

Regional Audience Council for BBC East

Minutes of meeting

Wednesday 4 March 2009

The Forum Boardroom, BBC Norwich

Council members present:

Jennifer Akpeki-Tyrell	Link to BBC Three Counties Radio
Melvina Dunnett	
Terry-Anne Golko	Link to BBC Radio Norfolk
Susan Hales	
Stuart Hobley	Joint link to BBC Radio Suffolk
Chandi Hubert	
Helen Hunt	Link to BBC Radio Northampton
Joe Lewis	
Laura Mungovan	
Dominic O'Sullivan	Link to BBC Radio Cambridgeshire
Peter Short	
Clarke Willis	Chair East RAC

Absent: Annie Kiff-Wood, Nicola Mullany, Marcus Tinworth

In attendance:

BBC

Tim Bishop	Head of Region BBC East
John Sparrow	Public Accountability Manager, East & London RACs

1. Welcome, introductions and apologies for absence

Clarke Willis welcomed everyone and introduced Terry-Anne Golko, a new member who has joined the council early to fulfil the role of link to BBC Radio Norfolk.

Apologies were received from Annie Kiff-Wood, Nicola Mullany and Marcus Tinworth

2. Minutes of January meeting

2.1 Minutes

Approved

2.2 Matters arising

John Sparrow tabled responses to Any Other Business items:

- Treatment of Edward Stourton by the *Today* programme – a letter from programme editor Ceri Thomas

- Effectiveness of moderation on *Have Your Say* message boards – an explanation of pre-and post moderation, a copy of the House Rules and a summary of the BBC’s complaints procedure
- Inappropriate language in *Top Gear*, a pre-watershed programme – a selection of responses to recent complaints including one involving *Top Gear* to illustrate how they are handled [+ complaints procedure summary]

DVD copies of the East outreach held in Peterborough had been distributed.

3. Reports

3.1 Audience Councils Day (21 January 2009)

Clarke had been one of three ACE delegates presenting key issues to the BBC Trustees. He felt that their presentation was stronger than those by other nations’ Audience Councils, because of contributions from RACs, including examples and instances raised by East RAC members.

3.2 February ACE meeting

Draft minutes had been circulated.

Clarke Willis noted that the new accountability structure was ratified and will be sent to the Audience Councils Committee for approval. He repeated his explanation that the overall aim was to make ACE more effective compared to other nations’ Audience Councils, thereby improving representation of English licence-fee payers. All members have received an explanatory letter from Alison Hastings including itemised responses to the main concerns expressed at regional council meetings during January.

One member, who had sent comments to Frances Bryant after the January meeting, felt that this letter didn’t deal with points raised. However he accepts the conclusions, apart from proposals to amalgamate business with outreach. Clarke Willis noted that this had been accomplished successfully in Cambridge in November 2007. John Sparrow said that the business element would be limited and placed before outreach activity.

3.3.1 Head of Region’s report

Tim Bishop’s report had been distributed.

Following the BBC Trust’s decision on local video. English Regions now awaits the Trust’s response to alternative proposals intended to enhance regional provision through existing services:

- Additional news at weekends
- Sports/football news
- Political coverage of local areas [a political editor for each BBC Local station]

Clarke Willis felt it was imperative that ACE indicated the importance it attaches to these improvements. He proposed writing formally to ACE for a progress update.

Action CW/JS

Tim also expanded on the BBC’s partnership proposals, which are a creative response to the current discussion about supporting other broadcasters’ public service output in view of the economic downturn. The broad headings include –

- Pooling resources to cover major regional events (e.g. Queen or Prime Minister visit, press conference)

- The possibility of sharing studio facilities
 - Accommodating journalists from competitor broadcasters in BBC buildings
- Though after 40 years of competing head to head every night there is some natural staff understanding to be built, this is seen as a way of using BBC resources to sustain the plurality of regional broadcasting and ensure that broadcasting develops even during lean economic times.

3.3.2 Members' questions, comments

- How will the difference in style between broadcasters be achieved with common or core material?

This relies on different editorial perspectives. Recent examples have been Gaza reporting, with all broadcasters using the same limited range of images, and news items obtained via the Press Association service.

