interestingly, many of those whom I consulted outside the BBC felt that countryside organisations themselves could do more to enable the media to access greater breadth of opinion. It struck me that, if these countryside experts, advocates and champions, could better coordinate their considerable insight and strengths then more voices could be found and made available to all media to the benefit of the public.

A good number of the stakeholders I've spoken to felt the BBC tended too often to view rural affairs through the lens of environmentalism – and as a consequence, only presented a partial picture, missing social and economic dimensions of rural life.

I understand the financial constraints the BBC is working under. In recent years, some of the infrastructure supporting rural affairs coverage has been dismantled. BBC News has reconfigured its pool of specialist reporters. This is a matter for the Executive rather than the Trust, but it's worth questioning whether some of those changes have been counter-productive.

Overwhelmingly, the BBC's content on rural affairs is good. But it can be unintentionally partial in a narrow presentation of the issues. The urban audience might not always notice this but the rural audience does. The more expert the journalist on rural affairs, or the closer he or she is geographically or by background to the story, the more accurate and balanced is the coverage.

The BBC has a duty to reflect the lives of the twelve million people who live in rural areas in the UK. It also has a duty to inform those who don't live in rural areas about the issues that affect 80% of the UK's landmass – which can have farreaching consequences on their own lives in towns and cities. An understanding of the inter-dependence of rural and urban life is of great benefit to all audiences – and the appetite for output that is related to rural affairs indicates there is a strong public demand for it.

Recommendations

I invite the BBC to consider the following steps:

- 1. re-establish the post of Rural Affairs Correspondent,
- 2. identify a senior figure to take an editorial oversight role, championing rural affairs across network output, devolved, regional and local programmes,



- 3. accelerate measures to make it easier for local and regional journalists to deliver news content at the network level,
- at least annually, gather together the BBC journalists and programme makers who are covering rural affairs to share ideas, experiences and contacts,
- 5. involve senior network news and commissioning editors to ensure they are kept abreast of rural affairs,
- 6. consider hosting an off the record discussion on rural policy sponsored by the Director of News with a wider mix of institutional and local voices,
- 7. make a concerted effort to revitalise the BBC's rural contacts list across a wide range of expertise.

These moves can help the BBC demonstrate that it understands its rural audience, especially through the medium of news programmes, and to bring a deeper understanding to an urban majority.



WHAT IS RURAL? AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The BBC Trust commissioned this review of the BBC's coverage of rural affairs in the summer of 2013. In undertaking my review, I have explored whether the BBC's coverage of rural areas in the UK presents a partial view of the nature of those areas, the role they play, and the lives of people who live there.

In summary:

- The rural population of the UK is over 12 million people, 50% more people than live in Greater London.
- The BBC's output should serve the needs and reflect the lives of rural communities across the UK.
- The BBC's output should reach and inform the entire audience about rural issues and the relevance or interest these can have to urban lives.
- In England, several commentators observe a growing disconnect between urban and rural communities; this is present but less acute in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- Whilst agriculture is an important business and employer in rural areas, and has mostly shaped the landscape, rural areas are host to diverse enterprises and make a substantial contribution to the UK's economic performance.
- There is a difference between the priority issues for rural communities, and the national focus on events in the countryside.
- Some big national issues, for example future food prices or climate change alleviation, will focus attention on rural UK and the BBC needs expertise and understanding to explore them.

The BBC's public purposes include a duty to reflect the many communities that exist in the UK, to stimulate debate within and between the communities of the UK, and encourage people to get involved with their local communities.

The BBC has a role to educate and inform, as well as to entertain. Educating audiences about the interests and experiences of rural UK is an important contribution. The BBC Trust is particularly concerned to understand whether the BBC output properly reflects life in the UK's rural areas, particularly where matters of public policy and political controversy are covered, and whether variations in opinion between metropolitan and rural communities are understood and reflected.

Its Royal Charter and Agreement require the BBC to deliver duly accurate and impartial news, and to treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality. Part of the BBC Trust's role is to ensure this obligation is being



fulfilled. It is essential to its independence that the BBC retains public trust as an impartial and accurate purveyor of news and programming.

Where and who are we talking about?

To understand rural Britain and Northern Ireland and to understand why it matters we need to be clear who and where we are talking about. What is rural? Is it only those areas that are physically remote from the vast majority of the population? Do we include our market towns, the suburban fringe, the commuter villages? Are rural communities defined by a predominant focus on farming and land-based production, or should we include as rural those people – like me – who travel from North Yorkshire to work in central London during the week?

Despite the continuing expansion of our towns and cities, the UK landscape remains predominately rural. Around 80% of the UK landmass is classified as rural and 20% or so of the population live there. The ONS², Defra³ and other public agencies use a definition for England and Wales where rural equates to settlements of 10,000 people or fewer. This includes what to many country people would be a reasonably sized town, and of course many small and some medium towns *are* more strongly associated with rural concerns and providing rural services than they are concerned with the interests of their bigger urban neighbours. In Northern Ireland, the NI Statistics and Research Agency puts the rural-urban dividing line at populations of 5,000, with some caveats. In Scotland, some studies suggest the maximum population to qualify as rural should be 3,000, and there is a more sophisticated approach to measuring remoteness in terms of travel time.

Taking accessible and more remote rural areas together:

- roughly 9.3 million people live in rural England (17.6% of the whole population of England)⁴
- an estimated 1.2 million people live in rural Scotland (23%)⁵
- 1 million people live in rural Wales (34%, and 1 in 7 Welsh people live in more remote rural areas)
- two-thirds of a million live in rural parts of Northern Ireland (36%)⁶

Add them all together, and the rural population of the UK is c.50% bigger than that of Greater London.

It is this rural population and rural geography that I focus on. My starting point is that a fifth of the population and four fifths of the landmass should not be

² Office for National Statistics: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/products/area-classifications/rural-urban-definition-and-la/rural-urban-definition--england-and-wales-/index.html

³ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/288991/Statistical_Digest_of_Rural_England_2014_March.pdf

⁵ http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/statistics/theme/population/estimates/special-area/urban-rural.html

⁶ Figures for Northern Ireland and Wales from UK-wide Regional Trends 43 2010/11 "Rural and urban areas: comparing lives using rural/urban classifications" Office for National Statistics



considered "niche". This is a substantial audience or potential audience. It is not a negligible part of the community. There are distinct "rural affairs" in which the concerns and lives of rural people can be quite different from "urban" or "metropolitan" communities. Equally, there are many issues rural people have in common with the towns and cities, and many events in the countryside that people in urban areas feel deeply about, and where interdependence of urban and rural has huge impact.

So, this review is not exclusively about rural affairs for rural communities. It must appeal to and reflect the realities of the people who live and work in the countryside. It must connect with the reasons people visit rural areas and why they value them. And it should be there for people who otherwise would never give rural UK a thought. It is essential that the BBC's rural affairs output reaches and informs the urban majority.

"The BBC has this public education role – and we need an educated public to have an effective democracy ... so if countryside issues are just for countryside people, that fails to address how city and countryside actually relates to each other."

Julie Nelson, Rural Officer, Church of England

Lives are lived in the countryside

What characterises this segment of the population? There are stereotypical traps: that the countryside is a land of permanently sunlit uplands, charming homes, wealthy incomers, delightful views, and bucolic lifestyles. Alternatively, that the scenic delights conceal lives of extreme hardship, deep generational obligations, high fuel bills, and limited but expensive access to transport, health and education services, training and employment opportunities. Of course, the experience of those who live in the countryside is a great deal more varied, though both these stereotypes can be found.

A snapshot of life in rural areas would reveal that the sparser the rural area, the lower are income levels and the more one comes across poverty⁷. Rural incomes are at least partially dependent on the ability to commute, especially for people who work full-time. Higher transport expenditure accounts for almost half the higher expenditure by rural households than urban ones in the UK.

People who live in rural areas appear to be better off than their urban counterparts on measures such as unemployment and crime, but worse off in terms of affordable housing, and the time and cost of transport.

The population mix is different in rural areas. The 2011 Census for England and Wales shows that they tend to have smaller proportions of young adults, and average or above-average levels of middle-aged people and children aged 10 to 14. There is a pattern of interdependence between rural and urban areas: we see

UK-wide Regional Trends 43 2010/11 "Rural and urban areas: comparing lives using rural/urban classifications" Office for National Statistics



young adults migrating out of the countryside to the towns, and people in their 40s with older children moving in. There are minority ethnic populations living and working in rural areas, but at much lower levels than for urban areas. While immigration to the UK has had a significant impact on some specific rural areas.

Agricultural production provides a foundation for the rural economy. Total income from farming in the UK was £4.7bn in 2012. The total area in agricultural production is 17.2 million hectares, or 70% of the land in the UK. Nearly half a million people work on farms. Farming across the UK is diverse: intensive and extensive, traditional and innovative, and an increasingly popular career option after many years of apparent decline. UK food production is modern, forward looking, and delivers to high production and food standards.

Farming has created almost the whole of the rural landscape we might consider "natural" – there are very few pockets of truly wild, untamed scenery in the UK. Not only is agriculture responsible for shaping the way the UK's land looks, it also helps to shape our own national identities – our sense of who we are.

Rural areas are places of enterprise beyond farming, and play an important role in the economy. In 2010, Gross Value Added⁸ (GVA) from areas of England classified as predominantly or significantly rural amounted to 31% of England's GVA, and was worth £348bn. Sixty per cent of this was attributed to predominantly rural areas.

Rural locations are home to one fifth of the English population, yet support nearly a third of England's businesses. That's around half a million businesses – small and micro-enterprises employing around 70% of workers in rural England, whereas only 15% of the rural workforce is employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing. In Wales, the proportion of businesses based in rural areas increases to almost 50%. Homeworking is high, as is self-employment, compared to national averages. A recent study revealed that economic activity happening within the boundaries of the English National Parks contributes more than £10.4 billion to the economy. That's 140,000 people, employed in 22,500 businesses. This is equivalent to the number employed in the UK aerospace industry.

Rural affairs, rural communities and lives are in some ways identifiable and distinct. The BBC's output should *in part* reflect this, offering rural audiences some points of connection, understanding of and relevance to their everyday experience. News in the countryside, and news from the countryside, are often different. Both matter. The BBC is not broadcasting rural affairs coverage only for the benefit of its rural audience.

The BBC Trust commissioned this review against a background of two big news stories being played out in the countryside. The first of these was the trial cull of badgers. This was a pilot announced by Defra to evaluate the effectiveness (in terms of badger removal), humaneness and safety of a badger cull. It was to be

⁹ Valuing England's National Parks, published by National Parks England, 2013

⁸ Gross Value Added is a standard way of measuring the value of goods and services produced in an area of an economy.



carried out in the areas worst affected by bovine tuberculosis (TB). The second related to two energy issues, wind farms and exploratory drilling for fracking for shale gas (particularly the Balcombe site). These are important stories that affect and are important to urban and rural audiences; High Speed 2 rail would be another. It is absolutely appropriate that they form a big part of the news agenda.

However, badgers and fracking are not front of mind for rural communities, unless they happen to be locally relevant. In Wales, Scotland, Lincolnshire, north-east England, Northern Ireland, for example, badgers don't yet carry bovine tuberculosis, or different control policies for the disease or the animals are in force. The average rural community is more bothered on a day-to-day basis by land-use issues, such as planning and housing — and the economic impact of these policies. Rural populations are more likely to be concerned with access to services like education, health and transport, by flooding and flood defences. This point is important when we look at what constitutes news and current affairs at the different tiers of the BBC, and how they are approached.

In the agricultural community, farming is starting to make reasonable returns. Scottish farming, and that of the uplands across the UK, remains more dependent on CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) support, with fewer opportunities for high-value specialisation, and in some areas farmland is under pressure from urban expansion. Farmers are looking ahead to potentially radical change in agriculture in the next decade or so: the impact of unpredictable weather patterns; whether farming practices need to change to help absorb rain, enhance food security, and/or increase production to meet global demand; a return to the debate about GM (Genetically Modified) crops; conservation and wildlife expectations as CAP reform continues; and sustaining performance on animal welfare and food production standards. All of these issues have an impact on the way the countryside looks, the food offer in our shops, our economic performance, sustainable development and climate change alleviation.

In the wider audience, there is a mix of positions. Some rural viewers and listeners have a deep interest and an informed opinion. Many are occasional (real or virtual) visitors. Others live in oblivion about the countryside. Our national identities have a rural core – the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games introduced a global audience to a UK rooted in its rural and agricultural history.

The English rural idyll is a bucolic scene – the rolling hills and "green and pleasant land" that inspired Vaughan Williams and Thomas Hardy; Scotland's identity is powerfully imbued with the striking landscape and dramatic history of the Highlands. Wales's geography is defined by valleys and mountains – where the tough ancient husbandry of sheep farming has shaped the land and culture – while in Northern Ireland, the dimpled landscape formed by the ice age is

¹⁰ The energy company involved, Cuadrilla, and the Government both stress that the trial drilling at Balcombe was for onshore oil.



patterned by a vivid green patchwork of fields so that today urban centres are only minutes from rich agricultural land.

Senior managers in BBC Scotland told me that they had carried out research before the last election, which identified rural matters as one of the top three issues for voters. Migration between urban and rural across the UK remains active: though many town and city dwellers might have distant or no generational links with the countryside, there are plenty of people with active family ties back into rural areas.

The attraction and interest is evidenced by Countryfile – in the BBC's top three for audience appreciation almost every week, pulling in more viewers than any other factual programme on network television, in a prime Sunday evening slot, with an audience that is 50:50 urban and rural.

Everyone in the UK is in some way a rural consumer. We all eat food from domestic producers, and most of us expect it to be safe, traceable, trustable, affordable and high quality. The countryside and coast is a popular holiday destination, walking, cycling and outdoor pursuits are thriving, and a temporary escape to the countryside is proven to be good for our wellbeing. Many people feel a huge passion for the countryside, and value it for its quieter, slower pace. Even for those people who never visit the countryside, it can be understood and enjoyed as a public good. These are all perspectives on rural that are relevant to the BBC audience.

This isn't to say that every audience member is interested. The qualitative research carried out among urban audiences found there was scant interest in rural matters. Audience members in London in particular had little awareness or connection with rural life. Recent immigrants to the UK often have little experience of or access to our countryside – although they may often have come from rural areas in their home country.

But even for these audiences, the BBC's duty to educate and inform should apply to their rural affairs exposure. It might ignite a new passion. More importantly, every so often, something happens in the countryside that affects us all. Nothing evidences this so well as the recent flooding and storms across many parts of the UK. As the drama of the immediate impact slowly recedes, how equipped are people for the public debate that should follow, about the purpose of the countryside, the relative value we place on town and village, an understanding of catchment management and development consequences, and our willingness to invest in prevention and defence? It is hard to imagine this debate succeeding without a wider understanding of the nature of the countryside and the complicated dependencies between rural and urban existence.



THE JEWELS IN THE CROWN

Under the Royal Charter and Agreement, the BBC has six public purposes it must meet. These include, "sustaining citizenship and civil society" and "representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities". In my view, in order for these to be met in terms of its rural affairs output, it is not enough for the BBC to simply provide high-quality output about rural matters — it must make every endeavour to ensure that output reaches a wide audience.

This is why the BBC's network output is so important – it spans the UK and, by its very existence, material that is given network coverage is deemed to be important to everyone. Within the BBC's network coverage it is BBC1 that is, of course, the flagship public service. It reaches the largest and broadest audiences and has a key role in the public life of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The BBC Trust sets the Service Licence for BBC1. This defines the service's core purpose:

BBC One's remit is to be the BBC's most popular mixed-genre television service across the UK, offering a wide range of high quality programmes. It should be the BBC's primary outlet for major UK and international events and it should reflect the whole of the UK in its output. A very high proportion of its programmes should be original productions.

In summary:

- Countryfile, Farming Today and The Archers are the BBC's rural gems.
- It is vital that impartial coverage of rural affairs reaches BBC1's audience.
- Countryfile's huge success proves the demand for rural affairs content.
- As BBC1's only specialist rural output, Countryfile bears a high burden.
- Radio 4 is home to almost all the BBC's network radio output specifically about rural affairs.
- Farming Today produces excellent content and is trusted by its audience.
- The knowledge and skills held by the Farming Today and Countryfile teams could be shared more broadly – to improve network output.
- The Archers remains hugely popular and its audience, rural and urban, hold it to be a fair and accurate reflection of farming and rural affairs.
- Radio 4 and BBC2 carry a commendably varied rural schedule.
- There are good examples of other programmes making the effort to connect rurally.

There are three flagship rural programmes on network BBC, two of which fall within my terms of reference for news, current affairs and factual content. These two are Farming Today and Countryfile. These programmes consistently reflect a broad range of rural issues, their analysis is thoughtful and nuanced, and the range of voices and opinions that are brought to air is impressive.



The third flagship programme was The Archers – as a drama production, it is specifically outside my remit; however, I shall return briefly to it later in this section as it is such a significant strand of the BBC's rural output.

I should also mention Landward, produced by BBC Scotland, which shares many of the positive characteristics of Countryfile and I'll come back to this when I talk about the BBC's output in the devolved nations.

Countryfile

Countryfile is a huge success story for BBC television. It is an excellent programme that brings to a wider audience the way of life in the countryside, as well as reflecting the public's deep appreciation of the landscape and nature, the recreational and economic uses of rural UK.

"Countryfile is spot on for the target audience. It is a very good slot"

Jonathan Young, Editor, The Field magazine

For many years, Countryfile was broadcast on Sunday mornings. After years of lobbying and persuasion, the programme was moved to a prime Sunday evening slot, and extended to a full hour throughout the year. It is almost always in the top three BBC programmes for audience appreciation. It commands a weekly audience of upwards of 6 million, peaking above 9 million – impressive in itself, especially impressive when it is pitched against high budget shows on other channels.

"There's a huge passion for the countryside – I think Countryfile surprised even the BBC with its success."

Mark Hedges, Editor, Country Life magazine

Countryfile is the top performing factual programme on UK television. Interestingly, the audience is split almost equally between people who think of themselves as rural, and those who consider themselves urban. Over half the audience say they watch the show because they are interested in countryside or rural affairs; 25% say they watch to help them escape, relax and enjoy the beauty of the countryside.

Bill Lyons, the Executive Editor, has positioned Countryfile as a magazine show for what matters in the countryside today. It has four elements: a series of reports from a specific rural location, weather, Adam's Farm and investigative reporting. This breadth gives the programme the potential to drive wider rural affairs editorial content, particularly output that would not fit into the existing Countryfile brief.

