

## Regional Audience Council for BBC East

Minutes of meeting

Tuesday 11 November 2008

The Forum Boardroom, Norwich

Council members present:

Melvina Dunnett	
Susan Hales	
Stuart Hopley	Joint link to BBC Radio Suffolk
Chandi Hubert	
Annie Kiff-Wood	Joint link to BBC Radio Suffolk
Joe Lewis	
Laura Mungovan	
Dominic O'Sullivan	Link to BBC Radio Cambridgeshire, deputy chair
Peter Short	
Marcus Tinworth	Link to BBC Essex
Clarke Willis	Chair RAC East, Link to BBC Radio Norfolk

Absent:

Jennifer Akpeki-Tyrell	Link to BBC Three Counties Radio
Helen Hunt	Link to BBC Radio Northampton
Nicola Mullany	

In attendance:

BBC

Tim Bishop	Head of Region BBC East
David Clayton	Managing Editor BBC Radio Norfolk
John Sparrow	Public Accountability Manager, East & London RACs

### 1. Welcome, introductions and apologies for absence

Clarke Willis welcomed everyone and introduced David Clayton, Managing Editor BBC Radio Norfolk, who was attending to respond to the review of BBC Radio Norfolk.

Clarke announced that he had agreed to serve as ACE member for the East/ Chair of the East RAC for another year.

### 2. Minutes of 9 September meeting

2.1 Minutes

These had been distributed.

The minutes were approved

The one action (to distribute a copy of the BBC Trust summary of the impartiality review) had been fulfilled by post. Several members said they had not received it, but hadn't raised it because they had not expected it. Further copies will be distributed, with the ACE submission on the Ofcom Public Service Broadcasting Review (PSB2) and an executive summary of the Salford Seminar (see below) [Material will be sent via recorded delivery to ensure that it has been delivered]

There were no matters arising.

### 3. Reports

#### 3.1 ACE meeting 7,8 October, BBC Bristol

Draft minutes had been circulated, with copies of recent press releases about BBC Nations and Regions re-organisation and some programme moves out of London, with a letter of concern to the Chairman.

There were no comments or matters arising from the minutes.

##### 3.1.1 Keeping BBC Local Radio on air

Clarke Willis noted a presentation to ACE about the state of broadcasting equipment in BBC Local Radio stations. Tim Bishop indicated that radios Northampton, Essex and Luton awaited refurbishment.

##### 3.1.2 Impartiality in news

Clarke Willis asked members to monitor news output for impartiality in preparation for a January deadline. [**Later:** This will be co-ordinated across all RACs, with a common brief, and run in January. More information to follow.]

##### 3.1.3 Nations and Regions reorganisation

Clarke Willis drew attention to the letter of concern sent by ACE to the Chairman about lack of England representation on the BBC Direction Group (BDG) compared to that awarded to the other nations. He explained that under this re-organisation, BBC English Regions would now report directly to BBC News, whose director is Helen Boaden. [She has a place on BDG] The controllers of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales will be promoted to director level and given places on the BDG. Though the current Director, Nations and Regions (Pat Loughrey) with Andy Griffie, (until recently Controller, English Regions), had done a great deal to strengthen and broaden output within England, that would cease and Controller, English Regions would not have a place through which to represent England on BDG. ACE members believe this will be disadvantageous to the majority of the UK's population, which is in England. Clarke Willis also noted that budgets for the other nations would be population-based.

- Member's question: What is the anticipated or likely outcome of the letter?
  - The Director General or Deputy Director General is expected to attend the next ACE meeting (Birmingham, 8 December) and the issue will also be raised directly with the BBC Trust on Audience Councils' Day (January 09)

#### 3.2 Head of Region's report

This had been distributed. Tim Bishop drew attention to the region's new network news reporter, Mark Worthington, whose work had just begun to appear on screen.

### 3.3. Ofcom Public Service Broadcasting Review (“PSB2”)

Two members have contributed to the ACE response on this, for the East council. Issues have included ways of funding other broadcasters’ public service content as Channel 4 and *Five* consider increasing their content, while ITV is withdrawing. A key plank in the Ofcom submission is the £140m per year within the present licence fee settlement, ring-fenced to help disadvantaged groups cope with digital switchover.

