

## Regional Audience Council for BBC London

Meeting : Wednesday 6 February 2008  
The Media Gallery, BBC 3 Marylebone High St London

### MINUTES

#### Present

Patricia Adley  
Steve Ashton  
Angus Fox                      Link to BBC London 94.9  
Paul Chapman  
Anthony Curran  
Dr Christine Fanthome  
Elizabeth Heath  
Dr Dwain Neil                 Chair, London RAC  
Jennifer Vidal

#### BBC:

Michael Macfarlane – Executive Editor BBC London  
John Sparrow, Public Accountability Manager

**Absent**, Ivor John, Christiana Ominiyi, Amir Shah, Alexandra Tham

#### 1. Chair's welcome, introductions and apologies

Dwain Neil welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Ivor John, Christiana Ominiyi, Amir Shah, Alexandra Tham.

#### 2. Minutes: 13 November 2007 meeting and matters arising

#### 3. Programme review – Local radio: BBC London 94.9

All but one member were regular listeners to a range of the station's programmes.

For most it was a station to dip into either for favourite programmes or as a companionable background, rather than for sustained listening.

Presenters singled out for praise include Vanessa Feltz, Danny Baker and Robert Elms, whose knowledge of London was especially valued.

Many appreciated the station's sport programme, as much for presenter Steve Bunce as for the sports coverage itself. Others found the regular sports sequence at 7pm an invitation to disengage.

There was consensus that the breakfast sequence required development, in the wake of Jono Colman's departure. For some, daytime programmes seemed more fun, more lightweight than the breakfast sequence, relying a great deal on phone-in contributions from listeners.

One member felt that the station's variety of presenters and content was both a strength and a weakness, since there was no clear focus. Another, who was not a habitual listener, found the station sound unattractive, notably its reliance on the phone-in element. It had been difficult to equate its perceived standards to the public purposes.

Members appreciated the specialist music programmes and urged the station to give greater attention to reflecting communities.

With increasing audience figures (though still a long way behind the major London music stations and BBC competition from the *Today* programme and Radio 5 Live) most agreed that this had been a year of consolidation.

[Angus Fox's report on the BBC London 94.9 outreach event at Crystal Palace is at appendix I]

### **BBC response**

Mike Macfarlane explained that the phone-ingredient is widely used in BBC Local Radio to involve listeners directly and link the station to its territory – “you can be part of this”. Reminding members of London's overall population, he commented that elsewhere in England, an area the size of Croydon would be likely to have its own BBC local radio station, whereas London's whole population is served by one. The station's challenge is to be distinctive in a cosmopolitan environment and in the face of competition from so many other services, many better resourced. Mike agreed that Robert Elms “...is London”, though Danny Baker has a similar focus too. He feels that Vanessa is able maintain impartiality while ranging between major issues and items of general interest. He agrees that the breakfast show needs development. Sports coverage is one of the station's strengths, especially since commercial radio dropped sports coverage some five years ago. Creative use of online alongside broadcast output enables simultaneous coverage of league and non-league matches, and of county cricket. Overall the station has begun to pick up a greater diversity of listeners than other local radio stations, though he agrees with the Council's call for more distinctiveness.

### **Chair's summary**

For BBC London 94.9 this has been a year of consolidation, with consistent performance by the station's main presenters. However, the breakfast show is in need of development, to attract a greater number of listeners at this key time of day. Though the station clearly has a London identity, largely through its presenters, this should be further developed to distinguish it from the big London-based music stations, in a competitive environment. In Public Purposes terms. members felt its highest score was for emerging communications, since the station is part of a multi-platform proposition, with a highly-regarded website, innovative use of online to broaden sports coverage and availability on all platforms. Its citizenship achievement was less well regarded, the creativity of presenters was recognised and it reflected the region well.

## 4. Reports

### 5.1 ACE meeting 18 January 2008

Minutes of the meeting were circulated

One member asked about MACE. JS explained that it was an initiative among all the four Audience Councils in the UK to maximise their effectiveness. Each Head of Governance and Accountability is leading on a distinct aspect of this review, which is due to report to the BBC Trust in March.

### 5.2 Executive Editor's report

Mike Macfarlane's report had been distributed and copies were tabled.