I heard from programme makers that they had carried out their own audience research, which found that Countryfile was more trusted on impartiality by its audience than BBC News. Audience involvement in the programme is very high,



with tens of thousands of responses to any call put out on the show. Such a high profile and popular programme creates high expectations amongst stakeholders. Their feedback was overall very positive about Countryfile. There was a strong consensus that a prime time BBC1 programme indicated the Corporation's commitment to rural matters.

Tom Heap's investigative slot originates interesting, relevant and accessible rural news stories, and explores them from many different angles. The breadth of this slot is impressive. Here is just a sample from the last year: the risks to farming, landscape and biodiversity from the spread of native invasive species; a strong positioning piece on the choices between town and country that face us as we look to climate change alleviation in the aftermath of the 2014 floods; whether we should label meat from animals slaughtered according to religious law.

These reports demonstrate just how wide the current affairs and news canvas is in rural areas, and evidence the ability to present the issues to a non-expert audience in an information and relevant way.

One subject that Countryfile is willing to tackle is the reality of meat production. For example, recent programmes from Ludlow and Wiltshire began with presenters in the fields caring for livestock, then they were in a butchery handling carcasses, making sausages and bacon, and cooking and eating it. Whilst some respondents to my consultation, as reflected later in this report, might still feel this misses the actual fact that the animal was killed, and thus consider it partial reporting, I think few viewers are looking for live slaughter on Sunday night TV, and both these pieces evidence Countryfile's willingness to present the whole "field to fork" food story.

Having a respected and trusted farmer, Adam Henson, as a presenter on Countryfile is significant. Later in this report, I cover the concerns farmers have that their compassion for their stock is neither understood nor reflected. Adam's Farm on Countryfile does capture this emotional connection that a farmer has for his animals. It has been realistic on animal disease, sending stock to slaughter for animal and population health reasons, and the impact this has on Adam and his family. Executive Editor of Countryfile, Bill Lyons says that "the 'Adam's Farm' feature offers an unparalleled insight into the day to day concerns of farmers, but it combines this with the same editorial rigour and scrutiny as any other part of the programme". This does a lot for people's understanding of modern farming, and is to be commended.

"Countryfile is getting more relevant – Adam makes farming accessible, [and it] caters for special interests"

Fiona White, Community Lincs

In the interviews I conducted with stakeholders, Countryfile was regularly referred to for the significance of its output. This was clear in the qualitative audience research too.



"It is accurate. Each segment that it does there's a lot of work put into it and they cover it very thoroughly"

Rural, Northern Ireland

In particular, loyal Countryfile viewers held it in high regard. The audience research indicated:

Regular viewers felt that Countryfile covered a very broad range of rural issues in the course of a year, which covered all the diverse aspects of rural life, including industry, many of them "serious" and scientific.

There are areas for attention. Countryfile should avoid the periodic slips into anthropomorphism. Every so often, the presenters of location stories give too strong an impression of visiting the countryside, not being of the countryside. This does matter to country people, who don't wish to be treated as a living zoo.

While some stakeholders I spoke to made critical comments about Countryfile's coverage which may have some resonance for the programme, it may equally be the case that the concerns raised were not directly related to Countryfile's output, but reflected a perceived absence of mainstream network programming that would be a better venue for the kind of coverage they sought – the BBC Executive may wish to bear their concerns in mind.

"What doesn't it talk about – it doesn't talk about the shadow side, the dark side of rural community. I can't remember it ever talking about rural poverty and deprivation – has it ever covered mental health issues? One of the big issues in farming is succession and family dynamics and that can be quite gritty and unpleasant. Health and safety too – it's the most dangerous industry and that's too dark a topic to talk about on that kind of programme perhaps."

Julie Nelson, Rural Officer, Church of England

"Countryfile has a massive education role as well. In the past you had CAP, farming issues. Now it sanitises the countryside, gives the view of those who use or visit the countryside rather than those who live and work there..."

Sarah Lee, Head of Policy, The Countryside Alliance

Whilst this selection of comments offers some additional direction for the makers of Countryfile, I want to sound a note of caution. It isn't appropriate or realistic for Countryfile to bear the whole load of editorial breadth and balance of BBC1 rural affairs output: other BBC1 programming needs to support this obligation. This is borne out by some of the commentary from the audience research, for example in Bristol audience members who were more occasional viewers noted a lack of "grittiness" to Countryfile, but also spontaneously volunteered that this is probably not what audience members are "sitting down to watch the programme for" and that it might be a stretch too far for the programme.



Farming Today

Farming Today is the long-standing, specialist, agricultural news and current affairs programme for the BBC at network level, it has been a fixture of the airwaves for more than fifty years. It is broadcast on Radio 4 every weekday at 5.45 a.m. for 15 minutes, immediately before the Today programme. A compilation programme, Farming Today This Week, is produced for Saturdays, broadcast at 6.30 a.m. for just under half an hour, and subsequently repeated by two local radio stations. The Farming Today audience is more eclectic than the title might suggest. As Christine Tacon, a non-executive director of Anglia Farmers and chair of the BBC's England Rural Affairs Committee, put it: "the elite wake up to Farming Today". It reaches an audience in Brussels too and has a weekly listenership of 1 million, with strong appreciation indices.

The content analysis demonstrated that in covering news stories, such as the badger cull, it reached a greater diversity of opinion than the mainstream news bulletins.

... the specialist programme Farming Today accessed a wider range of opinion on the badger culling issue than mainstream news bulletins.

Content Analysis, Loughborough University

Consistently, among the stakeholders I spoke to and in the audience research, there was a high level of satisfaction for its output. The audience research found:

Farming Today was observed by farmers and other listeners to be thematic over time and have good continuity of coverage of issues such as schools. Stories and information were developed and built on. Farming Today was picked up and listened to by some of the wider audience, particularly keen Radio 4 listeners, but it was chiefly seen as a farming programme.

Farming Today is a highly trusted programme, principally because of the deep expertise of its two presenters, Charlotte Smith and Anna Hill. Over the last couple of years, Farming Today has intensified its hard news focus, enhancing its role as a programme of record.

Over a week, Farming Today has the space to explore a farming or food production subject in detail, capture the nuances, offer breadth of opinion and invite new contributors to participate. This is a boon when many agricultural news stories – and indeed rural news stories – have a slow burn rate. Animal health, plant disease, CAP reform, they very infrequently hit the "hot buttons" for network news. However, their failure to boil up quickly doesn't mean they are inconsequential. Farming Today has given as much attention to the re-emergence of TB in wildlife and cattle as to the specifics of the trial badger cull that so dominated the network news.

The audience research indicated that on Radio 4, listeners were aware that output that was generated on the programme fed into the rest of the network's coverage



 stories were picked up in particular by Today and PM. I also heard from editorial staff who described good examples of Farming Today working with You and Yours to take a story to a wider audience – for example when horse meat was found to be in the human food chain.

At the same time, it has broadened its brief. Look up Farming Today on BBC iPlayer, and you will read that "All rural life is here: daily news of food, farming, the countryside and the environment".

For Farming Today, the implications are significant. On the one hand, it has led to some really strong content, such as a week on rural crime, and another on rural education. These two themed weeks also provided evidence of the programme makers' and presenters' connections with local radio, such as Radio Lincolnshire providing content for the rural crime week.

The content was commendable, informative and was enjoyed by its audience. It didn't appear elsewhere on the network. Both themes were good examples of how network output can capture, weigh and interrogate stories bubbling up from local areas across the UK. The audience research commissioned for this review found listeners were very complimentary about this output:

Regular listeners felt that Farming Today was following rural schools in an exemplary way long term, including not just the issues but some engaging interviews with children. They also commended the thematic coverage of rural hardship over the course of a week...

On the other hand, using Farming Today to address wider rural issues poses a separate problem. None of our consultees who were focussed on the socioeconomic aspects of rural affairs identified Farming Today as a relevant programme for their issues. They don't equate it with "Rural Today". The time at which Farming Today is broadcast, and its name, restrict its audience reach. Its specialist audience for its farming content expect Farming Today to do what it says on the tin.

"With Farming Today, you have got content of good quality but it is missed by a wider audience. It is a missed opportunity." Paul Hamblin, Director, National Parks England

I am unconvinced that this gem of a programme is sufficiently loved and understood in the BBC. I think that its current contribution to fulfilling the BBC's Charter obligations is undervalued and it is expected to do a lot of heavy lifting in terms of meeting the BBC's obligations to reflect rural affairs.

While I consider the programme is implicitly expected to deliver more for the BBC than is reasonable, its potential contribution in bringing expert, accurate and high-quality coverage of farming and food production to a wider audience is overlooked. The impressive knowledge and extensive contacts held by the programme could benefit the BBC's output more widely. One senior editorial



figure described the programme as "isolated" and "a bit of a ghetto". This is very concerning given that the programme is perceived by many in the BBC and outside to be at the heart of rural affairs coverage.

It seems strange to me that the knowledge and experience within Farming Today, which has two expert presenters and a programme team with considerable TV experience, does not seem to feed into television output. For example, the conclusion of the last round of CAP reform was presented on the network news not by the experienced journalists from Farming Today, but by the BBC's environment correspondent.

The Archers

It proved impossible to ask any audience or stakeholder about the BBC's rural affairs coverage without discussing the significance of The Archers, a programme which now as always arouses deep passion in its listeners. However, The Archers was specifically excluded from my remit, as it is not a current affairs or factual programme.¹¹

Of course, The Archers *is* a daily radio soap opera. It delights (and irritates) its audience with its character story lines. But I think The Archers must be understood as more than a drama. It sets a rural pulse twice a day, six days a week on BBC Radio 4. It plays an important role in reflecting rural events that might be "too slow growing" for the mainstream news programmes – a specific nod to The Archers that I heard from many factual and current affairs programme makers. The history of The Archers influences a lot of its audience to hear it as more accurate and authoritative than they might expect in a conventional drama programme. The fact that every episode credits the agricultural story adviser, himself a stalwart of the rural affairs team and Farming Today, adds to the sense that there is a level of authentic reporting embedded in The Archers.

The Archers sends an important message about the significance to the BBC of the lives that are lived in rural areas – and it demonstrates the BBC's understanding of the realities of everyday rural lives. Its audience perspective creates additional demands on its creators to be accurate and authentic.

Other factual and current affairs programmes

"Countryfile, Lambing Live, Springwatch all of those things which take in green and pleasant lands. I don't think I have ever been as aware of big blockbuster rural hits like those. In terms of network representation there is probably more going on than I can remember."

Peter Salmon, Director, England

The visibility of rural UK on BBC2 and Radio 4 is commendable. That the stable of Radio 4 rural programmes is almost unchanged in the last decade speaks strongly

¹¹ The Archers was first broadcast as a trial programme in 1950 and formed part of network coverage from 1951; it was intended to promote good agricultural practice.



of there being a defined area of rural programming of high quality, and commanding audience interest and loyalty. Costing the Earth, when it covers rural issues, is thorough, surfaces fresh content and covers a broad perspective. Ramblings, On Your Farm, Open Country all offer an insight into human stories in the countryside in quietly enjoyable ways.

The Food Programme is beyond a rural affairs programme mixing an investigative heritage with a more lifestyle approach – but regularly capturing dimensions of food production, distribution and sales. It definitely has superb expertise on food, and I think could connect up more consistently with Farming Today. Given the lack of rural awareness amongst urban audiences, this programme could provide a channel for the BBC to secure new audiences for its rural affairs output.

"On BBC 2 the audience like being in the country. There is no question about that. We have a lot of programming that is not set in towns or is set in small country towns. If they don't live there themselves they like to be engaged with it, visit and watch it."

Janice Hadlow, former Controller, BBC2

BBC2 offers a lot of content based in the countryside, or about rural UK. Coast is valued as an informative programme about the landscape, and how it was shaped from ancient times to the present day, and the lives lived on the UK's coast.

The question of "tone" in how rural lives were portrayed did come up in discussions with stakeholders, and in the audience research there was a concern that the BBC overall didn't always reflect the farmer's emotional connection with livestock and land. Some BBC2 programmes definitely have the feel of "visiting" the countryside, but in Lambing Live, a Year in the Life of the Cow, and Harvest the channel offered accessible but accurate portrayals of farming, which help balance out the "escape to the country" or "quaintly old fashioned" subtext elsewhere.

"the whole of the British sheep flock is born within a very set time and it is still done in quite a traditional way... For rural farming communities, it is a crucial part of their year. It felt to me like a national event that many would not be aware of ... a good corrective to the rural idyll. We followed them for a number of months to see the hardships and pressures of that life"

Janice Hadlow, former Controller, BBC2

One element of BBC2 output that isn't part of the rural affairs programme community, but was very much viewed as rural content by audience and stakeholder alike, are the "Watches". Autumnwatch, Winterwatch and Springwatch play an important role in bringing people back into contact with the natural world, and generate a huge audience response. Several stakeholders I spoke with felt that more could be done to explain cause and consequence in the relationship between wildlife and the human impact on the environment, and that this would enrich the programmes and audience understanding.



"I watch Springwatch and I love the eye-catching wildlife ... but it's always begging questions about why some of the things are happening. What are the broader forces at work that create the situations that Springwatch describes, such as climate change or agricultural intensification?"

Patrick Begg, Rural Enterprise Director, The National Trust

Some general current affairs and factual programmes are notable for the effort they make to connect with a rural audience. Any Questions? is particularly good at broadcasting from rural locations, in front of a rural audience, and thus having the opportunity to reflect how significant news stories are approached within rural communities. The programme has also started developing local radio tie-ins in the area it is broadcast, where the local station does a follow-up programme exploring the issues raised in more detail with its own audience, an excellent approach. Any Questions? has a track record of inviting rural-based contributors, although this could be extended – it was notable how few of our consultees had been approached to be on Any Questions? or to suggest panellists, for example. Its sister programme on the BBC, Question Time, is a little more restricted because it has to find a venue that will work for television, but perhaps it could follow the lead of Any Questions by being more visible in rural or market town locations. During the audience research, Question Time was broadcast from Boston, Lincolnshire. This programme received great praise for the authenticity of voice this brought – local dwellers in the studio audience (perceived to have a big voice on this programme) were heard being very positive about Eastern European rural migrant workers immigration which the audience members elsewhere (Bristol, Cornwall) said was unstereotypical:

"It was fascinating, what mostly impressed me was the fact that the audience were very pro the foreign workers. That's not the impression that the newspapers give"

Audience member, Bristol

Gardeners' Question Time and Songs of Praise are regularly broadcast from rural areas. Diverse output like Poetry Please and even Radio 4's 6.30pm comedy slot can have a rural element – Mark Steel's in Town visited Tobermory on the Isle of Mull, in an edition that was flagged up by one Scottish stakeholder, who said it "got under our skin" and noted it was well researched, and funny but not patronising.



CONTROVERSY, CONFLICT, REALITY

A specific requirement of this review is to consider how the BBC handles controversial events in the countryside. Conflict and controversy were themes that featured strongly in audience research and stakeholder discussions.

In summary:

- The BBC's coverage of the badger cull, fracking and wind power/rural planning was broadly impartial and accurate.
- There was no evidence of political bias in coverage of controversial issues, but the current rural controversies mostly aren't very party political.
- Coverage can create an impression that the countryside is a place of conflict and polarisation.
- There is a tendency towards a binary approach to issues rather than seeking a broad spectrum of voices.
- A good deal of the coverage, particularly of fracking, was protest driven.
- The visual balance of pieces can lead to unintended bias. The content analysis indicated that images of badgers and protestors were dominant in coverage of the badger cull and fracking, respectively.
- The emotional impact of pieces was perceived to lead to unintended bias in how the audience perceives a story.
- The audience want more explanation and context from people they believe are credible experts, especially scientists. They seek better explanation of contributors' credentials.
- Celebrity contributions on controversial subjects were unwelcome. The audience found it irritating and perplexing.
- Concentrating on two extremes a rose-tinted view or extreme hardship was felt to obscure the gritty realities of rural life.
- Some people, particularly in rural areas, detected a tendency for the BBC to define what is controversial through a metropolitan prism.

During the period of this review, there were two significant, controversial, stories that had an impact on rural lives – fracking and the badger cull, and the content analysis used purposive sampling¹² to assess coverage of these subjects. The content analysis carried out for the BBC Trust by Loughborough University included detailed analysis of the BBC's coverage of these stories and, in addition,

¹² In this instance, this sampling technique meant a range of output was considered that was not randomly selected. This was deemed necessary to include the most relevant output – for example, because of the geographical area it related to and the time period that was considered.



coverage of wind farms/rural planning. Loughborough University assessed whether the BBC's approach to and output about these controversial subjects was impartial. In carrying out its analysis its principal consideration was whether the BBC's coverage "reflected a breadth and diversity of opinion across output". Given the news flow during the sample period, the majority of the analysis concerned fracking and bovine TB/badger culling. I also include in this chapter other activities in the countryside that tend to be approached as controversies by the BBC.

The content analysis found no systematic failure in regard to any of these topics – however, its analysis has highlighted a number of areas that concerned me, and the audience research too has raised issues that I believe the BBC needs to address.

Binary and conflict-led reporting skews the audience's impression of rural areas

The countryside may be a place where conflicts are played out but these conflicts aren't the norm in rural areas, or the most important issues for rural communities. Neither the badger cull nor fracking dominates the thoughts of many rural people unless they are happening close to home, but they are definitely important issues for the BBC to examine.

The controversies covered by the BBC during this review period weren't party political, and weren't presented in those terms by the BBC.¹³ Political parties rarely featured in the coverage. The content analysis suggests that for the badger cull, for example, during the sample period only around 5% of appearances were party political sources. Politicians principally appeared as representatives of political office – in this case around 17% of appearances represented the UK government.

Many of our consultees from rural areas felt very strongly that when the countryside featured in news or current affairs, it was unduly presented as a place of conflict. They wanted more context, reality and explanation of the relevance of an issue in and to a rural setting. Audiences, both rural and urban, also indicated they wanted more context to rural output. The challenge is that news reports must crystallise what can be a complex story in a short space of time and this may not always be realistic. However, I think that BBC Executives need to be mindful that, when boiling a story down to its essential parts, it is not reduced so that it is little more than a simplistic row.

There is a tendency across all media, including the BBC, to have the news story led by the protest and to be reactive: audiences feel this gets in the way of understanding the issues and it can make reporting quite repetitive.

