

## Regional Audience Council for BBC London

Meeting : Monday 12 January 2009  
The Creative Space  
BBC Marylebone High Street London W1

### MINUTES

#### Present

Steve Ashton  
Michael Davenport  
Christine Fanthome            Chair  
Paul Chapman  
Elizabeth Heath  
Ivor John  
Jonathan Kewley  
Amir Shah  
Shelley Ward                    Link to BBC London 94.9

#### BBC Trust

Alison Hastings, BBC Trustee for England

#### BBC:

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

**Absent:** Patricia Adley, Christiana Ominiyi, Emma Palmer, Tasneem Saiki, Jennifer Vidal.

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

Christine Fanthome welcomed everyone to the meeting. She explained that Alison Hastings was attending primarily to discuss the Accountability Review.

Apologies were received from Patricia Adley, Christiana Ominiyi, Emma Palmer, Jennifer Vidal and Tasneem Saiki.

#### 2. Minutes: 12 November meeting and matters arising

Copies were distributed.

2.1 Minutes: Approved

2.2 actions/matters arising

a) Information about the BBC Direction Group was tabled.

b) Caroline Thomson was unable to attend this meeting. She will be invited again when there are significant developments in the Salford project.

### 3. Reports

#### 3.1 Head of Region's report

Mike Macfarlane gave a verbal report:

- BBC London's investigations team had revealed ways round current immigration law
- BBC London Olympics correspondent nominated sports journalist of year
- Christmas specials explored residents' perspectives about living in the five boroughs adjacent to Olympic sites.
- Extensive coverage of issues involving the London Mayor; recent interview on Vanessa; efforts to have him appear on Politics Show.

#### 3.1.2 BBC Local : Trust decision

The BBC Trust has decided not to approve this expansion of local broadcasting. It now looks to BBC English Regions to identify alternative ways of linking communities within existing technologies. The decision is significant for London and creates a difficulty for local management because the employment of many staff was dependent on it.

#### 3.1.3 BBC London moving to BBC News

In common with the whole of BBC English Regions, BBC London will be part of BBC News from 1 April 2009. Mike is now deputy controller of English Regions, with particular responsibility for direct liaison with Network News.

#### 3.2 December ACE meeting

Minutes were distributed.

Key points were highlighted. No matters arising.

#### 3.3 Discussion on definition of "local" and "regional"

##### 3.3.1 Local: representative responses

- Places I know
- Within my community
- The whole of London
- My town
- My borough
- Defined by the area served by my local newspaper

##### 3.3.2 Regional – representative responses

- The whole of London and the Home Counties
- Bigger issues affecting larger groups
- (all) London
- Area within M25
- The South [of England]

##### 3.3.3 Other comments

- The BBC shouldn't go too local because this will kill off local newspapers.

##### 3.3.4 Chair's summary

For London members, the majority definition of "local" is their borough or town, the locality they felt they knew best, though a few felt that the whole

of London was local to them. However, most felt that their region was London – the area within the M25, though again a few broadened this to the Home Counties or the whole of the south of England

### 3.4 Accountability review.

A summary paper was distributed.

#### 3.4.1 Alison Hastings' introduction and summary of proposals

Alison explained that this review followed from the Maximising Audience Council Effectiveness (MACE) initiative among all Audience Councils (completed early in 2008) and in fulfilment of a request made by the English National Forum (predecessor of Audience Council England) to review the accountability structure for England. Its purpose is to consider effectiveness and value for money of the RAC structure.

She applauded the increasing diversity of RAC membership and appreciated the range of review and outreach activity that councils now conduct. She declared her support for RACs, seeing them as a vital source of grass-roots opinion about the BBC which she values in her role as BBC Trustee for England.

She felt that the consultants' summary of strengths and weaknesses was realistic, though she did not accept their recommendations, preferring the option outlined in the paper. She, the Head of G&A and the Accountability Adviser are attending current RAC meetings to explain the proposals and take members' comments.