Highlights include

- Strong run of original journalism with exclusives followed up by national outlets
- Mayoral election becoming a big part of BBC London output
- BBC London 94.9 maintaining its recent strong run of audience figures.
- BBC London to move as Marylebone High Street closes

#### 5.2.1 Video podcast trial

Members asked when this would resume. They felt it was particularly significant to London viewers since they would otherwise miss reports that are broadcast while they travel home. Mike MacFarlane explained that the trial was complete and the service could not resume without BBC Trust approval.

Members agreed this should be referred to ACE as a burning issue (see 9.1)

#### 5.2.2 Coverage of developing London Development Agency story

Mike MacFarlane sought council's views on coverage of alleged abuses of power and funding allocation. Members comments –

- BBC London political content approved in general as “good and relevant”
- “on the right road” - approval of and support for this strand of investigative journalism
- BBC even-handed approach expected, and preferred to that of *Evening Standard*
- A belief that the outcome will bring benefits to the whole community
- Members willing to rely on BBC internal mechanisms to ensure balance

## 5. Farewells

Dwain Neil presented glass mementoes to Anne Fendick and Angus Fox. Mike Macfarlane presented one to Dwain Neil.

Angus Fox recalled that he had been associated with BBC London in a variety of guises for 10 years, most recently as chair of the BBC London 94.9 regional audience council. He had enjoyed his contact with council members and values their diversity.

Anne Fendick thanked Dwain for inviting her to deputise for him at ACE and its predecessor. She felt that her time on the Council had been informative, inclusive and supportive.

Dwain Neil thanked past and present members for their work.

## 6. Trust business

### 6.1 Complaints Framework Consultation – ACE Response

As noted in draft ACE minutes

### 6.2 Impartiality Review update (following January ACE meeting)

Awaits outcome of submission to BBC Trust

## 7. **Annual Report 07-08**

A draft version of this had been circulated. Members were asked to consider the extent to which the 2007/08 audience priorities had been achieved and to propose priorities for 2008/09.

Members felt that the volume of work together with imposed agendas had combined to inhibit the Council's normal challenging stance. They had therefore not found meetings as enjoyable or fulfilling as expected, nor did they feel that the results of their work was likely to register or make any difference. Only two programme strands reviewed – the Abolition season and *Panorama – White Flight* had met their expectations of the current audience priorities.

Members therefore felt that future audience priorities should include the following:

- Regain control of the agenda - 25% should be decided on by RAC members
- Re-focus on portrayal and representation - the Council's USP.
- Discuss issues of relevance to London that have a UK-wide resonance (e.g. Whether *EastEnders* is a fair portrayal of East End life)
- Expect confirmation that contributions to consultation are valued and make a difference.

## 8. **Outreach**

### 8.1 *Question Time*

Paul Chapman, Anne Fendick and Christiana Ominiyi, attended the recording on Thursday 13 December at the Laban Centre, Greenwich.

## 9. **Key points from this meeting, for ACE**

9.1 Support for a renewed video podcast trial of BBC London news items.

9.2 Advocate more local control of Council agendas, to ensure that meetings are fulfilling and more relevant to the London region.

## 10. **Date of next meeting: Wednesday 16 April**

Venue: Marylebone High Street

nb: first meeting for new members

## 11. **Programme Review:**

TBA

### **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.]*

## **Appendix I: article by Angus Fox about BBC London 94.9 local audience forum event at Crystal Palace.**

Outreach. Will the BBC have the courage to listen?

by Angus Fox - BBC Regional Audience Council member linked to BBC London 94.9

Last Wednesday, racked with Flu, I walked up the many hills from Crystal Palace station to Selhurst Park. The reason for this madness? Well, I'd gone to the wrong station of course as any self respecting Eagles fan would tell you! The real reason was to attend a BBC London 94.9 accountability outreach meeting at Crystal Palace's ground.

The Regional Audience Council I am a member of is part of the BBC Trust and provides review of all the output of BBC London, (that is, radio, TV and online programs made by the London region - such as Vanessa Feltz's radio show on 94.9, The London News bulletin on BBC One, Inside Out London, The Politics Show and so on). It is made up of volunteers like me who are appointed for a term and then meet several times a year and follow a program of review of output against the purposes of the BBC. Its feedback is reported and taken seriously by the BBC and my role as linked member to BBC London 94.9 is to provide an input voice to the region specifically about the Radio Station.