¹³ For more detail see Tables 1.5, 1.15 and 1.25 in *Rural Areas in the UK Impartiality Review: A Content Analysis for the BBC Trust.* Loughborough University, Communication Research Centre.



"Our criticism [...is...] in terms of the day to day management of the countryside, versus the pressure group approach. ...We recognise the day to day management of the countryside makes less exciting TV – but that means that what tends to get portrayed is about contention. To the urban viewer it can seem as if the overall impression of what's going on in the countryside is about disputes."

Tim Baynes, Moorland Group Director, Scottish Land and Estates

"The danger is that it is a more exciting story if there is an argument going on."

Dawn Varley, Director of Fundraising and Campaigns, League Against Cruel Sports

Lives in the countryside are affected by conflict-based reporting. I spoke with representatives of Gypsies and Travellers who live in rural areas about their experience. They felt strongly that BBC news (in common with other media) was drawn to report the conflict and did not seek out the more measured voice. They felt this kind of reporting had the effect of raising tensions further.

"Local groups are very well organised to lobby against travellers... Those groups don't necessarily represent the rest of the community – just a section of it – but are portrayed as if they represent everyone."

Spokesperson, Traveller Movement

To an undue extent, rural issues under examination by the BBC are presented as polarised rather than a "wagon wheel" of views.¹⁴ This binary, conflict-based approach to output emerged consistently as a finding in the content analysis, the stakeholder interviews and the audience research.

"There is too much of a tendency to go to the oppositional viewpoints."

Julia Marley, Policy Committee Member and Craven Branch Chair,

Campaign to Protect Rural England

The content analysis suggests this binary tendency can be seen in the news coverage of the fracking and badger/bovine TB stories. Where fracking is concerned, the analysis suggests that on the one side are the businesses (representing nearly 30% of appearances) supported by the UK Government (around 10%) exploring the possibilities afforded by fracking and, on the other, various environmental cause groups representing just over 25%. Citizens – most of which were members of the general public – accounted for around 13%. Coverage tended to be precipitated by one or other of these parties – 30% by a public demonstration or protest and around 40% by a Government or business announcement or initiative.

¹⁵ For more <u>detail see Tables 1.5 and 1.15 Ibid.</u>

¹⁴ For more detail see Tables 1.5, 1.15 and 1.25 in *Rural Areas in the UK Impartiality Review: A Content Analysis for the BBC Trust.* Loughborough University, Communication Research Centre.



The rural audience feel that more planning and continuity of reporting of big issues, across news, factual and current affairs, would help build a wider understanding. The BBC farming programmes and Countryfile do this well, deploying their specialist knowledge to good effect.

"Many of these issues are very complex. The time is very limited in the news, there is a danger you end up with polarised positions. I don't think it helps if there are not specialist rural correspondents able to draw on particular knowledge and expertise. Sometimes it almost appears as foreign news."

Professor Michael Woods, University of Aberystwyth

Bovine TB and badgers: getting the balance right

There was clear evidence and feedback that the BBC's journalists and output producers set out to cover the bovine TB crisis and the trial badger cull in an impartial way. They aimed to do this by giving different opinions due weight and also carrying a breadth of opinion. Aspects such as the growing badger population, bovine TB, the impact on dairy herds and farming families, the economic consequences, were all included in different programmes or news bulletins.

Overall, audiences and stakeholders thought the BBC did a good job on a difficult and complex on-going story. The audience research, reviewing a BBC reporter trawling the countryside on the first night of the cull was felt by rural dwellers in the audience research groups to have put together a truthful picture of the standoff and slight degree of intimidation between local farmers and protestors.

There were, however, some caveats. In almost all our discussions with stakeholders – notwithstanding their position on the issue – the use of badger images during the cull came up.

"Badgers – the first thing you see are cute badgers. The argument has already gone. Immediately the impression is formed."

Julia Marley, Policy Committee Member and Craven Branch Chair, Campaign to Protect Rural England

The predominant use of images of healthy badgers to open or conclude a report was felt to weight the argument in favour of the anti-cull lobby. People asked where were the pictures of sick badgers with TB, or infected cows being shot, or a distraught farming family coming to terms with the loss of their animals. To some people, it felt like the images asked "Which do you like most: the cow or the badger?"

The audience research also picked up criticism of the number of "fluffy badgers" in pictures and said it was never going to result in an impartial impression in their opinion.



"It seems like again the farmer was nearly the villain, because he was wanting to cull the badgers"

Audience Research, Northern Ireland

"What about the poor cows?"

Audience Research, Cornwall

"Where is the farmer's point of view and the cow?"

Audience Research, Bristol

Even on the BBC website, the story was introduced by photographs and a drawing of a badger. The content analysis bore out this finding. Badgers were by far the most dominant visual motif in coverage, accounting for more than 50% of coded visuals in BBC and non BBC coverage. By contrast, cows and cattle had far less prominence. The wider point about undue focus on conflict in the countryside was also borne out by the 25% presence of images of protestors.¹⁶

Images are a clear element of output that can affect impartiality. They visualise the controversy and, in this instance, stakeholders I spoke to considered they influenced how the audience identified the principal victims.

The story would have looked very different ... had images of cows sick with TB or animals slaughtered as a preventative measure achieved greater media prominence, and unwitting, healthy looking badgers, less.

Content Analysis, Loughborough

The emotional impact of the story was also significant to the audience. The emotional response of protestors was readily captured by reporters, but the same was not the case for farmers. Oxygen's audience research indicated that the audience did not think the BBC always understood the emotional impact of stories it was reporting on:

...rural dwellers felt that the BBC badger culling coverage shown was definitely setting out to be impartial in terms of time given, weight and choice of interviewees.

However, some did not feel it had achieved impartiality in terms of the final emotional balance in the pieces shown. They felt that the emotions of protestors and the animal rights side were clearly expressed and delineated, but the emotion of farmers was not similarly brought to life.

Audience Research, Oxygen Brand Consulting

I do not underestimate the difficulty of capturing the farmer's emotional response to this situation – and will come back to this subject more broadly later in the report – but I noted that one rural audience member clearly identified this was a point that needed to be addressed. He called for:

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¹⁶ For more detail see Table 1.45 in *Rural Areas in the UK Impartiality Review: A Content Analysis for the BBC Trust.* Loughborough University, Communication Research Centre.



"...more of the impact of what it actually does to a family farm, the financial impact, the stress, what it is to build up a herd of cattle you know, to let the public see that we do care about our animals. It's not just about money, it's the loss of those animals you've bred for years..."

Rural, Northern Ireland

Across the output, content like Adam's Farm on Countryfile have captured the devastation to farmers of bovine TB, but this was not felt to be present in the news reports.

The devastating impact of bovine TB has been an ongoing issue for farmers in some rural areas for years. The trial badger cull was of course controversial and it was beset with uncertainty – in terms of exactly where it was happening, how it was progressing and ultimately whether it was likely to be successful. I can see that it is inevitable that news judgments will be drawn towards contentious stories and will want to try to fill in the details that were not known about the progression of the badger cull. However, I was concerned that the output needed to address, alongside each day's news line, the scientific and agricultural context that lay behind the story. This included the enormous impact on farmers and cattle of bovine TB and a proper explanation of the scientific knowledge about the spread of the disease.

Respondents found it very difficult and confusing to access and make judgments on this issue and there was consistent feedback that without answering one very basic question audiences could not even start to engage with the debate. "Do badgers spread TB?" was the question most respondents wanted to be answered in news coverage.

Audience Research, Oxygen Brand Consulting

In the audience research on badger culling, the participants felt adrift in the news coverage unless they had an answer to the simple basic question: "Do badgers spread TB?" This was a question asked by audiences in rural and urban areas alike – they felt unable to form a view on the cull without knowing this, and wanted to hear from authoritative sources on it. They asked for more scientists or other identifiable experts; the audience research also identified that viewers and listeners needed the expertise of a contributor to be carefully signposted for them. The gap in knowledge was further highlighted by another finding in the audience research: no-one in the group of participants who were under 24 even knew what TB was.

The audiences found there wasn't always enough context for them to form an accurate understanding of the story. The audience research found that there was a shift in the BBC's clarity of reporting throughout the day. Audiences to breakfast and daytime output found that essential background information was included in output – BBC Breakfast and Radio 2's Jeremy Vine programme were particularly mentioned for the breadth and clarity of their coverage. But during the evening, output became progressively more difficult for audiences to follow. The BBC's



main news bulletins are very significant outlets for information – and the pressure on editorial staff to concentrate a good deal of information into a short time is high. But, given that few people in the research were motivated to follow up reports on BBC Online or elsewhere, providing enough context in the news report is key.

The role of protest groups again was an issue for the audience. The content analysis found that the single biggest trigger for coverage of the badger cull was an announcement or an initiative by the UK government. This accounted for 48%. The second biggest trigger for coverage was protests against the culls, at around $10\%.^{17}$ The theme of the impact of the cull on farmers and communities accounted for nearly 8% of network news bulletin output on the subject, while in the devolved nations and regions there was almost no coverage of this theme and it accounted for less than 1% of output on this subject during the content analysis sample period. According to the audience research, the focus on protest did not bring clarity to the story.

Fracking coverage

Few of the stakeholders I consulted had much to say about the fracking demonstrations taking place in the village of Balcombe during the course of this review. They agreed fracking would have consequences in the countryside, but thought the story was essentially one about the UK's future energy policy: it just happened to be played out against a rural setting. Coverage was prompted by and focussed on the conflict between environmental activists and energy businesses about the desirability of fracking.

"Costing the Earth produced a very good programme about fracking a few years ago — well before all the fuss — but could we get it out there?... Until the protests started so the BBC ends up reporting the protests rather than the issue."

Andrew Thorman, former Head of BBC Rural Affairs

In the coverage sampled in the content analysis, protestor groups dominated, with more air-time than coverage of the impact of fracking, and way beyond the airtime given to the benefits of fracking. One programme that did provide a broader perspective was the Jeremy Vine Show on Radio 2. This carried 18 pieces on fracking in our sample period, making space for different, including local, voices to talk about the bigger picture. Over half the appearances and almost 40% of the airtime was given to citizens. Over half the appearances and almost 40% of the airtime was given to citizens.

In covering the fracking story, there are many angles to explore: the science of the potential benefits and risks involved; the employment impact; where the

¹⁷ For more detail see Table 1.4 in *Rural Areas in the UK Impartiality Review: A Content Analysis for the BBC Trust.* Loughborough University, Communication Research Centre.

¹⁸ For more detail see Table 1.44 Ibid.

¹⁹ For more detail see Table 1.18 Ibid.

²⁰ For more detail see Table 1.19 Ibid.



financial benefit would be felt; what fracking would do for future energy needs and prices. Whilst these aspects were covered at some point, and there was more explanation of impacts and benefits than in the badger cull coverage, still the overwhelming focus was on the Balcombe protests.²¹

The content analysis indicated that the single biggest trigger for news coverage was "public demonstration/protest", it found:

Overall the fracking story was presented as a conflict between environmental activists who were in turn critical of those businesses with interests in this form of energy source. Expert opinion was used to adjudicate upon the likely consequences of measures.

Content Analysis, Loughborough University

The content analysis also found that the most frequently featured visual element of a report were protests and demonstrations, accounting for over 40% in BBC output.²² Audiences too felt – as they had done in regard to the badger cull coverage – that scientific input would have been more valuable here.

In the news coverage both of fracking and badger culling, a high proportion of the contributions were felt to come from environmental campaigners, celebrities, or pressure groups.

Respondents wanted environmental scientists to be given more of a voice in the fracking coverage. ... They felt they had seen many opinions and heard many fears expressed but they had not had a conclusive answer on what the actual environmental effects would be on people living near a fracking site.

This is what they wanted to hear, and they wanted to hear it from a source which they considered scientifically credible.

Audience Research, Oxygen Brand Consulting

One of the irritants for audiences in our research and consultations was the appearance of celebrities when there was conflict in the countryside. The content analysis indicated that in both the badger cull and fracking coverage, a disproportionate amount of time was given to the views of celebrities. The content analysis on badgers evidenced this. The proportion of BBC items featuring celebrities was low (4%) but their proportion of quotation time is comparatively high (12%).²³ The researchers commented: "This testifies to the small number yet relatively lengthy appearances by a select number of famous people." The same was also true of the coverage of fracking where the proportion of items with celebrities was 1% but their proportion of quotation time was 5%.

²¹ For more detail see Table 1.49 Ibid.

 $^{^{\}rm 22}$ For more detail see Table 1.50 Ibid.

²³ For more detail see Tables 1.7 and 1.18 Ibid.



The audiences we spoke to found the use of celebrities as part of the protestor voice distasteful – albeit that, in the media generally, it may well be that the involvement of celebrities influences news judgments and prompts further coverage.

Respondents on the whole disliked the use of protestors, particularly celebrities to put across arguments, as in their minds these people had little credibility and had "opinions" rather than impartial scientific evidence. They asked for more "scientists".

Audience Research, Oxygen Brand Consulting

While the use of celebrities runs the risk of exacerbating the binary presentation of an issue, more importantly, audiences simply couldn't understand why a celebrity should be treated as an authority, and if not an authority, why their voice was being given weight. The CPRE²⁴ identified that too much emphasis was given to celebrity viewpoints, and it was a widely supported view when I spoke with a market-town audience in East Yorkshire in advance of an Any Questions? recording.

It isn't all sunlit uplands – or bleeding hearts

The binary reporting concern arises again in comments about the BBC's portrayal of rural life more generally. In the audience research, people who lived in rural areas felt that the media generally tended to portray a simplistic picture of their lives – it was either an idyll, an "Escape to the Country" where people dipped in and out of charming thatched lives – David Inman from the Rural Services Network felt that the BBC's network coverage was a bit "glossy and rose tinted" or, conversely, repeatedly exaggerated the hardships in certain communities which had gained a reputation for being "deprived".

In the audience research, Welsh respondents said they lived in an area which got a lot of documentary attention and in their opinion the media sought out unflattering angles and interviewees because they had come to the area to cover a certain type of story: "there are a lot of nice houses in the village but they only pick out the worst looking ones ... and the worst people!"

These comments from audience members were not about BBC output specifically, but about how in general they felt the countryside was portrayed in the media:

"When you see rural life on the media everything all seems happy ever after, if you know what I mean. They don't see the farmer stuck down the field at ten o'clock at night with the tractor broken down you know, or machinery broken down and they have to get it going the next day. Working in the shed half the night to get it going so you can make your living"

Rural, Northern Ireland

²⁴ Campaign to Protect Rural England



"Country Living magazine – move to the country, buy a house for £750,000 and run an Alpaca farm – simples!"

Rural, Cumbria

Farmers also criticised this in the audience research: there was felt to be a tendency by all media, not just the BBC, to want to have a happy or "feelgood" ending to rural stories. This is summed up in the comments on a piece of audience stimulus covering snow on Arran which was seen as exemplary in every other way, but which ended with a shot of a lamb in front of an Aga in Yorkshire.

"Arran lost half its sheep ... I think it was accurate with what it did but it could have done more"

Audience member, Skye

"I know of a farmer pretty close, his sheep had their bodies, but he ended up cutting their throats because the ewes would never eat again, their mind was gone with starvation"

Audience member, Northern Ireland

Some of the stakeholders I spoke to felt there was a squeamishness in the BBC's reporting, a desire to avoid the gritty realities of life.

"You've got to show how food comes about — what the realities of life are... The BBC is incredibly squeamish about the countryside... Everything... [is]... creating a Panglossian world about the countryside that isn't real or true and does the countryside a real disservice in the process."

Mark Hedges, Editor, Country Life

The success of programmes including Countryfile, Springwatch and Lambing Live show the clear appetite for rural output – the mainstream audience is ready and willing to be engaged. Those who took part in the audience research were keen to have more information too. There is great programming to be made in the sharp end of food production and land management and the BBC shouldn't shy away from this.

"There is not one programme which has addressed the question of predators in an honest way – grey squirrel, mink, fox, buzzard, red kite, sparrowhawk. Declining are water voles, grey partridge, curlew, lapwing, golden plover, wood warbler."

Robin Page, farmer and Chairman of the Countryside Restoration Trust

Programmes like Springwatch and Autumnwatch can sometimes be silent on how badgers have been partly responsible for the fall in hedgehog or bee numbers, or the action to eradicate wild mink in the Scottish Islands. It may well be that this kind of celebratory output is not the place for "nature red in tooth and claw". But there should be impartiality in reporting on wildlife.



If the BBC sometimes ignores the necessities and benefits of farming, land management and food production in its mainstream output, if it does not clearly set out the relationships between species, not only will audiences be less well informed, but a chunk of the rural audience will feel ignored and misunderstood. Equally, those on the production and management side quietly acknowledge that they need to front up to audiences about modern farming techniques, and not pander to bygone impressions about farming.

Achieving balance about country sports

Issues around how land is managed and where land management overlaps with traditional country pursuits – fishing, shooting, hunting – were frequently raw nerves in the course of this review. Rural audiences and many of the stakeholders I spoke to felt there was a gulf in understanding between the BBC and a significant segment of the rural community.

I heard from some rural people, not only advocacy groups, that the BBC had a position on traditional pursuits as controversial or questionable. They felt this reflected a lack of understanding, squeamishness, a metropolitan perspective on the realities of country life, the relationship between humans, environment, wildlife. This isn't universal, for example Saturday Kitchen featuring game cookery was a highlighted positive and I noted that on the "Glorious Twelfth" (12 August 2013) BBC Scotland carried a news report about the significance to its national economy of grouse shooting.

However, it's an area of tension and deep conviction. Millions of people across the country – from all walks of life – take part in activities such as shooting or angling, including lots who live in towns and cities. Many of these people fervently believe that, through their pastime, they make a significant contribution to the natural environment. In England, an estimated two million hectares of land are actively managed for conservation as a result of shooting, and almost 500,000 people a year shoot live quarry. These activities are legal and pervasive across the countryside. They are not an exclusive preserve of the rich or the landowner.

Many people – including lots in rural areas – actively dislike the thought of pursuing birds or animals whether for food or pest control, much less for the enjoyment of sport. Country sports raise a mix of antipathy and bewilderment in many non-participants. Campaign groups like the League Against Cruel Sports through to institutions like the National Trust and the RSPB have positions on hunting, shooting, and occasionally angling.

Activities that are uncontroversial, part of everyday life for many in the countryside can become elevated to "news" stories and put into the limelight on 12 August and Boxing Day. Some stakeholders I spoke to thought that these activities became spotlighted because of the opportunity to portray conflict and drama – giving an unfair representation of the activity.