The proposals were a response to members' perceived preference for programme review over policy issues, consultations and prescriptive agendas. Agendas will have fewer items, with less consultation, providing councils with opportunities to consider programmes and topics of relevance to their areas (cf London RAC review of *Silent Witness* while rest of England considered *Losing It*) and the freedom to discuss issues of regional concern, that might have a resonance elsewhere in England. The change in the number and purpose of meetings (from six + two outreach to four + two outreach) aims to equate members' time commitment with the relative values of discussion and outreach.

ACE is likely to meet more frequently - eight times a year compared to the current six.- to help it become more effective strategically.

#### 3.4.2 Members' responses

##### 3.4.2.1 Chair's comments

Christine Fanthome felt strongly that it was important for ACE members to maintain close links with their RACs by experiencing meetings at first hand, so that both the flavour and the outcome of discussion at regional level can be properly represented to ACE. She expressed concern about the time commitment associated with additional ACE meetings, compared to a two-hour evening RAC meeting. A reduction in RAC commitments does not counterbalance the increase of those for ACE.

### 3.4.2.2 representative summary of other members' comments

- General agreement about perceived strength of RAC operation
- The restructure is at odds with this strength: it disenfranchises RAC members through reduction in meetings, which limits their opportunities to discuss output and other issues in an environment that suggests their voices will be heard.
- The changes weaken the connection to the grass roots
- No commitment to consider work/output of RAC meetings at ACE except outreach [compared to present, where RAC and ACE agendas are linked]
- "It's the thin end of the wedge."; "[is this] becoming top-down?"
- What is the meaning of "value for money" here – it seems to reduce the effectiveness of the structure.
- Agreement with report's finding re principal weakness - lack of feedback.
- Neither the report nor these proposals address that weakness. The current process is very much one-way and no change is suggested.
- Outreach is enlightening and very important.

### 3.4.3. Alison Hastings' response

Alison thanked members for their thoughtful contributions.

Re feedback on programme discussion, she invariably insists on a response from a relevant senior BBC person, who she expects will at least treat comments as food for thought. As an example she recalled RAC comments about BBC Three and controller Danny Cohen's response, (which was distributed to all RAC members). [Responses from key BBC people who attend ACE are recorded in ACE minutes] The BBC has a wide range of information sources [e.g. about audience reaction to programmes and perceptions of the organisation] Responding to requests for individual direct responses she reminded members that their role was to advise the BBC Trust about the BBC, its programmes and services, from the perspective of the region they live in.

The meeting was invited to vote for either four or six meetings per year + two outreach events. The unanimous choice was six meetings + outreach.

## 4. Trust business and feedback

### 4.1 BBC Local

The BBC Trust decision not to approve this was announced in November 2008. See 3.1.2 above

### 4.2 Impartiality review monitoring

Christine Fanthome thanked members for their work on this. The purpose is to consider whether BBC News is now more impartial when covering stories from regions and nations in the UK. Comments will be combined and reviewed alongside other RAC members' notes about a range of BBC news services. The results will be submitted to the BBC Trust head of Editorial Standards for assessment.

## 5. Programme and service review

### 5.1 BBC comedy

A paper was distributed outlining the purpose of this review, and suggesting what to single out from a list of comedy programmes scheduled prior to and over Christmas.

Range of programmes sampled by members:

*Blackadder Rides Again, Family Guy, Gavin & Stacey, Have I Got News For You, Lead Balloon, Live At The Apollo, Outnumbered, Rab C Nesbitt, The Now Show, Wallace and Gromit*

Live at the Apollo:

- Talent not ego. Should have a permanent place in the schedule
- A clear [proposition], good format, ideal time. More stand-up comedy like this please.