Input from all the council members who are participating in this survey has been compiled into a submission by Stuart Paterson, ACE member for the West. Clarke Willis thanked the two East representatives for their work.

### 3.4 Salford seminar

Clarke Willis and three other Council members attended on behalf of the East. The Salford development, adjacent to the Lowry Centre in Manchester, is one of the ways in which the BBC aims to signal that it is serious about moving production out of London. Key production departments including BBC Radio 5 Live, BBC Children’s, BBC Sport, Future Media and Technology and Lifelong Learning will be transferring by 2012. This event was intended to explain the potential benefits of this development to the north west and the north of England in general and what differences there might be in programme content as a result.

- Members felt it had been stimulating and exciting to see the location
- Some presentations had been over-long and somewhat unfocused, but all agreed that Richard Deverell’s insight into the move of Children’s was outstanding: “children’s is in good hands”.
- Members were aware of the north-south divide

One member felt that this was largely a cosmetic process, because commissioning power remained in London.

- There was discussion about the role and likely remit of the Director, BBC North, notably about the extent to which any decisions normally made in London might be devolved.
- Members also wondered how this development would improve the BBC’s standing in the North East, which traditionally holds the BBC in low esteem.
- There was concern that this development would have no influence in reflecting the East to the UK.

It was agreed that everyone would maintain awareness and comment on issues from an audience perspective.

**Action: ALL**

### 3.5 Ofcom “Great Digital Debate” – Huntingdon, 5 October 08

One member attended this open meeting on behalf of the Council. It had been staged by Ofcom at the invitation of Huntingdon District Council.

Main topics:

- Availability, speed and funding of broadband, (BBC accused of slowing down the system through the success of iPlayer)
- Ofcom proposals for funding public service broadcasting (e.g. Channel 4)  
He noted that Ofcom’s proposals dismissed the status quo, focussing instead on ways of raising additional funds, including from the current television licence fee. He felt that someone should challenge the way Ofcom is handling this consultation.

**[Later: Tim Bishop & John Sparrow discussed concerns with Head of Communications, English Regions**

#### **4. Trust business and feedback**

##### 4.1 PSB Review part 2

See 3.3 above. A submission from ACE has now been sent to the BBC Trust.  
Copies to be distributed (see 2.1 above)

##### 4.2 BBC Local – Trust provisional conclusions

Not available for discussion. Release expected late November 08.

#### **5. Programme and service review**

##### 5.1 BBC Radio Norfolk

A CD sampler, the Managing Editor's overview and a service licence summary were distributed.

David Clayton commented that the current low listening figures are likely to be the result of audience realignment. He feels that there has never been such a challenging time. Financial pressures meant commercial stations were amalgamating and reducing their local content. This provides an opportunity for BBC Norfolk and he felt the station had been refreshed with a new jingle package and new drive-time presenter. "Heritage vs new" is essentially the current challenge.

- A majority agreed that the floods coverage had been quintessential BBC Local Radio – timely and trusted: - "a real strength".
- The CD sampler suggested that a good range of topics was typically covered on the station.
- Many appreciated the balance within the faith debate, which had been taken from a chat-show strand.
- Many members commented on the Treasure Quest, which they felt was a way of learning about their area.

Other individual comments:

"professional"; "Something for everyone"

Members felt that the station fulfilled the requirements and expectations of the service licence.

##### 5.2 reports from other BBC Local Radio stations in the East.

###### 5.2.1 BBC Three Counties

Report distributed

###### 5.2.2 BBC Radio Northampton

No report

###### 5.2.3 BBC Radio Suffolk

Report distributed

The loss of Ipswich Town home game commentary had been replaced by post-match analysis, which seemed to work well as an alternative.

#### 5.2.4 BBC Radio Essex

Report distributed

#### 5.2.5 BBC Radio Cambridgeshire

Report distributed

- Member's question: is it possible to give audience figures for the South Cambridgeshire area?

**Response:** It is not easy to separate out zones from the aggregated figures. The further complication is the precise definition of the area – e.g. Newmarket is in Suffolk, but looks equally to Cambridge and towns to the east, hence listening is likely to be divided.

