

Regional Audience Council for BBC London

Meeting : Tuesday 10 June 2008
The Creative Space
BBC Marylebone High Street London W1

MINUTES

Present

Steve Ashton
Paul Chapman
Michael Davenport
Christine Fanthome Chair
Elizabeth Heath
Jonathan Kewley
Christiana Ominiyi
Emma Palmer
Amir Shah
Tasneem Saiki
Jennifer Vidal
Shelley Ward Link to BBC London 94.9

BBC:

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

RSe Consulting

Rob Abercrombie – consultant
Ana Macdowall - consultant

Absent: Patricia Adley, Ivor John, Alexandra Tham

1. Chair's welcome, introductions and apologies

Christine Fanthome welcomed everyone to the meeting. On behalf of the Council she thanked Michael Davenport for chairing the previous meeting and representing members at the May Audience Council England meeting.

She introduced Rob Abercrombie and Ana Macdowall, the two consultants who were conducting the Accountability Review commissioned by the BBC Trust.

Apologies were received from Patricia Adley, and Ivor John. Again there was no word from Alexandra Tham.

2. Minutes: 16 April meeting and matters arising

The minutes were agreed with a minor amendment. There were no matters arising.

3. Chair's reports

3.1 May ACE meeting – Television Centre, London

Michael Davenport outlined the content – an evening dinner with Nicholas Kroll, Director of the BBC Trust as the keynote speaker, followed by a whole day business meeting. This included presenting Roly Keating (Controller, BBC Two) with the Councils' views on *The White Season* and hearing his rationale for its inception and content. There was a useful working lunch during which council members met BBC channel controllers, commissioning executives and heads of department.

Michael was impressed by the efficiency with which business was conducted.

- A summary of the May ACE minutes was tabled.

3.2 .Executive Editor's report

3.2.1 report

Michael Macfarlane tabled his report.

He reminded members that the BBC London operation had been set up in response to devolution, hence the efforts to cover the Mayoral election and related stories. The final item had been included in Vanessa Feltz's programme, with the results service on air until midnight. He noted that the service had been well used.

- Inside Out has been performing well in its current run
- BBC London staged a S.W.A.T. initiative in Surrey Square, Southwark, in support of Springwatch

3.2.2 Members' comments and questions

London mayoral elections-1

One member commended the coverage, wondering only whether there had been as much scrutiny of Boris Johnson's proposition as of the current Mayor.

London mayoral elections-2

One member asked about the focus on the top three candidates.

BBC response As with general elections, the BBC has a formula for exposure based on levels of support. This is applied so as to manage coverage of minority candidates. The BBC's Political Adviser organises a two-tier system – major parties (eg with seats on councils) and minority parties.

4. Burning issues

4.1 Accountability

One member had drawn the chair's attention to concerns about council effectiveness:

- The processes by which the views of the London [and other] Audience Council(s) reach Audience Council England and the BBC Trust
- The extent to which this is taken into consideration and acted upon
- How and when council members might expect feedback.

John Sparrow had distributed the BBC Trust document "Progress since 2007"

It itemises

- the issues drawn to the attention of BBC Trustees by the four Audience Councils at Audience Councils' Day in April 2007
- the BBC Trust's responses and proposed actions.

He also tabled a paper giving headlines of topics and issues raised by ACE representatives at this year's Audience Council Day (April 2008)

Members felt that the process of distilling their whole year's work into these single presentations would inevitably eliminate any of the passion and vitality evident at RAC meetings. They also felt that the time allocated was too short.

John Sparrow explained that ACE met each month following RAC meetings, enabling Alison Hastings, the Trustee for England, to hear directly from RAC chairs about grass-roots opinion every other month. This was achieved by summaries of key points, distributed in advance, supported by advocacy from each RAC chair, who have clear recollections, as well as more detailed minutes, of their regional meetings. ACE meetings often identify strategic or over-arching issues of common interest. This process was in addition to this annual presentation.

Challenged about his role and expectations, Mike Macfarlane indicated that he and his production team value the London Council's feedback and criticism, providing him with a feel for what the London audience thinks. He uses the meeting as a source of guidance. Referring to a drugs story based in Lambeth, though there was a legitimate editorial reason for being there, RAC members' response was that "you always do drugs stories in Lambeth" – which had made his editorial team reappraise their reasons for focusing on particular localities, as well as trying harder to clarify their intentions to audiences.

In essence members felt that though local and regional accountability worked, in the sense that they were able to have direct dialogue with those responsible for content, the national context was less satisfactory because their views were given with no assurance either that people responsible for output would see the comments, or that they are valued by the BBC Trust.

In summary, members sought:

- Direct contact with producers [whenever possible] or assurance that production staff have seen RAC comments.
- More frequent and detailed feedback from ACE and BBC Trust.

Burning issue for ACE:

A clear response about the impact of RAC and ACE views, especially in comparison to other sources of opinion and research.

4.2 Value for money and programme review

Members felt that VFM was difficult to assess without data.

