

Our Promise To You: How the Trust will engage with audiences

The BBC Trust's Audience Engagement Protocol

1. Introduction

The BBC Trust is here to act in the interest of licence fee payers, and by licence fee payers we don't just mean those whose name is on the television licence, but also any other person in the UK who watches, listens to or uses any BBC service, or may do so in the future.

The public is made up of many diverse groups reflecting age, geography, interests, gender, religions, abilities, sexual orientation, ethnic background and a variety of other factors. In order to act in the interest of all members of the public, the Trust has to understand everyone's opinions and expectations. The Trust can then use its judgement to make decisions that set the BBC's course.

It is, therefore, very important that we find the best ways to listen to, and seek the views of the public. This is what we call engagement. We also need to ensure that the public understands the role of the Trust, including what is the responsibility of the Trust, and what falls to other bodies.

It is also important that we continually review this in the light of what we are told by audiences, and as technology allows us to engage in new ways.

This document outlines the ways in which we intend to engage with the public.

2. Principles of Engagement

The BBC Trust needs to understand all of the various groups which make up the audience – as such it has to carry out a wide range of public engagement. We will, however, be clear why we are carrying out this work.

We have, therefore, come up with a number of principles which should underpin any of our engagement activities.

We want to use methods of engagement which:

1. are ones which the public believes will work and will use.
2. will provide greater visibility for the work of the BBC Trust and, therefore, encourage the public to participate.
3. reach out to all members of the public, including those who might feel alienated from the BBC, while being resistant to capture by those with the loudest voices and vested interests.
4. are practical, convenient and easy for those taking part.
5. are open and transparent, including reporting the outcomes of our engagement.

- do not lose sight of the main aim of the BBC, which is to provide quality programmes and services.

3. Methods of Engagement

There are many ways in which we plan to engage with licence fee payers. In some cases only one method of engagement will be used but in most cases we will use several ways in order to ensure that we hear from as many members of the public as possible

3.1 Consultations

The Trust has to make many important decisions about the future of the BBC and the way in which the licence fee revenue is spent, and it is important that we understand what different audiences think before we make these decisions. Consultation is a very important part of this process.

The ways in which we consult will depend on the subject matter of the consultation; however, it will always be in ways which are appropriate to the subject matter of the consultation.

We will also think about who is likely to be affected by the outcome of the consultation, and work out the best ways of hearing from them.

The Trust will consult on many things, but we will always consult as part of a formal review of a BBC service, and as part of a Public Value Test which is carried out whenever the Trust receives a proposal for a new BBC service, or a significant change to an existing service.

Typically consultations will involve:

- a consultation document and questionnaire published on the BBC Trust website and available, on request, in hard copy format
- quantitative and qualitative research
- discussion with the BBC Audience Councils (see below for more about the Audience Councils)

The consultation document will be written using plain language. We will only use technical terms where necessary. If a consultation is particularly complex we will clearly explain the processes, and provide a summary of the key issues.

The consultation document will be published in Welsh as well as English. This is in line with the BBC's commitments under the Welsh Language Act, which also allows people to respond in Welsh should they wish.

The online consultation document will be designed to be accessible to users of assistive technologies such as screen readers. Consultation documents will be available in audio and Braille on request.

We will also ensure that the consultation is well publicised so that people know when and how they can take part.

Members of the public have told us that they only want to take part in a consultation if it is clear what might change as a result. We will, therefore make the exact scope of the project clear at the start of the consultation.

Once the Trust has completed a consultation we will publish our decisions, and the reasons behind these decisions, alongside an analysis of all the information we've considered in reaching our decisions. You can find out more about how we intend to report to you in section 3.8.

3.2 Audience Councils

3.2.1 What Are They

There are four Audiences Councils, one in each nation of the United Kingdom¹. The Councils' role is to bring a wide range of licence fee payers' views to bear on the work of the Trust, through the Councils' links with diverse communities, including geographically-based communities and other communities of interest, within the UK.

3.2.2 What They Do

The Audience Councils engage with licence fee payers across the UK and its different communities. This is done in many ways. Each Audience Council has developed a programme of outreach work which will ensure that they hear from as many, and as diverse a range of people as possible.

The Audience Councils play a key role in any public consultation organised by the Trust. This means that they must be consulted before the BBC launches a new service; when the Trust is reviewing a service; and when the Trust is considering how well the BBC is doing in delivering its Public Purposes. In these consultations the Audiences Councils will be informed by discussions and considerations at their meetings and by the programme of outreach which they have conducted.

The Audience Councils will report to the BBC Trust about how well the BBC is serving audiences in each nation, advise on any issues raised, and suggest priorities for the coming year.

Each Audience Council will also publish an Annual Review, giving licence fee payers its assessment of how well the BBC is serving licence fee payers in their nation.

¹ The Audience Council England is supported by a network of Regional Audience Councils

3.2.3 Membership of Councils

The Chair of the Audience Council is the BBC Trust member for that nation. The remaining members are members of the public who have an interest in the work of the BBC, and an understanding of the needs, interests, concerns and diversity of the audience in their area. Audience Council members serve for a period of up to five years. Members are volunteers and do not have any professional affiliation to the BBC.

3.2.5 How members are selected

Members are selected by the BBC Trust on the recommendation of local selection panels. All appointments are made in accordance with the guidance from Committee on Standards in Public Life. That is to say they will be open, include independent assessment, be based on merit and adhere to equal opportunities principles. All applicants are asked to complete an application form. A shortlist is drawn up by a local selection panel, which includes members independent from both the Audience Councils and the BBC. Those shortlisted will be invited to attend an interview.

3.2.6 How to join a Council

Vacancies for membership of Councils are advertised in a number of ways including on the Council website (see below), on radio, on television and in the press. If you are interested in applying you will be asked to complete an application form and may be called for interview.