"It really frustrates me that issues like hunting often dominate coverage – for example, there'll be not much on rural affairs all year and then at Christmas a sudden focus on the red coats and the beagles and a spokesman from the Countryside Alliance will be on the telly. This just reinforces the sense of the media portraying rural life as slightly old fashioned and the countryside as a place which is out of touch. In reality, rural communities care far more about benefits, housing, the pressures of an ageing population, young people leaving, environmental degradation and the difficulties of transport – all stuff that looks and feels much more relevant to universal national concerns."

Patrick Begg, Rural Enterprise Director, The National Trust

"The shoot that I went to on Saturday was simply a bunch of nice, normal people taking part in an activity which, to them, is commonplace. Getting the message across that our activity is a regular, uncontroversial one is, to a certain extent, our responsibility as members of the specialist shooting press, but equally I would like an understanding from the programme makers at the BBC that those involved in fieldsports reflect one element of the diversity the BBC is obliged to represent. I think that doesn't happen currently. Gameshooting, for example, is often portrayed as an obscure, arcane or weird activity. Given that half a million people in the UK are regularly involved, it's quite clear that portrayal is wrong."

Alastair Balmain, Editor, Shooting Times magazine

The Controller of the English Regions, David Holdsworth, is the editorial head of the BBC's regional TV output and local radio stations – based in Birmingham he has a keen sense that this is an area where the BBC should pay more attention:

"We should be doing more to get both sides to understand each other – the more we shed a light on each other – that sense in the countryside, that people don't understand how we think about wildlife – that's a legitimate editorial topic."

David Holdsworth, Controller, English Regions

It's not for the BBC to promote or take a position in the debate on field sports. However, from time to time audiences should have an opportunity to understand it and form their own view. I heard from stakeholders who felt strongly that their work, managing the uplands, was a significant contribution to the quality of the UK landscape and to biodiversity – yet felt that this was neither understood nor reflected by the BBC. They were suspicious that the BBC had scant empathy for or interest in the perspectives of rural landowners.

"It's very easy to criticise landowners without having to take responsibility for the outcome – everyone has their own view of how land should be managed. If those criticisms are to be aired, that must be matched by giving landowners an equal platform to respond in sufficient detail that the viewers can understand the complexities of what they do."

Tim Baynes, Moorland Group Director, Scottish Land and Estates



One wide point of agreement was that more, non-stereotypical people, should be heard talking about their participation. In this, the BBC needs help from organisations and individuals involved and, where they are nervous about the consequences of speaking out, to consider the merits of protecting their identity.

Aside from the specific field sports angle, I think this issue about country people's relationship with wildlife will become more acute: possible Government action on the hunting ban; issues of population balance or control of grey squirrels, mink, deer; the re-wilding argument and discussions about reintroducing once-native species. All these have dimensions of the relationship between man and wildlife in the countryside.



REFLECTING RURAL IN NETWORK OUTPUT AND NEWS

People living in urban areas are content with the amount and depth of coverage of rural issues by the BBC's network coverage, if they give it much thought at all. But what about that 20% of the population living in the countryside: do they see their concerns reflected at network level, are rural stories making it to the BBC's main news bulletins level, is a rural understanding being applied to network coverage?

For audiences in England, the network news and current affairs output from the BBC feels as if it is dominated by London and Westminster. This isn't surprising, given the political, economic and cultural weight of the capital. However, there is a concern about an unduly metropolitan filter on what is news. There's also a query about how the BBC senses the pulse of England beyond the South-East — how it understands peoples' lives and experiences and how it reflects them in the network news and current affairs output.

In summary:

- Audiences expect to find rural coverage on the BBC, more than any other media organisation.
- Audiences felt the BBC "tried" to be impartial but they did consider the BBC to be urban in its approach.
- In England, the news and current affairs agenda is dominated by London and Westminster, where rural affairs have a low profile. This can influence editorial judgments away from rural news stories.
- Editorial judgments could be better informed about rural affairs and their wider implications and consequences.
- Rural affairs policies are almost entirely determined at the devolved level, but at network level, there was little reflection of this.
- The BBC fails sufficiently to consider issues of general concern –
 education, health, employment from a rural perspective. This was
 more effectively done in the devolved nations and by the indigenous
 minority language services.
- People in rural and urban areas have low expectations of how much rural affairs news they might find on the BBC and they don't easily discover it.
- There was little signposting of more in-depth or rural-specific coverage of news online.
- Online rural content was patchy and could be hard to find.



Audiences expect rural content and understanding

"We are at our best when we reflect the audience and the nation back to itself. We actually see a moral purpose in that. If we take money from everyone we have to give something back to people as much as we can."

Danny Cohen, Director of Television

We expect licence fee payers to demand high standards of the BBC. The audience research found expectations were higher of the BBC than any other media organisation – indeed, it found "universal agreement" that, of all the media organisations, the BBC was expected to cover rural affairs. The audiences understood that, because of the unique way the BBC is funded, it had a particular obligation to reflect all UK groups and audiences in its output. The BBC was also the broadcaster identified with the programmes that audiences already knew – The Archers, Countryfile and Farming Today – and that history of rural output shaped their expectations.

When audiences were asked about the impartiality of the BBC's network output, there was a strong view that the BBC "tried" to be extremely impartial in the way journalists behaved and in the way pieces were put together. This was borne out by the content analysis. It noted that, in its network news reporting, it was vanishingly rare for a reporter to deviate from language that was impartial.

I heard unwavering support for the BBC's specialist rural output. Big, ambitious broadcasts such as Harvest and Lambing Live fulfilled a valuable brief in terms of bringing a focus to a particular aspect of rural life. Yet rural audiences in particular felt there were shortcomings in the BBC's day-to-day output: the issues that are significant to people in rural areas were not sufficiently visible or appreciated in day to day output, and when the stories are recognised and reported, there isn't enough understanding brought to them. This resulted in output that rural people felt was unfair to them.

Fran Barnes, a former Deputy Editor at the BBC and now Director of Communications for the National Farmers' Union, vividly put the point about understanding the countryside:

"The issue isn't necessarily with one-off, or specialist, programmes which have dedicated teams doing good research, it's the endemic approach to handling rural affairs in more generalist or news programmes where the reporter or production team may have very little knowledge or experience of the subject. This often means they may report rural stories from their urban perspective which can lead to inaccuracy and bias."

Time and again, in the stakeholder interviews I conducted, I was asked whether the staff reporting on rural affairs had deep – or indeed any – connections with the countryside. Stakeholders considered this affected whether rural affairs were reported, what was reported, and how it was reported. There was a sense that BBC journalists "visited" the countryside, rather than reporting about rural matters



from a position of knowledge. The audience research discerned a difference between programmes: viewers and listeners felt they gained more context and understanding from programmes like Breakfast and Jeremy Vine, than from news programmes later in the daily schedules.

In discussion of the recent floods coverage with the audience at a recording of Any Questions? in Pocklington, East Yorkshire, in March, there was a vocal concern about a perceived metropolitan/southern bias and a lack of understanding in the BBC's reporting. There had been severe floods in the East Riding this winter. They began on the same day as Nelson Mandela died. One audience member referred to that day's BBC1 News at 10pm and commented: "So we didn't get any coverage that day at all."25 This audience segment sensed a network bias towards the South-East, that interest and coverage changed once the Thames Valley was affected and the floods got nearer to London. One audience member put it eloquently: "It changed when the effluent met the affluent." For this audience sample, equally severe or worse floods in the north in the past, affecting many more homes, had got much less attention – the BBC in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire "just doesn't seem to get through" to the BBC nationally. People felt that facts were being missed: for example, farmers can't insure standing crops, so if the land is inundated it means a total loss. "There are farmers in the East Riding something like £160,000 out of pocket because of flooding of agricultural land."

Again, in the audience research, those groups from remote rural areas noted that reporting about rural stories made them feel as if they were out of the ordinary – curiosities that the metropolitan journalists struggled to comprehend, whose ingenuity, interdependence and resilience of their communities was seldom reflected in the BBC's output.

Westminster casts a long shadow

In the content analysis supporting this review, nearly half the output about "hot button" issues came as a result of official or ministerial statements or developments.²⁶ Very few references were made to the devolved responsibilities and policy differences of the national governments in rural affairs. Instances where differences were mentioned were rare – for example in the coverage of fracking during the sample period only 13 examples were found in all BBC coverage – most of these in mainstream news bulletins (11 out of 115 occasions).²⁷ This underlines the extent to which the BBC's network news coverage is framed by the Westminster agenda.

²⁷ For more detail see Tables 1.46 and 1.51 Ibid.

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²⁵ Extreme weather conditions had affected the east coast of Britain on 5 December 2013. These had been the lead item in the BBC1 News at 6pm and had been covered on the BBC News Channel. News of Nelson Mandela's death was released approximately half an hour before that day's edition of the BBC1 News at 10pm came to air and the following news programme focused exclusively on his death in a 'rolling news' format.

26 For more detail see Tables 1.4, 1.14 and 1.24 in *Rural Areas in the UK Impartiality Review: A Content Analysis for the*

BBC Trust. Loughborough University, Communication Research Centre.



"The local BBC Wales and Radio Wales was quite fair and accurate but there was no mention (of rural affairs) from the London based TV or radio" Rural audience member, Wales

It is not surprising that what happens in the UK parliament is reflected in the network news. However, the implications of this for rural affairs coverage are significant because, in Westminster, rural affairs are a pretty low priority, unless there is an extraordinary event or crisis. It's a point that is true of all three main Westminster parties, and is compounded by the low profile of Defra in Whitehall. One senior editorial figure reflected that when he was in the countryside and listened to the BBC's news output, the programmes had a "Westminster, foreign news, slightly 'commentariat' – feel to them, they do feel quite alien if you're sitting in a town of 2000 people in the middle of the countryside".

I was struck by this comment from Bob Carruth, from the NFU in Scotland who is also a member of BBC Scotland's Rural Affairs Committee, when rural affairs emerged in a BBC Scotland survey as one of the top three priorities for the public in the 2011 Scottish elections:

"We were surprised how high up people's list of priorities rural issues came"

Bob Carruth, NFU Scotland

The risks to the BBC in this are akin to its past difficulty over immigration, which wasn't spotted early enough as a rising issue in communities across England and the whole of the UK. My point on rural affairs is similar. There's a "slow burn" to most rural issues. They infrequently rise to a crescendo loud enough for a big national news story, but all the time they might be building towards significant financial, human and environmental consequences.

If the politicians and policy makers are unclear or uncommunicative about the role, value and expectations of the countryside, it is definitely not for the BBC to fill the vacuum. However, the BBC does have an important role to illuminate and investigate the gaps or omissions. Are BBC news editors and journalists probing the political silences? Is the Westminster focus distracting them from spotting what's happening in the English regions? Is the BBC joining the dots to create a network-wide picture, finding out things that those in positions of power and authority do not know themselves, or haven't seen fit to let the public know?

It's also important in this regard to pick up the accuracy of BBC coverage where it applied to devolved matters across the UK²⁸. Most aspects of rural affairs are devolved to the nations of the UK, but in this review I found that network output infrequently explains that rural affairs are devolved. Rather, it gives an impression that the English approach/policy is the UK-wide position. It is rare that rural stories are headline network news, so the sample size was relatively small, but the content analysis bore out that there was very seldom a prompt that rural affairs were devolved matters.

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²⁸ BBC Trust Impartiality Review: BBC Network News And Current Affairs Coverage Of The Four UK Nations, Professor Anthony King, June 2008



A missed opportunity: the floods of winter 2013/14

A look at the BBC's network news coverage of the extreme weather and floods of winter 2013/14 is illustrative.

When the floods began, the BBC news response was largely driven by what was happening in Parliament, and the immediate impact on the countryside and later towns. Once the crisis emerged, the BBC was hard onto it, stuck with it, and deserves credit for being much quicker back to the story than were the politicians. There has been regular follow-up content on a range of programmes across news and current affairs, including Countryfile. The disappointment is that the BBC could have been way ahead of the story here.

Many contributors to this review from June to November 2013, coming from different perspectives, identified land management for flood alleviation, and its consequences for farmland, as a critical and under-reported issue for rural UK. As we have heard in the aftermath, the issue was on the agenda in local fora and council chambers across the country. This wide awareness amongst landowners, NGOs, quangos, farmers, environmentalists, and perhaps even the BBC's own rural specialists, didn't break through into a network news programme, until the heavens had opened and the flood waters had risen.

One BBC staffer put it bluntly: "We'll fly to Greenland to cover glacial retreat, but in our own backyard we don't even notice our own climate change story until the crisis hits." That's rather pointed – and of course, it's not possible to say definitively whether the recent floods were the result of climate change – however, my observation is that news and current affairs output from rural England appears not to be breaking through to national, network level. It's a point reinforced by Ceri Thomas, former Head of News Programmes, BBC News²⁹, who wants "mechanisms to alert us to things which are taking place which are not on our institutional radar".

If the network (or regional) news had made the connections earlier, there would have been a chance to judge whether there was a news story about the increased risks and readiness for extreme events. In turn, the breadth and depth of immediate coverage, the range of opinion heard, could have better informed the audience on this complicated sequence of issues.

"Difficult" but important stories

One area of less dramatic but equally significant rural news, which stakeholders feel the BBC is leaving to Farming Today despite its wide implications, is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

²⁹ Head of News Programmes at the time of the review, now Editor, Panorama



"It does feel like it's an uphill struggle and the most recent example of that is the negotiation over CAP – £3.5bn of public money is being allocated and in any other field there would have been [the BBC's] top political guys stood outside government departments ... the armwrestling with the NFU about how to allocate public money for farming deserved more exposure generally in the media."

Andre Farrar, Media Manager, RSPB

People across the BBC told me this was "too difficult" and "too slow" to present in a newsy way to the audience – although there are some notable exceptions such as David Gregory-Kumar's reports for BBC Midlands Today. I contrast this with the BBC's extensive and excellent coverage of climate change, which is also a slow and difficult issue. Is it really impossible to acquaint audiences with what happens with the 50% of the EU budget devoted to the CAP? On most measures this level of public funding would attract more informed scrutiny for a wide audience. The CAP is a big influence on what the landscape looks like, on what we grow and how we grow it, on environmental measures, and is part of our national food story. It can drive – or stand in the way of – innovation in farming, and rising food prices are going to stay on the agenda for a long time. With a proposed referendum on Europe, the CAP is a material part of the debate on pros and cons.

The rural component in network news

Here, I want to concentrate on how rural affairs and interests are visible in the warp and weft of network output, and particularly network news, outside of the big events.

When considering this output, I asked Loughborough's analysts to look for an indication that output: "properly considers the unique challenges and perspectives of rural people, communities and businesses". There are two dimensions of their findings explored here:

- network news coverage specifically from or about rural communities or issues across the UK
- the reporting of ongoing news themes that affect us all but have different implications in rural areas and urban areas "rural proofing" the news

Rural-led news

Radio 4's Today programme regularly broadcasts content on a wide range of aspects of the countryside. The programme is periodically out and about in the countryside, perhaps helped by the show's length. It offers breadth and different perspectives, for example, covering the Oxford Farming Conference (which attracts Ministers) *and* the parallel "alternative" conference. I am sure that, having spent a couple of days at Glastonbury in 2013, the Today programme will before long have a couple of days at the Game Fair, which attracts the same size attendance.



BBC Radio 5 live is an influential station; its UK-wide output is 75% news. Its Controller, Jonathan Wall wants the station to be the BBC's market leader for reflecting the voice of the UK, as a barometer for news stories. With links into London newsgathering and 12 regional journalists to call on (embedded with other BBC teams), it has the scale and reach to achieve this ambition. It sets out to explore a deeper background to a story. What distinguishes Radio 5 live's coverage of rural affairs is the exploration of an issue across a full day's output, or even a whole week. For example, a dedicated week about science and food in June 2013 allowed a day's focus on GM food, getting beyond the emotion to the information and facts. In July 2013, Wake up to Money and the Breakfast show both looked at rural broadband.

Radio 5 live has systems to flag up good content from local radio, working well in some regions, BBC North for example, with room for improvement elsewhere. The station is happy to host themed weeks coming out of local and regional, and Jonathan Wall wants to sharpen up how they spot input that might have wider national resonance, and share that knowledge.

In my extensive interviews with BBC editorial staff and freelancers, I heard occasional examples of stories that had been found locally and made their way to network output – one local radio journalist in Cambridge had researched and then delivered a story about rural gang-masters that was aired on the BBC1 News at Six and on Radio 4's Face the Facts programme. More difficult is joining the dots – realising that what appears to be an individual local issue is in fact part of a pattern that is a significant network story. I heard how individual regions had each reported on their own local incidents of sheep rustling – but it took the intervention of one person with specialist knowledge and an eye across the output to realise that this was a significant rural crime, organised across Britain that was costing millions.

Identifying these patterns, being aware when on-going stories have reached a tipping point, having an eye across the output – these are significant challenges, but it is very important to get this right if the rural life of the UK is to be accurately and fairly reflected in BBC output. Unlike stories that emanate from Westminster, they are far more difficult to find – at the very least they will need a keen eye and a knowledge of a good deal of the BBC's regional and local output – it's likely too that, to make the stories work, they will need journalists to leave the newsroom and expend a bit of shoe leather.

The BBC could do more to report "this country in its length, breadth and diversity", as one senior executive put it and I am concerned that the BBC should not allow a gap to develop in its news reporting. The audience research indicated that network news and current affairs output originating in England was sometimes perceived to have an "urban bias or outlook". Audiences felt this was subtle and they believed it was unintentional – but it should be a concern to the BBC.



Editorial choices influence this perception. Of course, news judgments are just that – these decisions are not black and white, choices must be made between different stories and events can change quickly. However, to consider this, the Loughborough research looked at BBC news coverage of specific trigger events about rural issues. Stories were identified as potential triggers for news coverage – these covered three broad subjects: the cost of living; access to resources and services; and wildlife and woodland management or protection.

There were eight potential stories in total and they triggered 42 separate items of BBC network news output – either in broadcast news or online. So, on the face of it, the Loughborough team had a reasonable eye for identifying stories that would be likely to lead to network output.

Three stories related to the cost of living and these led to seven items on the BBC's network news coverage; two stories were about access to resources, and these led to 12 news items; and three stories were about wildlife and woodland management and these led to 23 BBC news items.

