

Regional Audience Council BBC North East and Cumbria Minutes  
BBC Newcastle  
20 Feb 2008

**Present:**

Sue Kelly (Chair)  
Liz Dodds  
Ken Blackwood  
Mark Freeman  
Hannah Eyres  
Frank Swinhoe  
Colin Boothroyd  
Martyn Jackson  
Eileen Bellett  
Reena Joypul

**Apologies:**

Ammi Pabary  
Tony Gillan  
Carol Alevroyianni  
Stephen Langley  
Wendy Pilmer (Head of Region)

**BBC Representatives:**

Carol Cooke (Public Accountability Manager)  
Andrew Robson (Managing Editor BBC Radio Newcastle)

**1. CHAIR'S WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were five apologies for absence. Wendy was hosting a three day course at the SON&R Centre in Bristol and had asked Andrew Robson to deputise for her.

**2. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING AND MATTERS ARISING**

There was an email response from Gordon Turnbull Head of Radio Sport on the reasons for sports coverage by two commentators, which read as follows:

'Our two commentator approach is unique in broadcasting. It's the cornerstone of our approach and is one of the reasons why we are so highly regarded. It means that our listeners benefit from two expert viewpoints. We try and make sure that the two commentators have quite different styles. That's why Mike Ingham and Alan Green work so well. One thoughtful and analytical, the other excitable, emotional and more direct. No other radio station can provide such a broad canvas.'

It's also worth pointing out that 90 minutes from one commentator is a hard listen on the radio. Our commentators are able to deliver a better and more professional service because they have 22 minutes in each half to think about the game, what they might have missed and some wider issues. Commentators who have joined us recently from local radio find that they perform much better using our format. It also makes Five Live instantly recognisable as a station. Not to be underestimated.'

### **3. PROGRAMME REVIEW**

#### (i) Review of Radio Newcastle with Andrew Robson Managing Editor ( DVD of Breakfast output supplied)

Andrew reported that 12 months ago the majority of the audience was 65+, the station was perceived as being the station for Newcastle, and listening was driven by the breakfast programme and sport. The station needed broader appeal, with more local news, livelier talk and a stronger image as a music station which was fun, engaging, accurate, topical and relevant to 45-65 year olds without alienating 65+ listeners. BBC Radio Newcastle wanted to improve the listening experience.

Andrew felt that the tone should be warm, friendly and modern, and presented by contemporary characters. He focussed on the lifestyle of the target listener, and getting the staples - traffic, news, sport, weather - right. A new news editor was brought in who developed the news team and made the content sound more contemporary and local with less emphasis on the past.

There was research into the music played, which resulted in a list of 326 songs to be reviewed every four months. Stronger sports promotion across rest of the radio output started, coupled with more cross promotion, so that presenters were seen as part of a team. Events important to the audience, like The Great North Run were strongly featured and there is a plan to look at the lives of 100 people in the region and use this panel for reactions to big events.

Andrew also reported on the success of both 180 degree programming and the web.

Comments from the council included:

- Mike Parr's Breakfast Show was a key programme; however a slow news day meant that the panel discussion suffered. Members suggested that more polarised guests, new, and younger guests, could make the discussion livelier.
- Phone in interaction with listeners worked well and Mike also used weather news for interaction, asking listeners to call in with the lowest temperature in the area.
- The Breakfast Show held people and organisations to account but members felt that Mike Parr was less provocative than Radio Cumbria and BBC Tees breakfast presenters.
- Mike's interviewing techniques of the Gypsies and their children on the DVD included closed questions and some complicated language, but members applauded the fact that the story was covered, and felt that presenters should be further trained in asking open questions.

- Members wondered why cricket from Durham was only available on the website and not DAB, medium-wave or FM, and suggested that one option should take the cricket.
- One member said that there was too much sport on the breakfast show.
- Some members said that the play list could be monotonous and not contemporary, with too much middle of the road music.
- The station reflected life in the North East, especially when presenters took shows on the road and covered stories from rural areas. Members felt that the loss of the buses would be detrimental to both news coverage and connecting with audiences.
- Travel news had improved with the new network of contacts.
- Members largely felt that the radio station had a currency and made listeners feel as if they were up to date with what was going on.
- Some members felt that there was too much repetition as a live interview on breakfast could be clipped and used on the news.
- Some members felt that there were too many trails and cross promotions.
- Some members felt that there was too much giggling on programmes but others liked the informal style, and the human interplay between characters.
- Mike, Jilly and Charlie were all regarded as being very professional, with their local accents contributing to their popularity.
- There was a suggestion that the breakfast show should cover some arts issues.
- The majority of presenters were male and the station seemed to be too Newcastle-centric.