Gavin & Stacey

- Enjoyable
- I was bonding with the characters, but won't watch the series

Wallace & Gromit: Widely appreciated

- Adorable family viewing – something for everyone

Outnumbered – three conflicting opinions

- Enjoyed by youngest and oldest member
- Not enjoyed by other young members

Have I Got News For You – conflicting opinions:

- Rather tired now – *Mock The Week* more exciting
- Christmas edition very amusing

Jack Dee

- More Jack Dee
- I hate *Lead Balloon* – plots weak.

Rab C Nesbitt

- “A great sit-com”
- The situation never seems to beat him, though he never gets out of the gutter.

Family Guy

- BBC Three brave to put this on.

6.30pm comedy on BBC Radio 4

- Consistently strong
- *The Now Show* has highs and lows, but it has a place.

Other comments

- I grew up with Christmas specials, and expect a high standard from the BBC. This year I enjoyed the Peter Serafinowicz show.
- Why is *Last Of The Summer Wine* still on?
- The BBC does well at Christmas.

### Chair's summary

The range of the offering and the levels of appreciation show that, though there are strong likes and dislikes, BBC comedy is a fair match for audience expectation. The range shows recognition that a single or universal taste has long since been supplanted by a much broader range of expectations, largely defined by age. The broadcaster's holy grail is finding new formats that attract and engage a cross-section of age-groups. The BBC is to be congratulated on its continuing efforts to develop new comedy offerings, try them out, then risk offering them to a more mainstream audience. The series that perfectly illustrates this achievement is the current *Gavin and Stacey*, which combines appeal to a cross-section of ages while avoiding the usual metropolitan scenario. *Wallace and Gromit* seemed sure-fire, too.

### 5.2 BBC London 94.9

Shelley Ward's report was distributed.

She noted that BBC London 94.9 had been fined by Ofcom for inviting listeners to phone in to a pre-recorded programme to take part in a competition.

## 6. Outreach

### 6.1 Young people outreach.

John Sparrow showed a DVD of five short sketches performed by children from the Black Arts Production Theatre, based in Tottenham, N London. He thanked Steve Ashton for bringing this group to attention and for working with them and the group leaders to develop the sketches.

Steve Ashton wrote:

It was a day full of wonderful new experiences, not just for me but for many of the young people, who had never been asked their opinion on what they want, let alone asked to express said opinions in such a manner. A group of 13 - 16 year old young people from The BAP Theatre Company was given a challenge to create and perform 90 second dramas or sketches about *My BBC*.

For many this was a steep learning curve as new skills and methods of working together were introduced. They rose to the challenge and not only took on my notes and directions re the differences between TV, stage acting and comedic timing, but answered our questions with an informed maturity.

I was really proud of the youngsters, their directors Richard and Andrew, parents and supporters I only hope the feedback from the BBC Trust will warrant the effort and openness displayed by the young people of BAP Theatre.

Alison Hastings asked for the sketches to be put on the ACE or London RAC website to illustrate audience council outreach activity.

### 6.2 Contribution to BBC Trust consultation on BBC services for young people

A report from ACE summarising the views of council members between ages 17-34, together with responses from young people aged 13-16 who took part in the outreach has been submitted for inclusion in this consultation. Draft copy distributed.

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

### 7.1 Burning issues

[in view of recent controversies] are BBC production people now frightened of pushing boundaries? Should there be a monitoring exercise?

### 7.2 Any other business

Comments –

a) Whether iPlayer online viewing of BBC television makes the television licence fee obsolete.

b) Mark Thompson's *Financial Times* article advocating a merger between Channel 4 and Five. [Over the weekend Andy Duncan, CE of C4, vehemently denied this, while Luke Johnson, C4 chairman is reportedly in negotiations]

## **8. Dates of 2009 meetings**

A list was distributed

## **9. Date of next meeting:**

Monday 2 March, 6.15 for 6.30-8.30 at BBC Marylebone High Street.

## **10. Content for review:**

BBC London news (Mon 22-Fri 26 Feb 1830-1900) to inform discussion about newsgathering for London.

## **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.]*