It is striking that more than half of the total BBC network news coverage triggered by these stories related to output that broadly would come under the environmental brief. I will comment later about the limitations that can arise if rural issues are viewed largely from an environmental perspective, which this element of the content analysis indicates may be happening.³⁰

However, one of the trigger events about access to resources stood out particularly for me. During the research period, the House of Commons' Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published its assessment of the Defra's success "at championing rural issues across Government" and achieving "fair, practical and affordable outcomes for rural residents, businesses and communities". The report was prompted by the Government's decision in June 2010 to abolish the Commission for Rural Communities. The report was heavily critical of Government policy, suggesting it "failed to take account of the challenges that exist in providing services to a rural population that is often sparsely distributed and lacks access to basic infrastructure".

The report covered a wide range of issues relevant to access to resources and services including: rural funding by government, the rural economy, housing, rural transport, and empowering rural communities. Although this report focused on England alone, it was an important assessment of government policy on rural matters. While the report was covered online, it was very disappointing that the content analysis found **no** references to this report on the BBC's broadcast network news.³²

³⁰ For more detail see Table 3.5 in *Rural Areas in the UK Impartiality Review: A Content Analysis for the BBC Trust.* Loughborough University, Communication Research Centre.

³¹ http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmenvfru/602/602.pdf
House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Rural Communities Sixth Report of Session 2013–14
Volume I

³² For more detail see Table 3.3 in *Rural Areas in the UK Impartiality Review: A Content Analysis for the BBC Trust.* Loughborough University, Communication Research Centre.



Rural proofing in news output

The BBC's rural audiences seek some empathy with how they live their lives. The audience research, and the stakeholder interviews, showed that most people were sanguine about whether most of their concerns would be newsworthy. But people hope to see *something* of their own experience reflected in news and current affairs coverage. The daily cares of rural communities and urban dwellers cover the same themes, but can play out differently in practice: jobs, health, education, housing, transport, living costs.

"Integrate it into the mainstream, don't give us specimen group treatment" Fiona White, Community Lincs

These subjects are the leitmotif of news, regularly changing policies or performance statistics driving them back into the national or regional headlines. We looked at whether coverage of national issues such as education, employment and health considered the "challenges and perspectives of rural people, communities and businesses".

I identified some very good examples of BBC network news looking at issues from a rural perspective: particularly the Today programme on BBC Radio 4, with features on GP rural premiums being withdrawn and the consequent impact on patient access to health, and affordable housing/second homes in the countryside. Local radio is excellent at picking them up: a feature on Radio Lincolnshire highlighted the impact of a secondary school that was an Academy threatening to close, when the next nearest school meant a 30 mile each way trip for some pupils. BBC Radio 5 live's close and regular relationship with their listeners, who have many on-air and digital means to communicate quickly and directly with programmes, helps them discover and share the rural experience or perception of nationwide policies.

Over a three-week period between 18 November and 8 December 2013 Loughborough looked particularly at the BBC's news output in relation to education, employment and health stories. It analysed how these stories – significant to the population as a whole – reflected the rural perspective.

In this period, the research team identified 619 BBC news stories about education, employment and health and found that only 82 included a rural angle – that's roughly one in eight stories about these key subjects. Further, the team found that rural proofing was concentrated in the BBC's regional news output and in the devolved nations. In fact, a meagre 2% of the stories about education, employment and health that included a rural perspective ran in UK-wide network news output. Twenty per cent of the BBC's regional and devolved nations' analysed output had some kind of rural angle. ³⁴

³³ For more detail see Table 2.1 Ibid.

³⁴ For more detail see Tables 2.2, 2.3 and 2.5 Ibid.



I spoke to editorial staff in network news who agreed that they did not consider "rural" as a filter when they were thinking about news output – there was an assumption that "rural" would be picked up at a local or regional level.

However, performance was inconsistent across the English regional news services and that of the devolved nations. Output broadcast on the indigenous minority language services was twice as likely to include a rural angle compared to output broadcast in English in the devolved nations or broadcast in the English regions. And, while more than two-thirds of BBC 1 South Today's coverage of education, employment and health had a rural angle during the period assessed by Loughborough University, other areas did not carry any stories on these three subjects which had a rural angle in the relevant period. We would need to carry out further research to understand more about this, but what is clear is that Network cannot assume the regions will fill the gap or that the regions are the default proper place for a rural perspective: the perspective should sometimes be UK wide.

These findings suggest to me that the particular challenges and perspectives of rural people, communities and businesses are not on the radar of those making news decisions at a network level. In consequence, they are not incorporated into broad reporting of these significant issues and so an opportunity to understand the lives of people in rural areas – and to understand how key policy areas affected them – is missed.

Online content

One response to the challenges of making space for the rural dimension in a busy network news diary is to ensure audiences are signposted to more in-depth or specific coverage online. The audience research found examples of good quality online content. However, the content analysis found little evidence that viewers and listeners were being alerted to this. It only identified two occasions when this occurred with respect to bovine TB and badger culling (out of 189 potential opportunities to do so). References made to the BBC website for viewers and listeners to obtain further information on the fracking issue were also rare — only four instances were identified in the sample, and only one was identified in BBC broadcast coverage of wind farms and rural planning.

Where stories were covered they were felt by audience members to be accurate and factual. The audience believe internet coverage develops well over time, although the interviewees in this project did not feel sufficiently interested in most rural stories to follow them up online. Getting the depiction of rural life right in mainstream TV and radio pieces was urged, in order to build better relationships between metropolitan and rural dwellers. This means providing necessary context and aiming for accurate depiction of rural life and emotions.



Is it important to the audience?

According to the audience research, people in rural areas and those in urban ones have low expectations about the amount of rural affairs news coverage they might experience on the BBC. Both rural and metropolitan audiences struggled to find coverage of rural life in "mainstream" viewing and listening during the week when they first considered rural output.

Notwithstanding the success of Countryfile, Oxygen Brand Consulting found that its respondents from metropolitan areas, in London in particular, had scant knowledge or interest in rural affairs. One audience member taking part in the London group could not comprehend why anyone living in the countryside would even want a good broadband connection. The diverse nature of businesses operating from the countryside – and the significance of internet use to most aspects of work and life now – was not considered.

Both in London and Glasgow living in rural areas was seen as a lifestyle choice. In Glasgow it was largely seen as just a rather impractical lifestyle choice. In London, on the whole, it was seen as an inexplicable and baffling one.

Oxygen Brand Consulting

While audiences in metropolitan areas lacked knowledge of rural life, those living in remote areas perceived that their lives were broadly absent from network output – and they felt this was a significant omission. I asked Julie Nelson, Rural Officer for the Diocese of Chelmsford, whether she considered rural audiences saw themselves in the BBC's output:

"Largely not, no. Generally most of the stories that are told are urban stories, the realities of daily life – the countryside is only interesting when it's dramatic or beautiful – but the ordinary everyday life isn't I think shown. When there's a murder, or floods, suddenly a village becomes news. You get the story and then it moves on"

Julie Nelson, Rural Officer, Church of England

Getting the depiction of rural life right in mainstream TV and radio pieces was urged, in order to build better relationships between metropolitan and rural dwellers. This meant providing necessary context and aiming for accurate depiction of rural life and emotions.

Oxygen Brand Consulting

Oxygen's research indicated that audiences felt the main evening TV news did not routinely cover rural affairs – particularly in England. This was true not only of the BBC, but all broadcasters. While those taking part felt that the regional output was more likely to cover rural matters, Oxygen concluded that the depth of the coverage was considered light:



"They don't really do much, just probably a couple of minutes, then they go onto something which is a lot more ... popular ... I don't think it interests many people much, to be honest"

Rural, 18-24, Norfolk

With low audience expectations, does it matter that stories of significance to rural areas are being missed by the BBC – and consequently, matters that are very important to people living in rural areas are going unreported on? I return to the thoughts of Julie Nelson "the BBC has this public education role – and we need an educated public to have an effective democracy".



WHOSE VOICE?

The range of voices on rural affairs across BBC output taken as a whole is broad and comprehensive. Stories can be developed and explained in a way that is nuanced, thoughtful and, crucially, impartial. However, if Farming Today and Countryfile were taken out of the picture, the breadth of voice heard in the BBC's coverage would start to look altogether more patchy – both the content analysis and the audience research picked up the prominence of a small number of charities and NGOs (non-governmental organisations).

In summary:

- It is difficult to draw out the rural voice. The BBC has to make extra effort to allow the rural voice to be heard.
- Undue weight is given to a small number of experienced, influential and well resourced NGOs.
- The BBC's local and specialist journalists, and its Rural Affairs Committees, can do more to direct programme makers to fresh and real voices, but are infrequently approached.
- There should be a balanced approach across social, economic and environment reporting of rural affairs, but in practice coverage is tilted towards an environmental lens.
- Country people tend to like a low profile, and their contribution is limited by them living and working a long way from BBC studios.
- Technological improvements should help to overcome this.
- Countryside organisations could organise to make it easier for the BBC to find fresh, non-stereotypical but authentic voices and opinions.

"My biggest wish list would be to find a new group of people to talk to. You hear the same views over and over again [the BBC] need to broaden their base. They need to find new champions of the countryside."

Mark Hedges, Editor, Country Life magazine

By default, there is a leaning towards a small number of NGOs

Contributions from within and outside the BBC, and our wide review of BBC content, point to undue dependence on a very small number of NGOs to either set the rural affairs agenda or more often to respond to it. Programme makers will be drawn to organisations that are seen to be responsive, quickly available, with staffed-up, accessible, professional press offices. Time after time, when asked who their top contacts would be for a rural story, BBC programme makers or journalists quoted the RSPB first, followed by the National Trust, and frequently but not exclusively the NFU. This has quite an impact on the selection of content and the opinions covered. It is made more controversial because there is some



tension in relationships between the RSPB and farmers/landowners, and with the shooting community.

"The RSPB, the wildlife trusts, the NFU probably get most coverage. There are an awful lot of other rural issues which are not necessarily of interest to those 3 organisations."

Paul Hamblin, Director, National Parks England

The BBC's Environment Analyst Roger Harrabin feels that several NGOs have a disproportionate effect, including the RSPB and the NFU:

"The RSPB has more than a million members. Surveys show that bird song makes people happier. It also makes good radio. So it's not surprising that R4 runs a relatively large number of bird stories – though far fewer than previously.

"Where it gets more tricky is that the RSPB is so well organised that we tend to rely on them heavily to provide locations and speakers on UK environment stories – just as we rely on the NFU to provide the farming view. This syndrome is likely to become even more pronounced as staff numbers fall and pressures on journalists increase."

I am sure that Roger Harrabin is right about the appeal of birds to a BBC audience and as the leading national charity in this field, the RSPB absolutely would be expected to make a big contribution on this subject. The organisation is to be admired for the professionalism it has brought to media relations and PR; my comments are no criticism of its success. It has a broad membership and achieves a lot to promote birdlife across the country.

However, as Andre Farrar, RSPB Media Manager, said when interviewed for this review:

"Without the BBC's coverage we would be short of a lot of coverage — the BBC is intrinsic to our planning. There was a ten year period when we were on [the Today programme] once a fortnight — partly because we cover such a large number of issues — from climate change to birds of prey persecution and from rural planning to Big Garden Birdwatch and we are also a major landowner as an aside, that's a big challenge for us in terms of our communication focus. The BBC's unique role (combining education with entertainment) through the Natural History Unit means you develop the interest which develops the concern and support for nature conservation."

As this comment evidences, the RSPB is both a source of expertise and a campaigning organisation and the BBC must be mindful that such bodies seek and benefit from publicity to build support and finance to their cause. This demands due challenge by BBC journalists, and a perceived lack of push-back or questioning has been very much noted by other organisations who want to



contribute to the BBC on rural affairs. In Scotland, we heard from stakeholders and audience input that they felt their concerns about sea eagles being responsible for livestock attacks were not put to the RSPB in Scotland, for example.

The BBC must be sensitive to this position and the impression it creates amongst other potential contributors and audiences. Oxygen Brand Consulting noted that, in the audience research, there was a perception that the major wildlife organisations' views on conservation and wildlife can be felt to dominate by rural dwellers over coverage of the needs and convenience of local people. The news media in general, including the BBC, were felt to be almost automatically on the side of conservationists and conservation organisations such as the RSPB. The counter-arguments and issues of the population were felt to be un-investigated.

It is inappropriate for this one organisation to have been the unprompted first response for all but three of the BBC programme makers or journalists to whom I spoke. There are many other bird and wildlife charities: the British Trust for Ornithology, for example, did not feature as a source in any of the material we reviewed.

"There are some organisations that are enormously more successful at getting their message across... and I don't blame them, they've been building up their press operation for a long time, and they get over-representation... But there are a myriad number of organisations in the countryside representing a vast number of people."

Mark Hedges, Editor, Country Life magazine

Whilst the RSPB was the consistent organisation to be identified in the stakeholder interviews I carried out, it was not the only organisation that appeared to have a dominant presence. The National Farmers' Union was quoted or interviewed on the vast majority of pieces concerning farming during the review period.

"The NFU represents the mainstream view of farming business – especially for big farmers – so it's very hard to exclude them from any story voicing criticisms about the way farming impacts the landscape or wildlife. There are farmers with differing views and it is possible if there's enough space to use them as well as the NFU – but almost impossible to use them instead. The NFU is the default baseline for agri-business – and like the RSPB it's well organised and finds interviewees quickly. It complains vociferously if it feels that a story has been written in an unfavourable way."

Roger Harrabin, Environment Analyst

As the largest representative body in farming in the UK, one expects a significant presence. However, farmers don't have a single view of agricultural and rural issues. Other farming and landowning organisations exist, for example the Tenant Farmers Association or the Country Land and Business Association, could provide different perspectives on a rural or farming story. Local radio journalists appeared to have a good range of local farming contacts who were "just" farmers, not



representatives, and audiences would benefit and probably enjoy hearing more from the ground level on some of the stories covered. This could help take some of the heat away from the "binary issues" concern that I cover later in this report, since almost inevitably going to the organised lobby and interest groups will result in a polarised argument.

"I struggle to remember a time that someone from, for example, ACRE [Action with Communities in Rural England] or the Rural Services Network has been asked for an opinion on mainstream media. Yet both are expert bodies and work on issues which are broader and more fundamental to life in the UK's countryside."

Patrick Begg, Rural Enterprise Director, The National Trust

Achieving breadth of rural voice is undeniably more difficult for the BBC than it was, especially at the network and England-wide levels. The abolition of several national quangos for rural affairs (except in the environment sphere) has reduced the sources of informed but non-partisan contribution. Funding cuts in the BBC mean that some programmes simply can't get very far geographically, or lack the remote technology support to feed in from rural locations. Flagship programmes or network news need to be certain they are getting authority and a confident contributor, not an unknown who can't handle the pressure of the Radio 4 PM programme or Newsnight.

"One of the problems is that the non-agricultural community finds it hard to have a voice. Who are the groups who can debate and talk about the issues who are not from the farming community? Who are the community leaders?"

Professor Michael Woods, University of Aberystwyth

However, in the interests of diversity of view, and to better reflect the experience of people in rural areas, I believe that the BBC could do more to broaden its sources and network of commentators. Improving the links between network and the BBC's local and specialist rural journalists, and with the Corporation's two Rural Affairs Advisory Committees, would offer relatively quick routes to fresh and real voices. In Scotland, the RAAC appears to have sustained this role for the BBC over the last decade. In England, it seemed that programme maker attendance at the RAAC had fallen away and has been rebuilding over the last year.

"The rural voice is deferential, English, fairly quiet – difficult to bring out. Farmers talk to farmers, farmers groups talk to farmers groups... modern media isn't completely compatible with how rural people talk to each other."

Andre Farrar, Media Manager, RSPB

"It is definitely easier in news if you have well-known people who are organised. Logistics are a big part of it. That is why the better-funded NGOs do well. ...a lack of sophistication about who we go to is endemic in news



and we all fight against it. Almost reluctantly you go to the default performers."

David Shukman, Science Editor, BBC

The established, national-name NGOs are not the only noisy voices. There are well-organised and highly active lobby groups on many aspects of rural affairs, from animal welfare and animal rights through to access to the countryside and energy production. My view is that BBC journalists and programme makers were pretty robust in testing and challenging stories that were pitched from these sources, particularly where the BBC target was at local radio level or on specialist rural programmes.

The external relationship that seems most fraught, on both sides, is between the BBC and the Countryside Alliance. It is more than a decade since the Countryside Alliance first came to prominence as an organisation that was strongly against the proposed ban on foxhunting. It was an issue that divided people across the UK and, as this was a totemic policy of the Labour Party, it was also highly political. The Countryside Alliance became one of the main organisers of the Countryside March in 2002 which saw around 400,000 people take to the streets of London. While the proposed ban on fox hunting was the driver behind the protest, it was not the only issue people were marching about – there was a broader sense that people in rural areas felt their way of life was under attack. Issues such as the need to safeguard UK farmers and cherish domestically produced food, concern about the closure of rural post offices and dismay about the availability of affordable housing were also present. It is not the job of this review to consider the BBC's output of more than a decade ago. However, it is worth noting that in the days immediately after the march, there was much criticism after one senior editorial figure at the BBC wrote a column in a national newspaper which referred to the marchers as: "rather angry, ruddy-faced people who looked like extras from a Channel 5 presentation of The Mill on the Floss". Party politics aside, many rural people feel that the Countryside Alliance reflects their wider issues and concerns and it is deeply unfortunate that more than a decade later, a significant minority of them still feel the sting of this article – and feel that it is representative of a deep metropolitan bias at the BBC.

It is essential to be able, collectively, to move on so that people in rural areas do not have a fear that they will be belittled or ignored if they engage in public debate. The BBC and the Countryside Alliance need to work out how to reconcile this.

It would be very helpful if the Alliance could offer a route to connect programme makers with that unheard rural voice, outside of its own spokespeople.

A tilt towards the environment lens

Rural affairs are a complex mix of the social, economic and environmental and should be approached through a balanced lens reflecting all three dimensions of rural communities and rural issues. It's my view that the BBC places an undue, but



unintended, emphasis on reporting rural issues from an environmental perspective. This isn't a land-grab by the environment team – indeed, they are doing their best to be helpful but their environmental expertise is bound to influence tone and perspective in reporting. When rural issues are covered on network news, the absence of a specialist rural correspondent means the newsroom default to the Environment Analyst as the nearest "best fit". This means there is an on-going danger of missing rural stories that do not meet the environmental brief, but aren't picked up by other specialist reporters. I am concerned that the environment has become the dominant prism through which to report rural affairs, particularly at the network level. Yet, as I stated earlier on, the countryside provides a home to hundreds of thousands of small businesses and high proportions of home-workers and the self-employed – these lives and the concerns they have also need to be reflected in the BBC's output.