#### BBC Response:

The Managing Editor explained that football was the number one sport which takes precedence over cricket. In addition, there a desk driver at the radio station would be needed so that the cricket game could be broadcast on DAB, Medium or FM. Radio Newcastle would be covering all of the Twenty 20 matches home and away, online, on DAB and 1458MW.

Shows would still go out on the road using the radio car instead of the bus.

#### Chair's summary:

Radio Newcastle's news, sport, traffic and weather coverage was thorough, although some members found that the music strategy was monotonous and too middle of the road. *The Breakfast Show* was lively, informative, and encouraged listeners' interaction although members felt that new, more polarised guests could make the studio discussions more interesting. Some members felt that the station was too Newcastle centric and not challenging enough. The BBC bus would be missed although the radio car would continue to be used.

#### (ii) Review of local radio across the year

Comments from the council included:

- One member said that the BBC Tees Faith programme on Sunday morning was very good, but did not approve of the presenter playing more contemporary music in the last hour.

- Another member felt that the Middlesbrough commentary and phone in on BBC Tees was lacking in passion.
- The name change, while risky, had worked.
- Radio Cumbria had a change of presenters and music which had provoked some negative responses initially but which had proved to be popular.
- It was pointed out that most of the Radio Cumbria presenters were men.
- Radio Cumbria was impassioned about Carlisle United.
- Radio Cumbria could benefit from more regular time checks.
- Members suggested that Radio Newcastle should change its name but this could be problematic as the radio station was doing well and the name change could have a negative effect.
- Radio Newcastle cricket commentators were very enthusiastic and the coverage was well received.
- A member raised the issue of the inappropriate nature of the distribution areas for local radio.
- Television trails on the breakfast programme were still dominated by stories from Cumbria.

#### BBC response:

The RAC member who raised the issue of the music on the faith programme had received a response from Matthew Barraclough, Managing Editor BBC Tees who said that he wanted the contemporary music to start early so that it attracted an audience who would stay for the next programme.

#### Chair's summary:

Members recognised that the radio stations were trying to develop a slightly younger audience without losing their current listeners and felt that the stations were generally becoming more contemporary in style. News, traffic, weather and sport were considered to be strong reasons for listening but the playlists attracted some criticism for their middle of the road nature and monotony. Members suggested a name change for Radio Newcastle to signal that it was more than the radio station for Newcastle but recognised that this could be a risky strategy.

DAB radio was increasingly seen as a problem in that if a signal was not resolved the result was silence rather than poor quality sound. Some members complained about the illogical borders of local radio transmission areas.

## **4. REPORTS**

### **Audience Council England**

Draft minutes of the last ACE meeting were circulated along with Elizabeth Dodds' report. Members raised the issue of the amount of time needed for RAC work and re-iterated the fact that they felt there was too much time spent on consultation documents.

## Head of Region's Report

The Head of Region's report was sent out before the meeting and Andrew Robson talked to it.

There was discussion about the big news stories which meant that the region was getting more coverage. This could present difficulties for regional news as the top national story could also be the top regional story. Members felt that local journalists were still not being use for national stories.

The Cumbria only trail about digital switchover was discussed. Some members, who had asked for Cumbria opt outs in the past, felt that this demonstrated that it was clearly technically possible, and that Cumbrian opts should be considered for the future.

Andrew Robson demonstrated BBC Local and explained that it was map driven, would be available on PCs, would probably replace the WIL sites, and change the way in which many people worked in BBC as they would increasingly be working across all media. BBC Local would be used to increase the level of regional information to complement national programmes like *Coast* and the site would also provide a place for the public's contribution.

Members had earlier emailed queries about digital issues. Richard Waghorn's team provided the following responses.

One member said that whenever there was high pressure over the British Isles the member had to switch to analogue due to pixellating and breaks in digital transmission, although the signal was usually so strong he had to have an attenuator fitted. He wondered what would happen after full digital switchover.

Richard's team said that some early set-top boxes suffered if they received too much signal but this shouldn't be an issue today, and recommended removing the attenuator. The attenuator was reducing all signals so when interference appeared the relative level to the wanted signal was maintained thus causing the problems.

After switchover, the increased power of the network would provide more reliable coverage.

