

## **The BBC Trust's Public Value Test for BBC Three (plus)**

### **Audience Council England submission**

#### **1. Introduction**

1.1. The Audience Council England is an advisory body of the BBC Trust. Our role is to provide the Trust with insights on the views, needs and interests of audiences in England. In order to do this we are supported by a network of panels, one in each of the BBC's twelve broadcasting regions in England.

1.2. This submission is based on discussions at each of our regional panels, and subsequent consideration by the Audience Council England.

#### **2. Summary conclusions**

2.1. The members of the Audience Council England considered the BBC Trust's Public Value Test proposals which include:

- The closure of BBC Three in the autumn of 2015, and its launch as an online only channel
- More online first and selected third party content on iPlayer
- Extended hours for CBBC
- A BBC One+ 1 channel

2.2. In our discussions we have found that while there was a range of views among our panel members, as would be expected given the varied proposals, overall there was a significant consistency of opinion and informed perspective.

2.3. We understand that the ways in which the audience accesses broadcast programmes on television is evolving rapidly and this brings new possibilities to innovate, lead and also to keep pace with changing technology and audience preferences, such as those explored in the range of proposals. While we welcome the concept to adapt and transform the offer to the younger 16-34 audience through the evolution of **BBC Three** we feel strongly that this should be developed as a phased transition, rather than through an immediate closure of the BBC Three channel and a simultaneous launch as an online only channel. We are supportive of the proposed changes to **BBC iPlayer** and a **BBC One +1 channel**. We do not consider that the extended hours for **CBBC** as set out in the proposal are beneficial or being asked for by the audience.

### **3. Assessment and response to the consultation proposals**

#### **BBC Three**

3.1. We consider that it is both appropriate and welcome for the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, to innovate and take the lead in response to evidenced audience preferences and trends. And we value the ways in which the BBC has capitalized on the opportunities new technology offers as it develops its portfolio of services.

3.2. However, having considered the feedback from our panel members and following subsequent discussion of the proposals, we are not supportive of the proposal to simultaneously close BBC Three as a broadcast television channel in the autumn of 2015 and move the service online with instant effect. We are not opposed to the principle of appropriate, transitional change, but we take the strong view that such a move should be phased in, over a longer period. We consider that this would ensure that the younger, target 16-34 audience remains well-served, with universal access to linear television programmes, until there is more parity for online access to content which is routinely available to the wider audience.

3.3. We recognise that there are inconsistencies and variations in broadband speed and online access across the English regions, both in rural and urban areas. Although this is not within the remedy or control of the BBC, while this situation continues the variations in access to online services for the BBC's licence fee payers and its audience remain an issue. In turn we remain concerned about the disparity in meeting audience expectation as the BBC makes the transition to and investment in its digital services.

3.4. We understand that not all households or viewers currently own or have access to a smart TV which ensures easy viewing of internet only content, and irrespective of the available broadband service throughout each English region, there are also cost considerations for different broadband and mobile packages, and for unlimited online access. Equally, viewing broadcast content on a laptop, tablet or other device other than a smart TV is often an individual activity, rather than a communal or family activity, and we consider that the loss of this shared option for families and other communal viewers would be detrimental.

3.5. While the equivalent of universal TV access remains absent for online only viewing because of differences in broadband or internet access, and there remains a discrepancy in universal ownership of smart TVs, we feel that the proposed BBC Three broadcast channel closure should be undertaken and progressed as a gradual transition over a longer period. This would enable the BBC Three audience to retain traditional viewing options, distinctive content and popular programmes rather than instantly losing access to linear channel broadcast content directly targeted at the younger 16-34 age group.

3.6. We also heard from our panel members that there were concerns about online navigation and how easy it would be to find content on an online only service. Given the proposed budget reduction from around £60m to £30m we are also concerned about the prospects for future talent development and the development of new programmes and inventive formats, particularly for comedy, entertainment, factual and music events relevant to the 16-34 age group.

3.7. We heard that some panel members felt that while the proposal reflects aspects of the evolving viewing habits of the BBC Three audience demographic, and that watching on-demand irrespective of audience demographic or age range was a very welcome option for viewers, at this

stage it would be helpful to have more evidence to support the proposition that more 16-34 year olds watch content online, for example on iPlayer on-demand, rather than choosing to view scheduled linear broadcast TV. We also consider that there is a potential loss of the older audience who also enjoy BBC Three if the broadcast linear channel closes with immediate effect.

3.8. Some panel members suggested that should a channel have to close because of budget reductions then, in their view, an amalgamation of BBC Four and BBC Two would be preferred, preserving the best and most distinctive of the linear TV channels but not at the expense of content specifically targeted at the 16-34 age group on BBC Three.

3.9. We understand that fresh approaches to develop and trial new services, given the rapidly changing broadcast market, are an essential aspect of a contemporary and dynamic broadcast organization. We welcome the intention which informs this proposal - to enable the BBC to explore future online content offers and shape a new approach to digital services, for example the development of new short-form online content. However, for the reasons we have set out we feel strongly that this should not be at the cost of instantly losing linear broadcast content, and disenfranchising the target BBC Three 16-34 audience at a time when trends among this audience are already down.

#### **4. BBC iPlayer**

4.1. We have considered the proposals for the future development and evolution of BBC iPlayer. With the expectation that the quality and distinctiveness of content is maintained, we are supportive of this proposal.

4.2. We heard from our panel members that iPlayer should continue to innovate and offer new service options. While we understand that not everyone has access to iPlayer we feel that the BBC should continue to revolutionise the service and enable it to evolve over time. Many members welcomed the prospect of online premieres and the inclusion of third party content, as long as quality was preserved and such content met BBC editorial guidelines and standards. Overall this was seen as a welcome innovation.

#### **5. Extended hours for CBBC**

5.1. We have considered the proposals for the extended hours on CBBC and overall we are not in favour of the proposal.

5.2. While there were some mixed views from our panel members, with some considering that this provided a useful extension of the service, in general members told us that running CBBC repeats was not of value or appropriate for the younger target CBBC audience. The period of the evening between 7.00 pm-9.00 pm was considered to be routine family- time or bed-time for this age group. Furthermore some panel members, reflecting the views gathered from youngsters at the upper end of the age group, felt that CBBC content was not relevant to the upper 10-12 year old age group.

5.3. In contrast we heard from a smaller number of panel members who took the view that providing age appropriate and quality content for 12-14 year olds rather than repeating CBBC content for a further two hours would be welcomed; and while additional choice from 7.00pm - 9.00pm as an alternative to other broadcast children's programmes, for example the Cartoon

Network, might be of value, they would in fact prefer any extension to hours to include educational and factual content from CBBC rather than repeats.

## **6. BBC One + I**

6.1. We have considered the proposals for BBC One + I and we are broadly in favour of the proposal.

6.2. We heard from some panel members that this would be of benefit to those in poor broadband access areas of the English regions. It would also give a further option to those who do not have internet access; however there were some concerns about the requirement for a Freeview HD box for those who may not be able to afford further additional costs. Others told us that the creation of a BBC One + I option would offer a useful alternative for viewers and, although non-revolutionary, it would improve choice and the viewing option for the wider BBC One audience.

6.3. While our panel members were generally positive about this proposal we also heard that some considered it to be a long overdue option for the audience, with the BBC simply catching up with the rest of the multi-channel market. There was a question too from some panel members who felt that the provision of a BBC One + I channel at this time did not correlate with the removal of BBC Three, a linear broadcast channel, particularly if the BBC Three proposal was to enable cost savings for the BBC