"There are very good insights within ACRE and the rural community councils – a lot of knowledge there but you don't often hear them."

Julie Nelson, Rural Officer, Church of England

"Some of this is about how the BBC covers economics and business. There is a heavy bias towards business news, financial sector. The rest of the economy is largely invisible."

Professor Michael Woods, University of Aberystwyth

Country people don't seek the limelight

People living there don't like the binary presentation of rural affairs, the focus on conflict or crisis in the countryside, and they don't feel equipped to enter the fray by commenting publicly.

"Many rural people won't tell you their concerns or stories so easily. It becomes personalised so there is a pride"

David Inman, Director, Rural Services Network

Both output producers inside the BBC and stakeholders outside it acknowledged how difficult it was finding rural voices who were prepared to speak up. Conservative country dwellers were specifically identified as a missing element.

"People like me are not there, who live and work in the countryside and understand it. You have presenters of a type, Chris Packham, Michaela Strachan, Bill Oddie. Practical countrymen – where are they?"

Robin Page, farmer and Chairman of the Countryside Restoration Trust

Many rural contributors, and rural audiences, identified occasions when they felt patronised by interviewers. There was an anxiety about how they might appear, if they would seem foolish. These difficulties are compounded by a tendency in country people to keep a low profile. I frequently heard that farmers and other land managers didn't believe that they would get a fair hearing if they spoke out. In some cases, and on some issues, this is exacerbated by a genuine fear of



retribution from protestors – the recent badger cull trials being an example where ordinary farmers were very reluctant to appear on news or current affairs programmes because of fears of reprisals. As the Editor of one rural publication said:

"My personal opinion is that my parents had cows so I am scared of protestors. It is justifiable."

One farming representative taking part in the audience research particularly felt they were under-represented in the media generally – and felt that journalists should find new ways of reaching out to groups who were reluctant or afraid to offer their views otherwise.

"If it was some issue like female genital mutilation, they [The BBC and others] would go to some effort to help the person speak – disguise voices and things like that"

Rural landowner

That is an extreme suggestion – but the BBC should take notice that a rural voice feels it necessary to raise this subject. While organisations can find ways to sustain their voice, while limiting risk, it is inevitable that individuals will feel exposed by appearing in the media and this may feed their reluctance to speak out.

The ability to feature more local voices, rather than representatives of NGOs, is made much more difficult by distance. BBC reporters are, save for local radio, largely based in cities, and for network that means London, Salford and urban hubs. They haven't the time to get far into the countryside, to cover a breaking story, or even add a rural dimension to a running story. When local voices are heard, the audience responds well. A rural audience in Yorkshire, talking about the flood coverage, recalled an Any Answers? programme that had included phone calls from farmers and people who were members of drainage boards, describing what had gone wrong. They noted that this output had been much more informative than the content of news bulletins, which they felt had instead been: "...all about reporters wearing waders and soundbites from politicians".

"It's easy to find the great and the good, but getting people who don't have time to be the great and the good, who don't have time to get involved, their voices need to be heard as well ... how do you get the small, quirky, rural voice – people are anxious about politeness – they defer ... feel untrained, anxious that they may be made a fool of – so it can be difficult to get 'ordinary' people, those without power and influence, to speak."

Julie Nelson, Rural Officer, Church of England

Farmers and other rural workers, often self-employed, cannot drop everything – miss the one fine day this week for spraying, drop the milking until the morning, be away from the phone and computer for hours – to contribute to a news item in the studio.



"I think there will be another, more digital, phase now, about clever use of technology, about sourcing more authentic voices onto the BBC. ...you can hear voices and get to places without actually being on the ground."

Peter Salmon, Director, England



THE DEVOLVED NATIONS – SHOWING THE WAY

In this review, I was asked to look specifically at the BBC's coverage of rural affairs in the devolved nations. We heard from BBC staff, stakeholders and audience members in each country. Material from the devolved nations was included in the audience research, content analysis and programme reviews. BBC output in these areas includes television and radio programming specifically produced for each nation, news across radio, television and online and, in Scotland and Wales, indigenous minority language output. Scotland has two Gaelic language services: the television channel, BBC Alba, and radio station Radio nan Gàidheal. In Wales, the BBC's Welsh language radio station is BBC Radio Cymru.

In summary:

- There are high levels of satisfaction with the BBC's content where it originates from, and is broadcast in, the devolved nations.
- The journalists in the devolved nations appear to have more understanding of and empathy with rural affairs. This is reflected in the quality and breadth of their reporting.
- This success is significantly down to strong personal and team networks between local offices, knowledge of the specialist programmes and, where relevant, the different language services.
- How well rural expertise and content transfers from local and regional newsrooms and from the devolved nations to the network is often dependent on personal connections within the BBC, these could be strengthened.
- The audiences in the devolved nations are more attuned to/experienced about rural affairs.
- Rural proofing of national stories happens, but could become more consistent.
- Consultees within and outside the BBC are very anxious that cost pressures will divert resources away from rural content.

In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales there were many examples of what good rural affairs coverage looks and sounds like. The content from the devolved nations generated high satisfaction levels.

Rural and environmental policy is either entirely or largely devolved to the national legislatures in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Each country sets different rural priorities and approaches, even in regard to policies that the audience might think universal, such as how Common Agricultural Policy support is provided to farmers. I looked at how the BBC fulfils its public purposes in each of



the nations, and what different structures or processes enable them to meet expectations.

As well as broadcasting network (UK-wide) output, devolved nations have their own factual programmes such as Farm Fixer (Northern Ireland), Country Focus (Radio Wales), The Hill Farm (BBC Wales) and Landward (Scotland) that are core rural, and well regarded. There were several examples of the devolved nations' mainstream TV or radio programmes picking up specialist rural content and bringing it to a wider audience. These audiences get the best of both worlds. Almost everyone mentioned Countryfile and their enjoyment of it. The nature of Countryfile as a broad magazine programme on rural issues was thought to make space for Landward on BBC Scotland to focus on the trickier and environmental issues.

Farm Fixer, a rural diversification programme in Northern Ireland was singled out for its accuracy, showing how different farming enterprises work as businesses and offering a range of viewpoints on how to make them succeed. Alongside this, a rural audience member in Northern Ireland commented positively on Farming Today offering a wider insight on farming than their purely local experience:

"Farming Today - Tenant farmers, they had one family starting out all rosy who were just moving in, another farm it had all gone wrong – that was accurate and impartial and showed both sides – we don't have many tenant farmers here so I found it interesting".

Rural, Northern Ireland

The overriding sense from contributors and the audience research was that BBC output that is specific to the devolved nations shows a depth and breadth of understanding of rural areas and rural lives. Viewers and listeners thought the coverage to be particularly accurate and impartial and they were very satisfied with it. Coverage levels, and the importance given to rural matters in the devolved nations and particularly in the Welsh and Gaelic language services that were considered for this review, were felt to be higher than in England or at network level. To quote an audience research participant who commutes daily between Bristol and Wales:

"I really notice the difference in radio coverage of rural issues when I cross the border into Wales"

"I get the feeling that within the Welsh-speaking community there is a network and the roots go right into the communities in terms of BBC Cymru reporting and reporters. But at a national level, Radio 4 or Newsnight, then it is very anglicised, middle-class English. If there is anything on Machynlleth, it will be someone who is contacted via the anglicised network. It is frustrating."

Nick Fenwick, Farmers' Union of Wales



Many elements combine to deliver what is felt to be broad and insightful coverage in the devolved nations. In Scotland, the significance of rural affairs was reinforced when it emerged as a top three issue in a BBC-commissioned poll of voter concerns in the build up to Scottish elections in 2011. In Wales, around 40% of the BBC's journalists are Welsh speaking, and although Welsh is taught across Wales, it has a heartland in the northern and most agricultural uplands as well as in Carmarthenshire – a largely rural county known as the garden of Wales. This suggests that at least some of these Welsh-speaking journalists and presenters, involved across the whole of BBC output in Wales, are likely to have a more immediate personal understanding of and empathy with rural issues.

Journalists, presenters, programme makers in the devolved nations felt themselves to be closer to rural areas – physically, emotionally, generationally. In Northern Ireland, respondents highlighted the progress they felt local correspondents had made in understanding farming by getting out and about in the community. This played out in a variety of ways from specialist farming content, to reporting from the Balmoral Show outside Belfast, to reality food programmes showing the journey of our food from field to fork. They drew attention in particular to the thoughtful coverage of the Horsegate scandal, when meat in the food chain advertised as beef was found to contain horse DNA.

In Northern Ireland, stakeholders commented that so much of life – and so many livelihoods – were by their nature rural, that rural issues were part of the warp and weft of programming. Output on BBC Radio Ulster was particularly referred to – a number of stakeholders I spoke to praised the out-and-about programme Your Place and Mine which brought fascinating glimpses of the lives of people across Northern Ireland. The agricultural programme Farm Gate was a weekly specialist radio programme that was relied on by many for detailed farming news and another programme singled out for successfully reflecting rural life was Eamon Phoenix's Hidden History. On television, the Farm Fixer was considered an accessible and engaging look at both farming and business (this programme was picked up by network) and another programme that was admired for showing a good spread of real lives was the series of documentary reports True North.

One farmers' representative considered that the BBC's approach to agricultural stories had changed in recent years – and there was now more interest in the industry. He perceived an improvement in the depth of news coverage:

"There is more of a balance, more depth and more research. Previously agriculture was seen as a declining industry and that was reflected in the approach taken. That has changed and there is more interest now"

Clarke Black, Chief Executive, Ulster Farmers' Union

While the stakeholders I spoke to acknowledged and valued the contributions made by regional reporters who made sure the length and breadth of Northern Ireland was reported on, they were equally clear about the importance of specialist correspondents, reporters who had a deep knowledge of agriculture and rural affairs, whose expertise was brought to bear on their reporting. They were



mindful that two specialist posts – the Agriculture Correspondent and Environment Correspondent – had been closed and wanted to guard against further cuts they feared would reduce the BBC's ability to report rural issues thoroughly and with expertise.

In Northern Ireland, the stakeholders I spoke to considered that the BBC recognised the cultural element, the rural "sense of place", and experienced a more even balance across the economic, environmental and social aspects of rural affairs coverage. However, the strongest area of concern for audience members, stakeholders and BBC staff themselves was about the threat to resources to continue to sustain this level and quality of coverage.

Northern Ireland audience members and stakeholders felt very deeply the recent loss of two key journalists and an anxiety that if the other perceived specialist went, rural affairs coverage would be jeopardised. The agricultural show on Radio Ulster is highly valued but dependent on one reporter: with no specialist to back him up, this felt like the subject coverage was at risk.

In Wales, a range of television output reflected the lives of the rural population or brought a focus to rural life. The Hill Farm was a series about a year in the life of farmer Gareth Wyn Jones, whose family has farmed in Llanfairfechan for three generations. Country Midwives was a factual series following a team of midwives whose work included supporting a very high rate of home births across a large, rural area. The programme also captured the experiences of a Polish community in Llandybie and addressed the communication difficulties that arose for the midwife as one mother-to-be spoke only Polish. Coastal Lives featured the stories of people who live and work along the Pembrokeshire coastal path and Iolo Williams presented a series of programmes about the rural landscape in Great Welsh Parks.

The results of the 2011 census led to the production Wales in a Year – this focused on the lives of eight families who were broadly representative of the nation as described in the census. The programme included a tenant farmer from Snowdonia, a fishing family in Milford Haven and a family from England who had moved to rural Wales and set up a catering company. Coverage of the Royal Welsh Show is an enduring feature of output and another long-running and popular programme was Weatherman Walking – in which BBC Wales's weather presenter Derek Brockway goes on a series of walks – in each, he is accompanied by a guide who gives an insight into local history and characters along the way.

It is striking in this output how much time is given to the lives and experiences of the rural Welsh population – holding a mirror up to the nation and reflecting it, in all its diversity. Some of this – such as The Hill Farmer – also received some network coverage and I wonder whether more could be made of this rich output.

On radio too, Radio Wales has Country Focus on Sunday at 7 a.m. and Monday morning at 5.30 a.m. Farming gets specific coverage on Radio Cymru with a daily farming/rural slot on the breakfast show and Byd Amaeth on Saturdays. For Radio



Cymru the audience and stakeholders feel that a lot of the general programming is from and about rural areas because of its Welsh speaking audience.

Of course, proportionately more of the audience *are* rural in the devolved nations, so might be expected to be more interested. For example, they seemed to find it easier to discover rural content on the BBC than their English peers, and appeared rather more bothered to do so.

However, the audience, whether urban or rural, were more *receptive* to the rural output than we observed in England. Perhaps this is because their connections to rural communities were less distant than many in English towns and cities. Even in the Glasgow audience focus group, which claimed limited knowledge and interest in rural matters on the whole, the contributors acknowledged their relatively ready access to countryside and demonstrated a wider geographical experience and understanding than that of the London group. I noted that, in addition to programmes from Edinburgh and Glasgow, STV produce a nightly show out of Aberdeen, covering more news from the north of Scotland and thus the audience in the Highlands and Islands have a choice of output that is "closer to us".

The influencers and commentators on rural affairs in each of the devolved nations are themselves better connected; political and governmental figures are closer to rural lives, and the rural agenda is higher profile generally. These smaller communities of decision makers and influencers, and the good networks between them, then make it easier for journalists to fully explore rural issues, their connectivity with urban interests, and unearth new perspectives. In November, when we visited the BBC and stakeholders in Inverness, there was a running national news story in Scotland about the possibility of moving from a voluntary cull to a planned cull to control the over-population of red deer. Over the course of one day and over the various BBC outlets, the issue was extensively explored without reverting to a binary position on the culling of deer. There were voices for and against any culling; discussions about a change from a voluntary policy; coverage of the environmental and agricultural damage and risks from overpopulation and reports on the science of population control. The content was presented by informed and dispassionate reporters, and appeared to give the audience a full and broad perspective on the pros and cons of the proposed change. It avoided anthropomorphism.

The breadth of opinion covered by devolved programmes is a strength. The relationship with lobby and interest groups was good but not over-dependent. Programme makers and journalist knew how to unearth rural stories and find the right contributors. As Pennie Latin, senior programme maker, commented in Inverness:

"[You have to] go into particular communities and gather all sorts of stories ... get round the place and soak up stories"



What seemed to be delivering for BBC Scotland in "digging out the story" was the strength of the informal networks between programme teams, as individual reporters and programme makers.

Aberdeen was seen as the centre of excellence for rural affairs, and everyone I met quoted the same "go to" names there. For example, Helen Needham, producer of the 90-minute Saturday morning Out of Doors radio show in Aberdeen, was equally great at spotting rural stories for other BBC programmes as for her own, and fed the leads through to Inverness and elsewhere. The food programme, Kitchen Café, produced in Inverness had a lot of rural stories, and its output was regularly lifted for the mainstream 4 O'clock Show – a good example of making rural content more accessible. For the Gaelic programming, a more authentic voice was heard just because few stakeholder organisations had Gaelic speakers who could contribute, so programme makers had to go into the community to gather comment and opinion. The BBC staff I met felt the extent to which a rural perspective was included was a legacy of devolution of BBC programme making across Scotland; however, they felt their expertise wasn't called on enough by relevant national programme makers in Glasgow.

"If you force the programmes out of the urban areas and have them made by people living and working in rural regions, then the programme makers naturally have rurality higher in their consciousness... Wherever the decisions on commissioning are made, we reflect our immediate environment."

Dan Holland, Producer, The Kitchen Café and The Kitchen Garden

Another positive factor has been the talent flow between more rural locations and the central belt centres for the BBC. The Radio Scotland morning news show with Gary Robertson used to be produced in Inverness, and this drove a big influx and circulation of talent, meaning that staff who returned to Glasgow and went onto other national or network shows took with them relationships and understanding of a more rural area. Since the departure of the show, that connectivity has lessened. Core rural programme staff tend to be very sticky, they are often making lifestyle career choices and don't want to move onto different, city-based programmes. Attachments could be used more effectively and deliberately to overcome this inertia and strengthen the networks between programme makers and journalists across urban and rural.

There are areas for improvement. "Rural proofing" of national (devolved nation) news stories is one area which we have already covered. There are some good examples of where this happens. The BBC team in Inverness were regularly asked by correspondents based in the central belt to provide a Highlands or rural take on the story: in the example about deer management, the Scotland environment correspondent asked for a local interview to be packaged; the local government and health correspondents do the same thing. The standout performers, reflecting how close this is to their mission and audience, were BBC Alba's An La 8.30am show and BBC Radio Cymru's Breakfast Show.



The issues of binary, conflict-based reporting, and a lack of coverage of the social and economic dimensions of rural, both came up in the devolved nations. All the nations picked up on the risk of romanticising the countryside. Respondents want the BBC to reflect innovation and solutions, not just challenges and hardship. In Wales some consultees felt that, at a network level, the BBC's view of the countryside was stuck in the prism of a recreational wilderness rather than, for example, understanding that not everyone in rural areas objected to wind farms.

In Scotland, many people mentioned the national news focus on the Grangemouth Labour Party selection story as being an example of the Westminster-led national news agenda in London/network being the lens through which Scotland was viewed. They agreed it was an important story but felt many other important news stories in Scotland had an equal or greater UK-wide relevance but were not covered on network news.

"No more an accurate picture of Scotland than having a stag poised beautifully."

Pennie Latin, BBC, Inverness

Inverness produces two news streams, one in English (which feeds into BBC Scotland national news programmes) and one in Gaelic for the television service BBC Alba and its sister service Radio nan Gàidheal. These are dedicated Gaelic channels, BBC Alba is a joint venture between BBC Scotland and MG Alba, and is part-financed by the Scottish Government. The television service is on air for up to seven hours a day, with an audience of 650,000. The Gaelic news/current affairs services cover 2.5 hours a day on radio and 0.5 hours a day of TV news and current affairs. This covers the full gamut of news from international through to audience specific, but in any single programme the output will be 50% to 90% rural. The editorial team aim to provide a fresh perspective, not simply repeating the news in Gaelic.

The structures I saw and heard about were both formal and informal — in Inverness, a news editor was in place who had previously worked in Glasgow — he took part in a round-Scotland conference that provided a route to feed rural news stories into the Glasgow news operation. While the process was important — without the conference call, news wouldn't filter upwards — it seemed to me equally as significant that the news editor had previously worked in Glasgow. He already had the trust of his colleagues and they clearly had a high regard for his news judgment.