John Sparrow reminded the Council that their unique contribution was in terms of perception rather than absolutes – whatever the actual cost of a programme or insert, their role was to say whether it had been worth it.

He agreed to provide cost-per-hour figures for various types of programme. **Action JS**

5. Trust business

Copies of the Public Service Review phase one and the chairman's speech to the RSA had been circulated.

Members' feedback indicated that the speech was easier to understand than the Public Service Review document.

6. Outreach

6.1 Entertainment report

Christiana Ominiyi reported on the outreach event she organised with three generations of her family and residents in her immediate neighbourhood.

- She appreciated the initiative because she felt it had enabled people's voices to be heard
- The common ground and differences between the three generations were revealed. The group had felt part of something.
- The summary report had captured the essence of the discussions.

6.2 Children's services

John Sparrow explained that the London RAC is expected to question primary schoolchildren aged 6-11 about their media consumption. He is trying to arrange a suitable situation.

7. Programme and service review

7.1 *Made in England*

Most members had enjoyed the programme at some level, though few would have watched it unprompted, because of its late schedule placing and/or low profile through lack of trailing.

Individual members' comments:

- it had been appreciated by the BME community
- Visually beautiful – led [me] to a different part of the UK, the greenness outside London. Gentle on the eye.
- Well made and I learned something. Included an interesting range. Innovative. Pleasantly surprised.
- Portrays England for what it is. We mustn't lose this.
- Found the concept weird – a bit naturalistic and archaic.
- Is it about manufacturing?
-

Chair's summary

Most felt that the London/NE programme (Courtney Pine's musical journey to Holy Island) had been enjoyable – even educational, but that it had been scheduled too late. Few would have watched it without prompting and no-one was aware of any of the other elements in the *Made in England* initiative, except via the briefing.

In Public Purposes terms, it fulfilled education and learning to some extent, was strong on creativity and reflecting regions to the UK.

BBC response

This was a single programme, London and the North East's contribution to an English Regions initiative arranged jointly with the Arts Council to celebrate art in England around St George's Day. The regional programmes were aimed primarily at the regions for which they were produced, the best being repeated on BBC Two.

Regions can only broadcast their own programmes ("opt out") on BBC One and the 2240 point in the BBC One schedule is frequently used for regional programming. Trailing is generally organised by BBC Marketing, Communications and Audiences, who assign priorities to key programmes and initiatives round the year, leading to the number and profile of on-air trails. *Made In England* was not a high priority.

7.2 Children's provision –BBC 7 /Radio 4 & formal learning

Members had received a CD-Rom containing examples of this output.

Go4It - Individual comments:

- Listened with younger brothers – items too long for their attention span. First item repetitive, second more enjoyable
- Educational, but would children listen alone? More likely with parents.
- It included children who were clearly from a variety of backgrounds.
- Items too long. Presenter strong, but attention wanes.
- A bit adult, but erudite and a high standard. But who listens – what profile? I found the use of sound effects amusing.
- This sounds as though it's made by adults for kids. It's not appealing.

BBC7: *Big Toe* stories – individual comments

- One of the stories was irritating – very “stage school” but the third one was enjoyable.
- If this is broadcast at 7am it's too early. Children are read to at bedtime, but it's difficult to get them to listen.
- Very BBC and middle-class
- Young children do appreciate taped stories.

Chair's summary

Few knew of the radio services, though there was awareness of the formal learning provision via children's schools. *Go4It* sounded as though it was what adults thought children should want – rather middle-class, not enthralling. It seemed to assume listening with parents, because items felt too long for children's normal attention span. However, content clearly did include children from a variety of backgrounds. Though appreciation of stories and readings was reported, the broadcast time of those on BBC7 was hardly suitable – children's bedtime was felt more appropriate. The websites were applauded.

7.3 BBC London 94.9

Shelley Ward reported some of the station's highlights and her own observations on output.

- The station's coverage of the London mayoral elections, notably Vanessa Feltz's ability to draw out listeners' views.
- The station's election results marathon
- Coverage of the Olympic torch handover event and anticipated coverage of Carnival.
- The Paul Ross on-air partnership with Joanne Goode at breakfast has given the programme a family feel.
- Plans for five programmes featuring Cliff Richard.

8. Key points from this meeting, for ACE

Is RAC feedback on *Made In England* too late, in view of the minuted discussion at the May ACE meeting?

9. AOB

9.1 BBC Trust Annual Report launch event

Council members are invited to attend this at Broadcasting House early in July. [JS has e-mailed members for confirmation of interest]

9.2 Mary Whitehouse

A DVD of the *Newsnight* discussion following the drama documentary about Mary Whitehouse's life and influences will be circulated for members' interest, since the discussion explored the concept of public service broadcasting and the BBC's perceived responsibilities.

10. Date of next meeting: Tuesday 16 Sept 2008

Venue: Marylebone High Street (room TBC) 6.15 for 6.30-8.45pm

11. Content for 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 for further explanation.]