#### 5.3 *Losing It* - and *BBC Headroom*, mental health campaign.

DVDs of two hour-long programmes featuring Griff Rhys-Jones on a anger-management + background pages from the BBC website about *BBC Headroom* were distributed

Members' individual comments on the programme:

- Enjoyable; interesting to see how he explores his anger and how society deals with anger. Expected it to be a bit more outward-looking.
- An effective self-exploration, avoiding self-obsession – though did Griff Rhys Jones understand the impact of his anger?
- Too flippant, too much comedy. Other programmes needed.
- *[Withheld from published minutes under section 36 of the Act.]*
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- A bit flippant and superficial
- More arty than scientific or factual; irritating.
- I related to it and found it valuable, especially through the humour.

Chair's summary

The programme stimulated responses ranging from enjoyment through engagement to analytical detachment and dissatisfaction. What emerged was Griff Rhys-Jones' inability to acknowledge his own problem, a key point of anger management. Some hoped for a wider range of more considered programmes that might give clearer insight into underlying causes and guidelines for self-management. Members tacitly approved of the initiative, recognising that it can make a contribution to citizenship by raising awareness and making it possible to talk about an illness which, though widespread, is rarely discussed.

## 6. Outreach

### 6.1 Outreach event – services for young people

Three RAC members attended this event in Parnwell, a “disadvantaged” area of Peterborough. One member reported on the activities, in which two groups of children devised and performed separate responses to the scenario being used by all RACs.

RAC members watched the performances and discussed with the children the thinking behind them. Proceedings were filmed. This and notes from the discussion form the output of the event, for potential inclusion on the ACE website, in a

compilation for ACE members and in the ACE written submission to the BBC Trust consultation.

## **7. Burning issues / any other business**

### 7.1 Brand/Ross affair

#### Individual comments

- BBC should make stars, not buy them. I disapprove of Ross' salary but it's been blown out of all proportion.
- It highlights the risk of outsourcing. The producer is paid by the star.
- They crossed the boundary. [both broadcasters' contracts include a clause requiring them to avoid bringing the BBC into disrepute]
- The BBC response was slow, with a risk of over-reaction
- What's important is moral standing, not risk aversion. Power was handed to the *Daily Mail*. The BBC should lead - it's what people expect.
- Only one comment was included in the offending programme. [Jonathan Ross' enforced] "holiday" is pathetic. The BBC seems not to have universal standards.
- It's sad, [showing] peculiar priorities. The domino effect of overpaid stars losing focus.
- The risk is that the legacy will be stars out of control
- What is the BBC's role – to reflect prevailing standards, or set them. At what point should it reflect, and when should it uphold? Failure to uphold will reduce trust.

#### BBC response

A complaint is no less important whether one or 30K people make it, when it highlights an editorial breach. The content was unacceptable and the Director General has made that clear.

Though current thresholds of taste are difficult to establish and may seem to vary between services, this instance was a clear breach of accepted standards and established internal procedures.

#### Chair's summary

It's been open season on the BBC, because two highly-paid entertainers, hired to attract younger audiences, lost sight of common decency. And on that occasion, the checks and balances designed to manage any excesses failed, followed by a corporate inability to deal with the consequences in a timely and responsible way. That hiatus fuelled a popular press campaign, which many licence-fee payers used to let the BBC know that Jonathan Ross is over-paid. Resignations will not end the saga, because of the unfortunate timing in relation to the current debate about public service broadcasting. The bigger issues – thresholds of taste and decency and perceptions that the BBC's headlong rush to attract younger audience is poorly managed - are still to be addressed.

## 7.2 Nick Robinson

One member disapproved of a comment included in Robinson's report on Peter Mandelson's appointment as a government minister: "...he attracts controversy like manure attracts flies" – felt to be an inappropriate metaphor, because it was less than objective and would do little to raise the esteem of politicians in the eyes of the public.

Clarke Willis commented that it seemed to be an instance of journalists making rather than reporting news. A discussion on that topic would make an interesting agenda item

**Poss agenda item: reporting versus "making" news.**

## 8. Date, time and place of next meeting:

Tuesday 6 January, Cambridge (venue TBA) at 3.15 for 3.30-5.30pm

### 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](http://www.bbc.co.uk/foi) for further explanation.]*