The links between the Glasgow newsroom and the Alba production team were impressive. Producers in the regions were keen to spot opportunities for their stories to be given wider coverage. As well as formal news decisions – when a story was relevant to both the Gaelic and English services – there were also informal links; where occasional spare capacity in Inverness meant that a journalist could pick up an interview or images that could be fed back to the Glasgow newsroom, giving that day's output more texture and greater breadth of coverage. This pragmatic use of resources was not without its own tensions – staff



in Inverness were conscious of the times when they could not assist their colleagues in Glasgow. They were also fearful of a possible future threat to their own resources – mirroring the concerns I'd heard in both Northern Ireland and Wales, where stakeholders valued the output they had, and were anxious lest it should fall victim to any future cost-cutting.



GETTING IT RIGHT ALL THE TIME

Much of the input and evidence gathered during this review suggests that the BBC is making great efforts to avoid bias and partiality in its rural affairs content. It very frequently succeeds, but getting it right all the time needs more focus.

In summary:

- The BBC's specialist rural programmes are a success story as regards their accurate, impartial and informed coverage of rural affairs.
- Beyond the specialist programmes, the BBC's performance can be compromised by an incomplete understanding of rural affairs.
- What is covered, and the way it is covered, is too narrow and can be superficial or incomplete. This can cause unintended bias in how rural affairs are approached.
- The BBC owes it to its audience to see rural affairs as a core expertise
 across all its output, and to achieve the same level of understanding
 and analysis as it would give to other aspects of life health,
 education, the arts.

The 2003 report into rural affairs commissioned by the BBC Governors³⁵ included the following statement:

The appointment of a new Rural Affairs Correspondent has had a positive effect in raising the profile of rural issues in BBC News programmes. BBC News 24 is working more closely with the BBC Nations & Regions to ensure that local expertise on rural issues finds a place in national output. And there is greater use made of the expertise of the Rural Affairs Unit in Birmingham. The possibility of a rural affairs website remains under review.

However, quite a lot of the infrastructure that supported editorial balance and accuracy on rural affairs has been dismantled in recent years. It is disappointing that many of the important recommendations that addressed this same agenda in the rural affairs review a decade ago, and were implemented to good effect, have since dropped away.

The BBC, such a complex undertaking, succeeds through relationships and personal networks. Making even more of a success of the BBC's rural affairs coverage, being fully assured about its balance and impartiality, depends on the right people pausing to "think rural" and then knowing where to turn to for expertise, content, and support. I believe that the lack of dedicated, accessible, specialist rural expertise at network level jeopardises the BBC's purpose to educate

³⁵ A summary of the BBC Governors' 2003 Review of Rural Affairs Coverage is included at Annex B.



and explain, where the BBC can do much to improve the public understanding of rural affairs.

Leveraging knowledge, networks and content

For news to make a more consistent showing on rural affairs, the BBC needs to improve the information and awareness about rural affairs in the London news operation. Then those professionals can make a better-informed editorial judgment on newsworthiness and angle.

When it comes to surfacing stories, and reporting them with insight and expertise, there are resources for the network to draw on. I talked earlier about Farming Today and how much potential there is to lift and extend content from that specialist news programme into the wider news and current affairs network. Radio 5 live can do the same, more consistently, with local content and can also flag up to the wider network newsgatherers what's on the mind of listeners across rural areas in the UK.

Frequently, story ideas and approaches come from specialist correspondents and editors feeding into the newsgathering diary. There is no specialist correspondent or editor making the case for rural affairs across the network. BBC staff I spoke to acknowledged that, without a louder voice, rural stories would not "jump out" at those making news judgments.

There are some positive recent developments that will help. The devolved nations already include strong output that reflects the lives of rural inhabitants – it seems to me that more of this material could be broadcast at a network level. In England, David Holdsworth, Controller, English Regions, explained there was now a daily phone conversation with the Broadcasting House news-room to raise the top three regional stories – so that rather than being entered in a news diary, the stories could be discussed more fully.

James Harding, Director, News, is setting clear expectations for coverage across the UK:

"Over the next five years, one of my top priorities is that people look at the BBC and think that's a news organisation that's really telling you what's happening in your country."

James Harding, Director, BBC News

Strengthening the connections between the network and regional and local centres and the devolved nations seems an essential step towards redressing the imbalance in understanding, perspective and therefore accuracy and impartiality of rural affairs coverage. At the most basic level, it can overcome the time and distance challenges that prevent network reporters getting to more remote or rural locations across the UK. Fran Unsworth, Deputy Director, News and Current Affairs, pointed out that closer integration might lead to the knowledge held by reporters – wherever they are based in the UK – feeding into and influencing news



decisions that were taken at network level – and indeed their voices being heard through network output too.

For individual programme makers and reporters, the best guarantee of their awareness and understanding of rural affairs is the strength and extent of their personal contacts and friendships across the BBC. David Holdsworth reinforced this for me: he emphasised that mobility between all parts of the BBC was very important for building awareness and connections. Attachments could be used more effectively and deliberately to increase movement between the devolved nations, regional and local centres and the network production bases. This would strengthen the links between programme makers and journalists across urban and rural.

It is already on the BBC's agenda to improve collaboration and knowledge sharing between the different tiers of output. Some specialisms already do this – for example, the regional business correspondents get together twice a year, including with their national counterparts. Improving the connections between staff who work across the range of the BBC's output can only benefit the breadth of opinion and broad exploration of rural affairs offered by the Corporation.

The Rural Affairs Unit

The BBC has co-located its Radio 4 rural programmes in a Rural Affairs Unit in Bristol. Prior to this, the Unit was based in Birmingham. All the evidence is that the specialist programmes from this Unit are excellent on accuracy, expertise, impartiality. Maintaining the performance of this group is very important, but equally important to me is leveraging its expertise and capabilities more widely across the BBC. However, this isn't what it is set up to do.

In Birmingham, the Rural Affairs Unit was connected with The Archers, with the Rural Affairs Correspondent and via him, with news. When Rural Affairs was based in Birmingham, there was a dedicated Head of Rural Affairs. And, in Birmingham, Countryfile sat with the Radio 4 programmes. Now Countryfile, which is not part of the Rural Affairs Unit, but is made by TV Features, is in a different building in BBC Bristol, reducing the opportunities to share content and to plan across output. However, it may build collaborations with the Natural History Unit, which in turn could improve the "grittier" coverage of wildlife in the countryside that some respondents noted as a concern about the BBC's natural history programmes.

Calling this a Rural Affairs Unit can be a little misleading if it implies the group is a centre of excellence for the BBC, a perception I did pick up from some non-rural BBC contributors. In fact, it's a co-location of the network rural radio programme teams: they definitely have a lot in common, and benefit from being together. But the Unit doesn't have a broader mission. There is no shared resource, or non-programme person providing cross-unit research, responding to non-rural programme requests for expert support. In fact, apart from Tom Heap's role on Countryfile and Costing the Earth, there is no-one with a brief across TV and



radio. Plenty of people in the radio programme teams in the Rural Affairs Unit are good on, and experienced in, television - but aren't being championed out to present rural affairs on other network programmes, leveraging their expert perspective.

Not many parts of the BBC do reach into the Bristol programme team for content or advice. Senior editorial figures I spoke to at Radio 5 live, the devolved nations and on BBC2 had never thought of contacting it. The Unit is a niche production centre for highly valued, informed and accurate specialist rural programmes.

One senior editorial figure in Bristol noted that at times, it felt as if it was "ghettoised". It's not a big step from being a niche to being a silo. This worries me. The Rural Affairs Unit could offer more to support the BBC's UK-wide remit for rural coverage. Some BBC network heads and programme editors felt it would be really useful to have the "top ten" list of rural issues on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. The Rural Affairs Unit could initiate more regular contact with local, devolved and regional stations to unearth stories and plan coordinated approaches. Again, though, it's not clear who would do this in the Unit: there isn't a rural affairs forward planner across TV and radio who could act as a central data point, deliver more influence with network news, and get rural content syndicated and re-used more effectively.

Giving more weight to rural affairs

"The BBC [in its non-specialist output] has got better about nations and regions, about ethnic minorities but not about including the rural dimension."

Steve Peacock, former Editor, Farming Today, agricultural adviser,
The Archers

Beyond the specialist rural programmes, decision makers for other content aren't deliberately avoiding rural. They just don't particularly think about rural as a programme dimension, and that can cause output to be narrow and lack depth. No-one at present has the remit to apply good editorial leadership in relation to rural affairs that could support the BBC's output producers and programme makers, wherever they work.

"Within the BBC, each section is not talking to each other. We need to think as a whole and the BBC needs to consider the rural aspect in all programmes"

Ann Jones, Chair, National Federation of Women's Institutes, Wales

Who has the clout to give more weight to rural affairs? I looked at ideas such as a senior managerial "champion" for the BBC's rural coverage. Whilst there were lots of possible candidates, all were busy people who already had big roles. The rural agenda would always be a "side of desk" activity for a senior "champion".



An editor across the network is in a position to look across all the output and get the general drift: and then correct any imbalances, judge undue influence or bias, catch the careless unilateralism in the case of devolved government, and apply editorial balance to the subjective matter of the countryside. I do believe that an editorial role will specifically help with the news dimensions, avoiding the binary and conflict-driven approach, bringing different voices to the discussion, funnelling the regional and local content that is of more than parochial relevance.

I heard lots of evidence about the successful impact Andrew Thorman had as the Head of Rural Affairs across network radio and TV in England. Whilst his job expanded beyond this brief, it remained a core priority for him. Andrew saw his role as partly "to crack the whip and make sure the programmes work together".

Jeremy Hayes, who recently stepped down as Rural Affairs Editor for Farming Today and the specialist rural programmes, had a different role from Andrew Thorman. He did take content from Farming Today to pitch into network news, and had instances where the Today programme and Newsnight had approached him for his team to deliver stories (these cases were prompted by the production teams thinking they were missing something).

Many senior editorial figures we spoke to recognised the need for a strong voice, a large character, who could build links between the rural affairs unit and news. I think the baseline position to enable that voice to carry enough weight needs to stretch wider than Farming Today, significant though it is, and the specialist radio programmes in Bristol. It must cover television as well.

For a broader Rural Affairs Editor role to work, it needn't be a person's only role: it is more important that it is someone with authority who will give it some priority.

Rural Affairs Advisory Committees

"It is the job of programme makers to find people who can tell their own story ... we dig about a lot to get the rural voice ... spend time with them... It can be quite a challenge to reflect the diversity of what life's like in the country, beyond the traditional image of rural life. There's a great variety of experience out there, sometimes you have to look a little harder beneath the surface to make sure you find it."

Janice Hadlow, former Controller BBC2

Getting the nuances right and finding expert, varied voices were constants in the audience and stakeholder input to this review. Access to independent expertise and wider networks advances both. The BBC has two Rural Affairs Committees, one in England, one in Scotland. Both contribute expertise to programme makers about what is happening across rural England and Scotland from many different perspectives: farmers, food producers, land managers, environmentalists, vets, people concerned with social and economic aspects of rural life. The committees have no editorial input, no right of review of comment, but are an invited group of informed individuals willing to share their networks, knowledge and insight to help



the BBC get rural affairs right. They are an insightful, balanced community genuinely committed to an accurate and broad presentation of rural affairs in the UK, and have a lot to offer programme makers.

A specialist correspondent to articulate, amplify, examine rural affairs

"The rural affairs brief is one of the most challenging. It covers health care to food production to GM crops, cutting edge science to social affairs"

Jeremy Cooke, the last BBC Rural Affairs Correspondent

In the last decade, the BBC has had two dedicated Rural Affairs Correspondents, Tom Heap followed by Jeremy Cooke. Both were highly regarded journalists with weight and credibility across the BBC. In 2012 it was decided that the post of Rural Affairs Correspondent, which had been introduced in response to the previous review of bias and impartiality in rural affairs, would be dropped.

"For licence-fee payers to truly benefit from the role of a Rural Affairs Correspondent, you have to find and develop original journalism. Everyone can do the big stories. The trick is to showcase those stories that you unearth yourself, the off diary stories which can often set the agenda."

Andrew Thorman, former Head of Rural Affairs, BBC

"You have to seek out the evidence on rural areas, it won't throw itself at you."

David Inman, Rural Services Network

If the rural affairs correspondent had still been in post when I conducted this review, I believe that the concerns about impartiality and accuracy across the BBC's network output, particularly news, would have been greatly reduced. I think that the loss of a dedicated, experienced specialist correspondent across TV and radio has had far-reaching consequences:

- there is no named single person to lead on "selling" and delivering rural stories to the (network) news and current affairs community.
- while lots of people are trying, ad hoc, to build relationships and influence, they lack a single, clear authoritative channel.
- the pressure on Farming Today to be the carrier of rural news and to advocate rural content to other news programmes is increased.
- news and current affairs output producers rely instead on either the Environment desk or to a non-expert journalist to cover rural stories.



- there is no central point to which local, regional and national journalists covering rural issues can rally, identifying nationally significant stories and themes bubbling up from the grassroots.
- it removes a protection against overlooking the devolved characteristics of rural affairs across the UK.

Removing the Rural Affairs Correspondent post sent some unhelpful signals, seen in the context of this review. It implies that rural is not considered terribly important in the BBC newsroom or network. This can mean that ambitious and talented journalists would not look to rural affairs as a good career progression opportunity.

"We need to find mechanisms to alert us to things which are taking place which are not on our institutional radar. A Rural Affairs Correspondent would clearly be one mechanism."

Ceri Thomas, former Head of News Programmes

In a continuing era of cost cutting at the BBC, making the case for a new, costly, dedicated post will be challenging. I listened carefully to the views of those within the BBC who felt there were other ways of getting better rural understanding, expertise and coverage at the network news and current affairs level.

There was a good deal of consensus that rural output would be strengthened if the different rural players in the BBC were better connected and were used more widely. There was also consensus that the links between the BBC's news centre in London and all the parts of its operations, from local radio to devolved nations should be strengthened. I agree these are good steps to take, but they aren't mutually exclusive with a Rural Affairs Correspondent. I am unconvinced that more informal networks would have the weight to influence the big hitters in London and Salford who are deciding on network news and current affairs content. Stories coming up this way are very important, but presenting them for network output demands a UK-wide perspective from a specialist dedicated UK-wide correspondent.

I share the view of Jeremy Cooke, the last holder of this post, that asking everyone to ensure their stories are "rural proof", rather than have specialist responsibility means it just doesn't happen – the evidence in this review bears this out, since it clearly isn't happening. I spoke to one senior editorial figure who thought the BBC suffered from a "domestic UK news deficit". He felt the BBC was not good at reporting its own country – and saw a lot of its most talented correspondents wanting to take up foreign postings.

Making appointments and creating positions is an operational matter that rests with the BBC Executive. However, if the post of the Rural Affairs Correspondent were to be re-created, it would not be a job for the faint-hearted – there is an assumed glamour to the life of a foreign correspondent that doesn't apply to a specialist reporter wearing waders in the Wear. But that correspondent would



need to be confident there was an appetite at network level for the rural perspective to be reflected. They would need to be sure that output editors valued and rewarded their specialised input.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

I find that the BBC is doing a very good job on the majority of its rural affairs coverage. It has some outstanding programmes and people, delivering an excellent service for rural and urban audiences alike, in their approach to rural affairs. Overall the qualitative audience research showed that the audience judge that the BBC is accurate and "tries" to be extremely impartial in its coverage of rural life and affairs.

Flagship programmes like Countryfile and Farming Today, and the visibility of rural UK on BBC2 and Radio 4 is commendable. The controllers we spoke to appreciated the audience's interest in and appetite for rural affairs.

Almost without exception, across the vast rural-related output of the BBC that was considered, the content analysis shows its journalists use neutral language. There was plenty of evidence of the effort they make to present contentious stories in an impartial way. Nor was there any evidence of political bias.

This clear commitment to impartial reporting is commendable. Yet, in many areas of reporting, for example business and politics, the BBC relies on its experienced specialist correspondents who have years of knowledge that allow them to explain, analyse and challenge effectively. General reporters are clearly committed to impartial reporting, yet I wonder whether it is reasonable to expect them to deliver the same challenge and analysis that might come from a specialist correspondent.

Things can be better. The BBC could do a more accurate and comprehensive job with deeper expertise, with more coordination and collaboration across the BBC, and by reflecting a broader perspective on rural lives, rural issues and the part the countryside plays in national life. Improving the BBC's coverage will help the urban majority understand what is happening to the people and places of rural UK and how this affects their own lives – core to the BBC's purposes. It will strengthen the connections with the twelve million rural people in the UK who currently see a partial portrayal of their experience on the BBC.

The audience research was broadly very positive in its findings. However, audiences did discern that the BBC is urban in its approach. For news, they identified a shift in tone and accessibility of coverage through the day – better



context and expert comment on Breakfast or Jeremy Vine – but the evening news bulletins were not so accessible.

The dismantling of some important parts of the BBC's rural infrastructure in recent years has meant that rural expertise is lacking at the network level and in non-specialist programmes. Audiences discern this in a more superficial approach to reporting rural stories, an emphasis on the immediate conflict, and a lack of intelligent probing of positions.

In England, the news and current affairs agenda is dominated by London and Westminster, where rural affairs have a low profile. The concerns and experiences of people outside London and the South-East are felt by audiences to be a low priority for the news operation. News risks overlooking stories bubbling up from the grassroots.

Again, at network level, and in some of the regional services for England, the BBC failed to address national issues – education, health, employment – from a rural perspective. This was much more effectively done in the devolved nations and particularly by the indigenous minority language services.

To an undue extent, rural issues under examination in BBC news and current affairs are presented as polarised rather than a "wagon wheel" of views. The BBC needs to widen its sources and range of voices. The countryside organisations could, in a coordinated way if possible, help the BBC achieve greater breadth of opinion.

At the network level, there is a huge reliance on Radio 4 to deliver a good impartial spread of rural output. The news duty falls disproportionately – almost exclusively – on Farming Today. Protecting, nurturing and leveraging Farming Today is very important in achieving accurate, broad and informed coverage of agriculture and food production, and for the BBC's credibility on a central core of rural affairs. Similarly, Countryfile on BBC1 shoulders almost all that network's regular coverage of rural affairs – to great acclaim.