- What progress is there with refurbishing the region's Local Radio stations? BBC Radio Cambridgeshire will be re-equipped in September when it moves to new premises. Bids will be made for Northampton, Three Counties Luton, Essex and Suffolk. The BBC's Head of Business Continuity will visit Luton to assess the urgency of the need.

4. Draft annual report from this region

A copy of the whole report had been distributed. Only the Chair's introduction goes forward to ACE. Members are invited to send any comments to John Sparrow by the end of the week.

Action: ALL

5. Trust business

.1 Local Video proposal

A copy of the Public Value Test had been distributed

.2 BBC Trust workplan

Copies were distributed. In general, RAC and ACE activity will align with the topics and timetable.

.3 Letters from Sir Michael Lyons

His letter to ACE members outlines how the Trust proposes to respond to issues raised at Audience Councils Day.

ACE members also received a copy of his letter to the Director General detailing Trust expectations of the executive. Clarke Willis highlighted the requirement to provide the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire region with its own Politics Show as an instance of successful lobbying at RAC level.

Copies of both letters will be sent to members

Action JS

6. Programme and service review

6.1 Review of BBC Local Radio in the region

Reports from links to the six local stations in the region had been circulated and were tabled.

6.1.1 BBC Radio Cambridgeshire

Dominic O'Sullivan heard consistent praise from members of the public he met at an outside broadcast covering credit crunch issues. Information broadcast during recent snow had been invaluable and appreciated. People he met said they found the station's coverage of both topics "trustworthy" though they trusted national financial reporting less.

One member reported an instance of inaccurate rail information during the bad weather.

6.1.2 BBC Radio Suffolk

Stuart Hobley noted plans to change the programme schedule and hopes that reporting rights to Ipswich Town matches would be regained. He reiterated the value audiences placed on weather, snow and school closures. He explained that the Managing Editor is conducting an analysis of the station's programmes to ensure that each has a unique remit

One member asked about the balance between urban and rural coverage. Stuart acknowledged that this can be an issue, which the station has attempted to address through community journalists, contributing on the merit of each story. There is a focus on rural coverage in Sunday afternoon programming.

6.1.3 BBC Radio Northamptonshire

Helen Hunt reported positive feedback from many grateful listeners, for the consequences of recent bad weather. There is a challenge from the commercial radio station, Heart, though its locally-focused output is limited.

The station is not available via DAB, which prompts frequent complaints and creates confusion for listeners because DAB is promoted so heavily.

6.1.4 BBC Radio Norfolk

Terry-Anne Golko reported that though she felt the output was strong, the station was not attracting new listeners.

As with other stations in the region, its bad weather output had been valuable and well received. She highlighted a balanced report on the credit crunch, which featured closures and new ventures in Great Yarmouth.

6.1.5 BBC Three Counties Radio

Jennifer Akpeki-Tyrell reported similar output and reactions in response to recent snowfall coverage. School closure information had been particularly helpful for parents. Music is being re-introduced into its general output. The station is attracting its target audience, and listening has reportedly increased slightly. The station has received adverse comments about its reduction of programmes for ethnic minorities.

6.1.6 BBC Essex

Joe Lewis commended the station's coverage during recent snow. Changes introduced recently by the new Managing Editor are settling down, though in general the station's output still does not reflect the overall diversity of the service area, notably for the parts of the county that adjoin greater London, and especially by comparison to BBC London 94.9 output. He understands that new programmes are planned.

6.1.7 Main issues emerging

Consistency and accuracy of travel information

Availability of BBC Local Radio stations on DAB

Serving the diverse audiences in each station's area

Declining/refreshing audiences

The Service Licence requirement to reflect religion on Sundays, when many faiths were followed in the region.

6.1.8 BBC response

Addressing the question of serving minorities, Tim Bishop explained that at an earlier point BBC LR had served growing communities, which in one instance - the Asian Network - had become a full-time service in view of the size of the Asian population. He noted that the Luton area (BBC Three Counties) has many minorities, who are served by special programmes, whereas a comparable service on BBC Essex is less feasible because of the stark contrast between the north of the county, (predominantly white) and the south, where the population is more mixed. He agrees that the black community in south Essex is not served: his aspiration is to reflect all communities in mainstream programmes, with specialist support in the evenings. He is also intends to support relationships with community stations. Local and regional output aimed to balance and complement network coverage of financial news reflecting local developments as well as accurately charting local reality. A "crunch-buster" character (cf Alvin Hall) may be introduced, to counterbalance what may be perceived as "bad news".