3.2.7 Report from Audience Councils

The Audience Councils meet monthly² and publish a summary of the discussions which take place. You can read about these on the Audience Councils website. The website also contains biographies of the members, future workplans of the councils and details of how to contact the Audience Council for your area. You can access the websites via bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/audiencecouncils

The BBC Trust has published a detailed Audience Councils Protocol which can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/framework/protocols/accountability

3.3 Research Projects

The BBC Trust needs to understand about all audiences, including those who might not take part in an open consultation. We will, therefore, carry out a programme of research across which we will make sure that we cover many different audience groups across any one year.

This should also ensure that any open consultation is not captured by those with the loudest voice and strongest opinions.

² In England the Audience Council meets six times a years, alternating on a monthly basis with the Regional Audience Councils meetings

The research will be tailor made for each specific project. However, among the things which we might do are:

- Public opinion surveys. For example, research that involves interviews with a large number of people either face to face, on the telephone or over the internet.
- Research discussion groups, also known as focus groups, looking at specific issues with different audience groups.
- Research workshops which will allow the public to have in depth discussions about key issues which the BBC Trust is considering.

We will always publish a report of the findings from the research projects we commission, at the same time we explain the decisions we have made. You can read more about how we report to licence fee payers in section 3.8.

3.4 Other Ways of Letting People Have Their Say

The BBC Trust aims to provide as many opportunities as possible for the public to have their say and to feed comments to the Trust. This will include using traditional methods as well as newer, interactive ways.

We have our own website (www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust) which is used to launch consultations, and open discussions about the BBC's services and its Public Purposes.

We will hold public meetings around the UK where the public will be invited to come along and tell the Trust, face-to-face, what they think about the BBC. These meetings will be publicised locally and we will hold them in accessible locations which allow for the involvement of disabled people. We will work with the Audience Councils when they conduct their programme of outreach.

We will also use the BBC's own services to allow you to talk to us directly. This might be on radio phone-ins, webchats or on television.

3.5 Interest Groups

There are a number of organisations which specifically represent members of the public. They may be based around communities of interest, geographically based groups or other factors including disability, race and gender, faith and sexual orientation.

We must find ways of listening to these organisations, particularly when we are considering issues specifically relevant to that group.

At the same time we must ensure that we do not allow any single group to dominate discussions about issues, and we will consider the views of these interest groups alongside what we have learned from open consultation and research.

3.6 Listening to complaints and comments

The BBC takes complaints very seriously, and the BBC Trust plays a key role in the complaints procedure, both in having an oversight of the way in which complaints are handled and acting as the final stage of the appeals process for editorial complaints from those people who are unhappy with the way in which their complaint has been handled or the response they have received from BBC Management.

The first port of call for complaints and comments to the BBC is by either contacting the programme itself, or by contacting BBC Information. You can do this by e-mail, telephone or letter. More details can be found at

www.bbc.co.uk/complaints

or by calling 08700 100 222

or by writing to BBC Complaints, PO Box 1922, Glasgow G2 3WT

3.7 Taking Action

Having listened to the public we must then decide whether we need to take action, and, if so, what.

We will carefully and appropriately assess the views of licence fee payers as part of our decision making, for example:

- When we carry out a review of each of the BBC's services
- When we are deciding whether the BBC can launch a new service, or make a major change to an existing service
- When we are deciding on the priorities for the BBC in terms of its Public Purposes.

We'll make sure that we consider how the views vary amongst the many different members of the audience. We also need to balance audience views with a whole range of other factors, but we will always explain the reasons behind the decisions we make.

In addition to engaging about specific decisions and policies, we also hear from the public about a range of other issues. Some of these issues such as the content of the Royal Charter, or the licence fee settlement are not the responsibility of the BBC Trust. However, other comments will be used to help us set our future programme of work.

Therefore, we will regularly review everything which we have learned from our engagement work, including reports from the Audience Councils, survey information about what different sections of the audience think about the BBC, major themes and questions raised at public meetings, themes from complaints, alongside research commissioned by BBC Management. We'll identify some of the key issues and consider what the best way is to address these concerns.

We'll also discuss this with BBC Management, and set them a series of audience challenges which will address some of the issues which have been raised during our engagement activities.

3.8 Reporting to Licence Fee Payers

One of the key issues which members of the public have told us is that it is vital that we report on the work we have done, the decisions which we have made, and how it has used the insight gained from talking to audiences.

We will publish all information we have looked at as part of any consultation. This will include a summary of written responses from individual groups, a report of research findings, and transcripts from public meetings.

We will ensure that our reporting back to the public is done in clear and simple language, using technical terms only where necessary, and is spin free.

We will also use a variety of methods to report back. We'll identify the target audiences for each report and choose the appropriate way of communicating to that audience.

Our website (bbc.co.uk/bbctrust) is designed to be accessible to people using assistive technologies such as screen readers. Audio and Braille documents are available on request.

The Trust will publish an annual report to explain to licence fee payers how it believes the BBC is delivering against the Public Purposes.

4. Measuring Effectiveness

It is clear that any engagement will only be successful if we learn more about the public and what they want, and we explain our decisions clearly.

We will develop a series of measures to assess the effectiveness of our engagement work which we will use to carry out an annual review. This will help us ensure that the audience is at the centre of how we make decisions, and that we have both sought their views and reported our findings to the public. We will publish our assessment in the BBC's Annual Report and Accounts. We will commission an independent assessment of our engagement work every three to five years.

We will carry out an assessment on all of our engagement work, to ensure that it does not discriminate against any licence fee payers and, where possible, promotes equality.

We will publish details of our future engagement plans on an annual basis.

We will review this protocol on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects new methods of engagement and emerging technologies.