People who live in the countryside are largely well served by their most local BBC providers. Presenters and programme makers at the local level demonstrate a sound understanding of what is locally relevant, of the differences and the connections between urban and rural communities in their areas, and have a wide network of contacts to help them reach and deliver authentic rural comment and experience.

A small number of bodies were disproportionately the first port of call for comment on stories. The RSPB particularly stood out in this regard, with the NFU and the National Trust in a secondary position. This is limiting the breadth of opinion and expertise offered to the audience.

There is scope for more and better use of science to explain important stories and developments for the audience. The use of celebrities is a distraction for the



public who want more authoritative voices, better able to provide context, history and balanced analysis.

The indigenous minority language programmes are by their nature and geography much closer to the lives of rural communities. This gives some of our more remote rural places an opportunity for strong coverage of their issues and lives. While this is being mostly replayed to the local audience where it originated, there is potential for this material to be utilised more widely. These important BBC services benefit from specific resourcing for the indigenous minority language channels and the Director of News may wish to consider whether the BBC's output more generally can benefit from the stories that are unearthed.

The biggest risk to impartiality in the BBC's network news and current affairs output is too narrow a range of voices and opinion, a default to binary/conflict-led reporting. The biggest challenges on bias are unintended but nevertheless potentially severe: there is evidence that at network level, the BBC overlooks issues that directly or differently affect the rural populations of the UK. In particular, the rural population of England is poorly served. This may be because of an unintended metropolitan bias; it may be a wider point about reporting of England in an increasingly devolved UK. There is a tendency disproportionately to report rural affairs from an environmental perspective, rather than balancing this starting point with the social and economic dimensions.

There are four areas the BBC could tackle to address these conclusions:

- improve the weight of its rural affairs coverage so that it has more credibility both inside and outside the BBC
- improve networking across the BBC and the development of broader rural contacts beyond the BBC
- help pool excellence and bring content to a wider audience
- sustain and protect the flagship programmes and services. In the absence of Countryfile and Farming Today, this would have been a much less positive report.

In conclusion, I find that the BBC's content on rural affairs is overwhelmingly good, with little evidence of bias, but it can be unintentionally partial in a narrow presentation of the issues. The urban audience might not always notice this but the rural audience does. The more expert the journalist on rural affairs, or the closer he or she is geographically or by background to the story, the more accurate and balanced is the coverage.

Recommendations

My professional background is as a management consultant, and inevitably in the course of this review I have thought about what practical steps the BBC might



take. I make suggestions here out of a strong desire to be helpful, and entirely accept the BBC retains its operational independence.

I invite the BBC to consider the following steps:

- Re-establish the post of Rural Affairs Correspondent. This could be combined with other programme responsibilities, such as the investigative reports on Countryfile. Part of the role must be a proactive connection with regional and local BBC journalists and those in the devolved nations. This is the most impactful decision the BBC could take to address the conclusions in this report.
- 2. Identify a big-hitter with the bandwidth and commitment to take an editorial oversight role, championing rural affairs across network output, devolved, regional and local programmes. Charge this individual with monitoring and reporting progress against some of the areas for improvement that I have identified, such as range of voice or covering rural issues through an environmental prism.
- 3. Accelerate and increase the measures James Harding and David Holdsworth are taking to make it easier for local and regional journalists to deliver news content at the network level. Track the visibility of these journalists on network news output.
- 4. At least annually, gather together the community of BBC journalists and programme makers who are covering rural affairs to share ideas, experiences, contacts, collaboration opportunities.
- 5. Have part of this meeting attended by senior network news and commissioning editors to "sheep dip" them in rural affairs.
- 6. Consider, perhaps in parallel to this gathering, hosting an off the record discussion on rural policy sponsored by James Harding a supercharged version of the Rural Affairs Committee with a much wider mix of institutional and local voices. This could help the countryside bodies be better mobilised for the future, a step I urge them to consider.
- 7. Make a concerted effort to revitalise the BBC's rural contacts list across a wide range of expertise.

Whatever measures the BBC's leadership decide to take in response to this review, I will watch with interest for these critical outcomes:

Countryfile and Farming Today are sustained and flourish as flagship programmes



- rural affairs is recognised as a specific competency across the BBC, beyond the specialist rural programmes unit in Bristol
- there is a strong and credible person taking an overview of the breadth of BBC coverage for television, radio and online who can offer in-depth expertise to help inform and develop news and current affairs judgments
- deliberate, sustained, connectivity exists between the BBC journalists and programme makers who are covering rural affairs. This is evidenced by more rural news stories being originated or surfaced, more collaboration and sharing of ideas, content and contacts, embracing network through to local
- output from specialist programmes is more frequently syndicated or reused, making it more accessible to a wider audience, whether at network, devolved, regional or local level – or online
- a greater range of voices and organisations contributes to rural content, including renewed emphasis on science and context in rural affairs reporting.

These moves can help the BBC demonstrate that it understands its rural audience, especially through the medium of news programmes, and to bring a deeper understanding to an urban majority.



ANNEX A: CONSULTEES AND CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS REVIEW

External Contributors

Di Alexander, Former Chief-Exec, Highland Small Communities Housing Trust, current housing manager for Cairngorms National Park, Scotland Hazel Allen, Engagement & Development, Highland Senior Citizens' Network, Scotland

Mr Peter Archdale, Deputy Chairman, Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC), Northern Ireland

Edmund Bailey, NFU, press officer, Wales

Alastair Balmain, Editor, The Shooting Times

Gareth Bannon, Press Officer, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland

Fran Barnes, Director of Communications, The National Farmers' Union

Tim Baynes, Moorland Group Director, Scottish Land and Estates

Patrick Begg, Rural Enterprise Director, The National Trust

Clarke Black, Chief Executive, Ulster Farmers' Union

Amanda Bryan, Forestry Commission's commissioner for Scotland

Gerry Burns MBE, Northern Ireland

Dr Liam Campbell, Historic Buildings Council, Northern Ireland

Bob Carruth, NFU Scotland and Chair of BBC Scotland's Rural & Agricultural Affairs Advisory Committee

Viscountess Cobham, Chair, Visit England

Garry Coutts, Chairman, NHS Highland, Scotland

Peter Davies, FUW, press officer, Wales

Aileen Donnelly, Communications Officer, NI Rural Development Council

Andre Farrar, Media Manager, RSPB

Nick Fenwick, NFU, Wales

Derek Flyn, Scottish Crofting Federation

Katie Foster, Chair of the Shropshire and Telford Tourism Strategy Board

Ryan Gavan, Press and Communications Officer, Scottish Wildlife Trust

Dr Chris Gibson OBE, Northern Ireland

Jill Grieve, Head of Communications, The Countryside Alliance

Paul Hamblin, Director, National Parks England

Lady Anthony Hamilton, President, Federation of Women's Institutes of Northern Ireland

Harry Hassall, representing on behalf of David Green, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Scotland

Mark Hedges, Editor, Country Life

George Hamilton, Highland Biodiversity Partnership, Scotland



David Inman, Chief Executive, Rural Services Network

Ian Jardine, Chief Executive, Scottish Natural Heritage

Ann Jones, Chair, National Federation of Women's Institutes, Wales

Sarah Jones, NFU, press officer, Wales

Dr Sam Kennedy, Deputy Director of Education Services of The College of Food,

Agriculture and Rural Enterprise, Northern Ireland

Gerry Lavery, Senior Finance Director, Department of Agriculture and Rural

Development, Northern Ireland

Sarah Lee, Head of Policy, The Countryside Alliance

Dr Philomena de Lima – Director, University of Highlands and Islands' Centre for Remote & Rural Studies

Rebecca McConnell, Public Relations and Communications Co-ordinator, Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU)

Lauri McCusker, Director, Fermanagh Trust, Northern Ireland

Maureen Macmillan, Moray Firth Partnership, Scotland

Julia Marley, Policy Committee Member and Craven Branch Chair, Campaign to Protect Rural England

Carol Masheter, Development Project Officer, Highland Environmental Network, Scotland

Rhys Meirion, tenor, Wales

Tegwen Morris, Merched y Wawr, business woman, Wales

Prof Paddy Murphy, Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute

Julie Nelson, Rural Officer, Church of England

Clare Norman, Senior Press Officer, Campaign to Protect Rural England

Tracy O'Toole, Marketing and Business Development Executive, Royal Ulster Agricultural Society

Robin Page, farmer and Chairman of the Countryside Restoration Trust

Charlie Philips, Moray Firth Partnership, Scotland

Graeme Prest, Forestry Commission, Scotland

Ms Caroline Redpath OBE, Assistant Director, YouthAction Northern Ireland Spokesperson, Traveller Movement

Kenneth Stevens, PR & Communications Officer, Scottish Gamekeepers

Diane Stevenson, Assistant Director, Natural Heritage, NI Environment Agency

Christine Tacon, Chair, BBC Rural Affairs Advisory Committee, England

Heather Thompson, Director Northern Ireland, National Trust

Denis Torley, Forestry Consultant, Bidwells, Scotland

Dawn Varley, Director of Fundraising and Campaigns, League Against Cruel Sports Eryl Vaughan, Windpower Wales

Gary Verity, Chief Executive, Welcome to Yorkshire

Susan Walker, Convener, Crofting Commission, Scotland

Fiona White, CEO, Community Lincs (rural community development charity)

Sir Barney White-Spunner, Executive Chairman, The Countryside Alliance

Arlon Williams, RSPB, Wales

Iain Wilson, Regional Manager, NFUS, Highland, Scotland

Michael Woods, Professor of Geography, Aberystwyth University, Wales

Helen Woolley, Director-General, Country Land and Business Association

Jonathan Young, Editor, The Field



Internal

Helen Boaden, Director, Radio

Danny Cohen, Director, Television

Jeremy Cooke, former BBC Rural Affairs Correspondent

Jane Ellison, Commissioning Editor, Radio 4

Melanie Fanstone, Assignment Editor, Health and Science

Janice Hadlow, former director, BBC2

James Harding, Director, News

Roger Harrabin, Environment Analyst

Jeremy Hayes, former Editor Rural Affairs

Tom Heap, former Rural Affairs Correspondent

David Holdsworth, Controller, English Regions

Dan Holland, radio programme maker, Scotland

David Jennings, Head of Regional and Local programmes, East Yorkshire and

Lincolnshire

Peter Johnston, Director, Northern Ireland

Bill Lyons, Executive Producer, Countryfile

Clare McGinn, Head, Radio Production, Bristol

Pennie Latin, Senior radio programme maker, Scotland

Maggie Mackinnon, Asst Editor, News and Sport/TV and Radio, Scotland

Norrie Maclennan, News Editor, Gaelic/TV and radio, Scotland

Ken MacQuarrie, Director, Scotland

Su Maskell, Assistant Editor, Health and Science

Roger Mosey, former Editorial Director

Paul Moss, Business correspondent

Charlie Partridge, Managing Editor, Radio Lincolnshire

Steve Peacock, former editor, Farming Today, agriculture advisor to the Archers

Paul Royall, Editor, BBC News at 6pm and 10pm

Peter Salmon, Director, England

David Shukman, Science Editor

Philip Sime, content producer, Scotland

Charlotte Smith, presenter Farming Today

Linsey Smith, Rural Affairs Correspondent, East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire

Craig Swan, News Editor, English News for Highlands and Islands, Scotland

Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director, Wales

Ceri Thomas, former Head of News Programmes, now Editor, Panorama

Andrew Thomson, radio bulletin producer, Scotland

Andrew Thorman, former Head of BBC Rural Affairs

Fran Unsworth, Deputy Director, News and Current Affairs

Mike Walker, senior producer, Scotland

Jonathan Wall, Controller, Radio 5 live

Gwyneth Williams, Controller, Radio 4



ANNEX B: SUMMARY OF THE BBC GOVERNORS' REVIEW OF BBC COVERAGE OF RURAL AFFAIRS, 2003

In June 2003, the then BBC Governors commissioned a review of BBC coverage of rural affairs.

The review was in three parts: an independent expert panel; focus group research with audiences; and content analysis carried out by the BBC. The review reported in October 2003.

It found much that was good: the BBC takes rural issues seriously; coverage is often of high quality; and the appointment of a Rural Affairs Correspondent was welcomed. However, the great diversity of rural areas was not always understood properly by metropolitan-based broadcasters, and this could lead to glib generalisations and unintentional bias.

One example identified in the review was that the concerns of those who live in accessible rural areas are not always the same as those who live in remote areas, but they are sometimes treated as identical. Another is the fox-hunting debate, where it was misleading to represent the countryside as uniformly pro-hunting – or to depict everyone who hunts as belonging to the landed gentry.

To counter this, the review recommended that BBC News should tap into existing expertise to build authority. The review also recommended that serious consideration should be given to creating a dedicated rural affairs site on bbc.co.uk/news.

The review also considered the representation of rural affairs in BBC drama. Some drama – particularly *The Archers* – was praised for pursuing strong and accurate rural storylines.

But not all were so successful. A degree of stereotyping was felt to be acceptable, particularly in comedy such as *The Vicar of Dibley,* but it was felt that there were missed opportunities. The review recommended that television drama should explore the possibilities inherent in the grittier side of contemporary rural life.

The findings of the review were presented to programme makers across the BBC and distributed to editors in BBC News. There has been progress in implementing its recommendations, although more remains to be done.



The appointment of a new Rural Affairs Correspondent has had a positive effect in raising the profile of rural issues in BBC News programmes. BBC News 24 is working more closely with the BBC Nations & Regions to ensure that local expertise on rural issues finds a place in national output. And there is greater use made of the expertise of the Rural Affairs Unit in Birmingham. The possibility of a rural affairs website remains under review.



EXECUTIVE RESPONSE

We are grateful to Heather Hancock for her comprehensive report and her considered findings. We take our commitment to the reporting of Rural Affairs very seriously and welcome the report's endorsement of our programming and impartiality, singling out flagship rural affairs programming on BBC One, BBC Two and Radio 4, as well as coverage in the regions and Nations for particular praise. The report is comprehensive in its analysis of Countryfile, Farming Today and Watches (Springwatch, Autumnwatch), but it should be noted that, inevitably, the report could not reflect the full range of TV programmes particularly on BBC Two and BBC Four.

The report identifies areas for improvement it believes need to be addressed. Whilst overall the BBC does a good job reporting and reflecting rural affairs, the report makes reasonable suggestions of ways in which output could be further improved. Our response to the suggestions for improvement made by the report is contained below.

We would like to assure the Trust that, despite concerns expressed by some contributors to the report, flagship programming has examined the "darker" sides of rural life (for example farm safety and rural poverty), recent immigrants' relationship with the countryside, and the complexities of the relationships between farmers and their livestock. Countryfile also anticipated the recent severe flooding as early as Spring 2013 and will continue to focus on these sorts of issues. We acknowledge that Watches have not always delved deeply into the more political debates about human/wildlife tensions that find a more natural home in news and current affairs coverage. We would, however, like to assure the Trust that the Watches have, and will continue to, explore those issues when there is a clear biological or ecological dimension.

Many news stories are based around conflicts, opposition to a government policy for example, but we accept the obligation to reflect a broad range of views where they exist. A binary approach to a subject may be appropriate on many occasions but we accept that it can have its limits and, where they exist, we should strive to represent a wide range of views on controversial subjects in the interest of impartiality.

We recognise the concern expressed in the report at the loss of specialist Rural Affairs Correspondent posts. In Northern Ireland, we have a specialist Agriculture reporter and are currently considering ways in which we can improve his deployment to enhance our output. In addition, we have specifically tasked four senior district journalists to cover rural affairs in their respective areas, and they do so on a regular basis. For example, recent stories we broadcast about badger baiting came from one district journalist and another is closely monitoring the fracking story in his area.



In Scotland, we accept that the loss of the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Correspondent post has meant that, at times, coverage of rural affairs has focussed on the environmental angle rather than social and economic issues. We will rectify the situation by better utilising specialism in fishing and farming from our Aberdeen and Selkirk teams respectively and by ensuring that social issues across rural Scotland are a priority for programme teams.

In Wales, rural affairs are of great importance in both English language output and Welsh language programming. Coverage of rural Affairs comes under the remit of our Environment Correspondent with staff from our district offices playing an important role in reflecting the issues affecting their particular locations and the nation as a whole. In addition at our daily editorial conferences, we try to ensure that all aspects of the nation's life, economy and different geographical areas are reflected in all our programmes and this has a benefit in ensuring that due weight is given to rural affairs.

For Network News, the Rural Affairs Correspondent post – which, as its top recommendation, the report wishes to reinstate – is an expensive post, based outside London with its own dedicated team and equipment. As the author herself recognises, "in a continuing era of cost cutting at the BBC, making the case for a new, costly, dedicated post will be challenging".

We agree, so we intend to approach the task slightly differently. Our Londonbased Science and Environment team will continue to report and analyse rural stories as part of their brief and we will continue to improve links with our local and regional journalists. We are going to extend the brief of three regional correspondents, based in Birmingham, Suffolk and North Yorkshire, to report for network news on rural affairs. One of our Environment Correspondents will spend time in Bristol, basing themselves there for some of the time. This will allow them to work more easily with BBC specialists at Farming Today and bring a wider range of voices and story ideas from outside London to Network News. We are also discussing a new arrangement with Countryfile whereby a reporter contributes some reports on rural issues to TV bulletins, and offers expertise on radio news programmes such as Today and The World at One. By doing this we would hope to join up the knowledge that exists within BBC News more efficiently and influence our newsgathering. In this way, we hope to address the author's concern that we should always be able to sense the pulse of England beyond the South East.

In recognising this need, we also accept the recommendation that we should "identify a big-hitter with the bandwidth and commitment to take an editorial oversight role, championing rural affairs across network output, devolved, regional and local programmes". We would anticipate adding this to the responsibilities of an existing editor.

BBC News will, as requested, seek to widen and deepen our contacts through the 'expert days' run by the College of Journalism, in which practitioners and journalists meet, and which were held successfully after the Science impartiality



review. BBC News accept that we should, at least annually, gather together the community of BBC journalists and programme makers who are covering rural affairs to share ideas, experiences, contacts, and collaboration opportunities. We intend to organise this either through the College of Journalism or by attending the existing Rural Affairs Committee meetings in Bristol and we will invite senior network news and commissioning editors "to 'sheep dip' them in rural affairs". This should help to address the author's concern that we do not use as wide a range of voices and opinions as we should. In the Nations, we will look to extend the range of voices and thereby reduce the prominence of certain organisations and/or individuals over others.

We also agree that we should host an off the record discussion on rural policy sponsored by the Director of News.