I previously chaired the Local Advisory Council, which was abolished in favour of these outreach events so I was interested but sceptical about outreach as a replacement for local accountability - especially in London where we had a dynamic hard working council of voices which I know helped the station understand how it was perceived in the community. But straight away let me tell you my conclusion about that is that it's a positive. This is the way to do it! The people who attended gave a lot of input. They also found it terrific that the BBC was out in the community. It was a win-win. I could write a lot about the accountability of the BBC and how its changed but I wont. There is a more important reason for writing this.

The meeting was chaired by David Robey, the Managing Editor and his team were the panel.

It took a little while to get going. After the introductions the discussion started. A number of striking themes emerged which ought to be the cause of a wider discussion.

Firstly, it's about locality. Local is a word I heard a LOT during the evening. Local Journalism and local outreach came across as particularly innovative - with commercial stations starting to copy the lead taken by BBC London 94.9. BBC London 94.9's approach of placing journalists like Croydon BBC reporter Evadnye into the local community was praised as a particularly effective way of reaching people. It struck me that even for a local radio station BBC London 94.9 seemed like the impenetrable BBC for people in the audience. The simple act of having local staff and local outreach changes that. It provides a link to the machine - a way to ensure that information reaches the right editor of the right show. Factual news items for Drivetime, Issues and Tips for Vanessa - that kind of thing that people just wouldn't know are easy for members of staff to deal with. Local web content too was praised but more demanded.

Secondly it's about young people. Several young people were in the audience and active participants. Some were from the Brit School in Croydon, participating in Local Radio there on BritFM as part of their courses. They felt that the BBC is really big and formal. Therefore they argued, young people are more likely to go to a commercial station or web site as its less formal. Encouragingly most of the people in the audience go back to mainstream TV even Newsnight even though the Internet is there. Worryingly though, having just reviewed the charter under which BBC London 94.9 operates as part of my work with the RAC, there's no remit for the station to go after this younger audience. BBC London 94.9's audience is middle aged by design and middle class by my opinion. No wonder then that it doesn't appeal to young people. It calls into question the nature of the station charter which does not recognise them as a target audience. If the BBC does not try to involve young people in London then surely they are missing an opportunity and when those young people are older they won't be interested to 'switch'.

What an opportunity it is too! One older participant relentlessly pursued his own quite narrow agenda of issues which he felt were not adequately represented to his liking. In truth they could not be since it would require him to be the only presenter and views he did not approve of to be discarded. He was quite a forceful speaker and his views seemed reasonable until they were all linked. The panel pointed out that he was a very vocal caller on the station anyway so his point of view was being put forward. The point of telling you this is that one of the young people responded to him by asking him why everything he said was negative. "Balance can be given", said the young person. "More positive stories are just as important as negative stories - There's no need to set a negative agenda". The young person had an agenda too of course. But an uplifting one of creating a good environment for young people where they can be recognised. He pointed out that getting into the press in South London meant doing something bad. He spoke with conviction about the idea that he had that the BBC should somehow grasp the role of providing recognition and positive reinforcement for young people doing something good. Therefore he said it would directly affect our society. "Young people tend to be stupid" he said, "Young people don't know how to package themselves or their content or how to reach out to people like the BBC. Don't wait for the young people to do something first" He had produced his own documentary and got some press on BBC London's web site. This small piece of reinforcement had spurred him on!

There was a great deal of confusion in the audience about what content existed for young people. Nobody knew about BBC Blast. One person said 'BBC Three - I don't watch it and I don't know anyone who does'. Young people today are technically gifted and take it for granted. They must be able to see user generated news in the website. They must be able to comment and upload like the social networking sites they all know all about and use unconsciously. User generated content is natural and key to them. They must feel like equals. This content must come from young people not middle aged people in suits. Several times I heard the comment "don't treat us like idiots".

I can see that the BBC's natural instincts to control everything and its own internal resistance and indeed the public value test process are significant barriers to both youth and lack of structure. This is the challenge the BBC must accept or face being increasingly irrelevant. I think there needs to be a specific measurable plan for the BBC to cater for the demands of young people with projects or events or coverage aimed at young people in London.

And this is where there is a problem. There isn't one. And it's no good having older people dressing in a way that they think is hip and pretending to have a connection to youth - I've seen this recently in the BBC and it's doomed.

Angus Fox - BBC Regional Audience Council member linked to BBC London 94.9.