Another member wanted to know if there would be different times for the time signals on DAB, Freeview, digital satellite and the internet. The response suggested that this would be likely in the short term, as re-organising the playout and distribution systems so as to ensure that signals were entirely synchronous was too complex. For the internet, the buffering and packetised nature of the transmission meant that controlling the time taken by each packet in the stream to traverse the internet was almost impossible. Currently the most accurate time signals were those broadcast on FM radio.

There was discussion on the digital switchover in Whitehaven which was viewed as being impressively uneventful, with no reports of any significant failures, beyond a small number who had problems tuning or cabling digiboxes, which were quickly resolved. Reception was generally very good, but not perfect, and there were times when reception was poor, especially in the rain when the picture became odd, and sound and picture synchronisation was lost, normally for only a few minutes at a time. This was usually due to a problem with the receiving installation, as poor installations with satellite broadcasting were generally the

cause of reception problems during poor weather. The receiving element was particularly prone to failure.

Another member highlighted the fact that people had been expecting a full Freeview service which had not materialised. *Film4* and *Dave* were not broadcast. This had caused questions, petitions and comments in the local press relating to the 'second class service we are getting from the BBC' and questioning why a reduced licence was not available for the reduced service.

The response explained that Freeview was broadcast over a number of “bundles”, or multiplexes, of services. The BBC’s services were carried on two of these multiplexes; the main services from ITV and Channel 4 on another; and then the other channels across the remaining four. The commitment in switchover made the public service multiplexes available to everybody who could receive analogue television.

The extent of coverage for the other multiplexes was theoretically controlled by the amount of spectrum, or frequency space, made available to those operators by Ofcom. However, it was in fact determined by a commercial decision made by those operators about how much coverage (and, thus, how many transmitters) it was economic for them to build.

## **5. TRUST BUSINESS**

The Complaints Framework Consultation and ACE response was circulated before the meeting for information.

The Impartiality Review update, following the January ACE meeting, was circulated before the meeting for information.

## **6. ANNUAL REPORT 07- 08**

The Annual Report had been previously circulated. Members suggested that a sentence be added to the report stating that they did not agree with the loss of the BBC buses and open centre. Another member suggested that the arbitrary nature of the local radio regions be highlighted.

### **Review of 2007- 8 Audience Priorities**

- Key regional news stories focused news coverage on the north east on several occasions this year but regionally based drama and entertainment programmes had ceased, and very little was made in the region.
- Regional coverage was not good enough. Members pointed out that we don’t learn much about other regions from watching the news.
- The first Public Purpose was delivered through the *Abolition* strand of programming.
- There was too strong a focus on strategy. Members felt that their key role should be to discuss the end product, but said that the script was already written and the RACs were there to tick the box.
- Digital switchover appeared to have worked smoothly but not all channels promised had actually been made available.

- Coverage of devolved issues was poor and relied heavily on the BBC coverage of Parliament.
- Members felt that language provision was getting better and signing was now widely available.
- Getting rid of the buses was a false economy as they offered the opportunity of greater variety in issues, voices and venues. Members wondered if services were being sold off to the detriment of BBC quality.

### **Identification of 2008-9 Audience Priorities**

- Restoring the balance between programmes and service review and advising on strategy was important. Programme reviews, balancing comment on new programmes with those that were already embedded should be prioritised and the work load made manageable.
- Priorities should be examined as the future may not principally lie in broadcasting programmes but in web based delivery.
- Regional portrayal was better but still patchy and reliant on strong news stories.
- Very little networked programmes were produced in the North East which resulted in a weak production base and lack of training for people wanting to work in the industry.
- The impact of strategic reprioritisation should be examined as the loss of the buses and open centres was strongly criticised.

## **6. OUTREACH**

The Family Entertainment outreach plan was discussed and members were asked to email the Public Accountability Manager with suggestions of families who would be willing to take part.

## **8. BURNING ISSUES/ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Mark Freeman was prepared to act as the RAC link person to Radio Newcastle and Eileen Bellett would link to BBC Tees. A link person for Radio Cumbria would be appointed when new Cumbrian members had been approved.

## **9. KEY ISSUES FOR ACE MEETING**

The digital switchover problems at Whitehaven were suggested as being an issue to take forward to the ACE meeting.

**10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING:** Wednesday 9 April 2008 at BBC Newcastle

**Programmes for Review:** The White Season BBC Two, particularly -  
White Girl on 10 March 9 – 10.30pm BBC2  
The Poles Are Coming on 11 March 9 – 10pm BBC Two

## **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.]*