On religion, Tim felt that the Sunday prescription was a pragmatic requirement that did not inhibit individual stations from reflecting aspects of other faiths at any time.

Chair's summary

Trust emerged as the main expectation and attribute of BBC Local Radio in the East. There was universal praise for the range and accuracy of information given during the recent bad weather, while many found local perspectives on the credit crunch more credible than reporting in national news services. Travel news was not consistent across the region, with varying levels of accuracy and currency; only two stations have their own travel reporters. Some members highlighted the lack of DAB coverage as an issue for their BBC local stations. Only three of the region's six stations are available via DAB, which was perceived as a disincentive to DAB take-up as well as a cause for complaint. Other members were concerned about how local stations served the diverse audiences in their areas – with some specialist strands closing down and other large minorities not served at all. If a general policy of inclusion is in operation, it is not very evident, especially when comparing BBC London 94.9 output with that of BBC Essex (which serves south Essex boroughs that border London). There was concern especially among link members about a general decline in audiences, since refreshed output has not yet attracted new younger listeners.

6.2 Generally Accepted Standards

members' individual comments

- The Ross Brand affair had masked other more serious problems, for example children being interviewed about inappropriate topics, such as classmate

suicide. And some pre-watershed topics are inappropriate – e.g. attempt to drown someone in *EastEnders*. But there can't be one "line" – so much is influenced by the context.

- BBC standards are falling, and Ofcom is too lenient – there's too much freedom.
- Brand Ross is the tip of the iceberg – what about the drowning in *EastEnders* – and the paedophile storyline?
- Warnings are excuses
- The Edmund and Jo show on BBC 6 Music at 9am is risqué but it's acceptable [to the audience] because of their age and expectation.
- Programmes on BBC Three are expected to be risqué.
- *[Withheld from published minutes under section 36 of the Act.]*
- Dr Who "dying" - kids know it's fantasy., but find *EastEnders* "real".
- *[Withheld from published minutes under section 36 of the Act.]*

Chair's summary

Though this was an incomplete and somewhat inconclusive discussion, there was a strong belief that the content of key pre-watershed programmes – illustrated by examples from *EastEnders* and *Top Gear* – was increasingly inappropriate, given the expectation of suitability for a family audience including children. However it was thought too simplistic to "draw a line", because so much depended on context, expectation and channel profile – with the content of many BBC Three shows cited as inappropriate for mainstream viewing but suitable and acceptable for the channel's target audience. There was also a perception that warnings (content advice given before post-watershed programmes begin) are simply an excuse for "anything goes" whereas, though post-watershed programmes should be able to explore more adult themes, audiences should not feel they have been ambushed.

7. Outreach

Generally Accepted Standards

This will be the topic of outreach, likely to be held on the date of the June meeting.

Action: JS to advise when arrangements finalised

8 Burning issues /

None

9. Any other business

One member highlighted the experience of his local Town Centre Partnership, which had received a BBC East researcher's call asking about high-street closures in the context of the credit crunch. It was perceived that instances to illustrate a negative story were being sought, when the town had a more balanced story to tell.

**Action: Town Centre partnership contact to provide more detail;
Tim Bishop to look into issue on receipt.**

10. Farewell and thanks to retiring members

Clarke Willis presented Melvina Dunnett and Helen Hunt with mementoes to mark the ends of their terms of office. He thanked them for their interest, contributions and commitment to BBC accountability.

11. Date, time and place of next meeting:

Tuesday 7 April, The Forum Boardroom, Norwich at 3.45 for 4pm-6pm
[nb first meeting for remaining new members]

Ends

11.03.09

Endnote

[We aim to make as much of the minutes available as possible. However, there will be times when sections of the minutes will be withheld from publication. These will be kept to a minimum and clearly marked.]

The reasons for withholding information are consistent with the Freedom of Information Act which applies to some of the BBC's information. See www.bbc.co.uk/foi for further explanation.]