

## Regional Audience Council for BBC East

Minutes of meeting

Tuesday 09 January 2007

South Lodge Hotel, Chelmsford

(Adjacent to BBC Essex)

Council Members present:

Clarke Willis	RAC Chair
Richard Carter	Link to BBC Radio Cambridgeshire
Michael Deakin	Link to BBC Radio Suffolk
Melvina Dunnett	
Joanna Hendricks	
Helen Hunt	Link to BBC Radio Northampton
Peter Lerner	Link to BBC Three Counties Radio
Richard Walker	

Observers:

Annie Kiff-Wood, Chandi Hubert, Marcus Tinworth

BBC:

Tim Bishop	Head of Region, BBC East
John Sparrow	Public Accountability Manager
Lynne Wilson	Assistant Editor, BBC Essex

### 1. Welcome and apologies for absence

Clarke Willis welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Denise Priest and John Newman.  
Jane Codona did not attend.

Clarke noted that this was the first meeting as the East Regional Audience Council. Each of the six meetings in 2007 will be held at or near one of the region's BBC Local Radio stations, for a presentation and output review, enabling council members to form their own awareness of these stations' roles and achievements.

He introduced three new Council members, who were observing proceedings today and would be confirmed in time for induction at the next meeting. Marcus Tinworth will become the link with BBC Essex. Earlier he had been given an introductory tour by Lynne Wilson, the station's Assistant Editor.

### 2. Programme and service review

#### 2.1 BBC Essex overview

Lynne Wilson, Assistant Editor BBC Essex, showed a short DVD about the work of the station and tabled an overview paper.

The station serves an area bounded by the East Anglian coast, the fringes of London, rural Suffolk and Hertfordshire and including the Thames Gateway, making it one of the largest areas within the BBC East region, with a population of some 1.8 million. The station maintains a 20% share in the face of many local commercial competitors and BBC national stations.

It is primarily an all-speech station, especially during the peak of breakfast time. Its presentation team is predominantly drawn from local people, many of whom have been with the station since it began. They have wide local knowledge and have established an open dialogue with listeners.

The station has a big news team, both to ensure adequate coverage and to sustain investigative journalism – an example of which was a recent feature about the Essex traveller community. Sport is also an important part of output, in particular coverage of Colchester and Southend football teams. Localised coverage of match play can be achieved by splitting the station's frequencies.

The station also plays a part in BBC national initiatives, such as RaW (Read and write – BBC literacy initiative) and *Who Do You Think You Are*.

[Members had been invited to sample a range of the station's programmes either off air or via the *Listen Again* facility]

Members' comments and questions:

- Two had sampled Eric Hall via *Listen Again*. They felt it was a specialist music show aimed at an older sector of the audience.
- One wondered about the extent of coverage for London boroughs (eg Redbridge, Dagenham)
- There was a different 'feel' to the station compared to BBC Radio Suffolk – it seemed more lively.
- Some members wondered whether the station's programmes welcomed younger people, noting that music might make the output more acceptable.
- Two members singled out *The Dave Monk show* for his ability to involve his audience without polarising them, the mix of topics during the phone-in and inclusion of an appeal on behalf of a local charity.
- Another asked about the importance of the *Where I Live* site and for the station's views on local television.
- Travel reporting was highlighted as somewhat out-of-date and therefore of little value.

Marcus Tinworth had enjoyed his visit to the station. He commented on the staff's evident enthusiasm for their work. He is a regular listener, especially during breakfast time and for sports coverage. Knowing the size and diversity of the area served by the station, he now understands the reasons behind the programme mix. He believes that the station holds the area together. As a listener he expressed a wish for Saturday sports coverage to start earlier and felt that inclusion of more music in the output would broaden listener appeal.

BBC response (jointly by Tim Bishop and Lynne Wilson)

The audience for BBC local stations has become a 45+ age-group, despite efforts at various times throughout BBC Local Radio to attract younger listeners. This is essentially a reflection of life-stages, with people tending to become more interested in their locality as they grow older.

However there are key points in each day's output that attract a broader range of listeners, for example news at 8am, and website content (eg unsigned bands) which engages younger members of communities.

BBC Local Radio stations generally feature much more speech content than any commercial competitor although music is a key part of output, often defining the sound and impression of a station. A core of suitable popular music is established centrally; it is currently under review. Two or three music items are included in the very early part of the weekday breakfast show (in line with the overall policy for local radio). Music programmes on Sundays (eg Eric Hall) are aimed at an older audience and therefore include a non-representative repertoire.

The station covers London boroughs for news and sport, in response to an awareness that residents identify more with Essex than London. However it has not been possible to measure the actual audience size in those areas. Football is a key ingredient of coverage.

The *Where I Live* website attracts some 90,000 unique users per month. It has two staff members who decide on weekly news priorities, with the emphasis on quality rather than quantity. The website will also cover the Thames Gateway jointly with BBC South East, in response to the housing and other developments in that area. Staff are keen to introduce video content to enhance story coverage.

The station would welcome an opportunity to provide a local television service: there is considerable enthusiasm among staff for new developments and plenty of stories to cover. As well as providing an enhanced service for Essex licence-payers, local television could provide more stories for *Look East* and other regional output and would be beneficial for staff development.

Travel news remains an important core service for any BBC local radio station, so it was disappointing to hear that members felt it was not up to date. In practice, *[withheld from published minutes under section 43 of the Act.]* many BBC LR stations invite direct listener input, which is immediate and effective, with very few hoax calls – perhaps because callers feel they are contributing to life in the community. Tim Bishop agreed that travel information arrangements should be reviewed, with the Radio 2 model in mind. He also recognised the value of a travel news service at weekends.

## 2.2 The Ipswich murders – local, regional and national coverage

- BBC Radio Suffolk had responded well to this developing story, changing breakfast and drive-time to reflect the seriousness of events.
- Agreement that the *Look East* outside broadcasts from the town had been strong – measured, factual and un-sensational
- A consensus that by contrast national coverage had been somewhat heavy-handed, rather sensationalist and often poorly informed, with too much speculation – eg
  - labelling of Ipswich (variously a city, a market town, a backwater)
  - inaccurate reflection of Ipswich life (eg pictures of an empty High Street – after the shops shut it's always like that!)
  - over-dramatisation of the town's 'red light district' – in reality a very small area also frequented by rail travellers and football crowds.
  - moments when high-profile national reporters were asked for 'updates' when there had been no developments.

- Members also wondered why it was necessary to 'bring in the cavalry' when, in their view, the BBC had perfectly competent reporters based in the East
- Members acknowledged the evolution of language used to describe the murder victims, preferring 'women' to the earlier label 'prostitute'. The sensitive interview with one woman who was subsequently killed was singled out for praise.
- One member with detailed knowledge of police organisation highlighted inaccurate speculation about the capability of the local force, explaining that, after the Soham murders, police had established a 'buddy' system which automatically provided support teams from all over the country to progress investigations.

Members also highlighted the question of trust over the release of a BBC interview with the first suspect, originally made for reference purposes. They were also concerned by the Attorney General's warning about the prejudicial effect of coverage on an eventual trial.

#### BBC response

Lyne Wilson noted co-operation by BBC Essex and some involvement because the woman shown on train CCTV came from Essex. Tim Bishop explained that the East news team had alerted Network news to this developing story some two weeks before it became a national concern.

Responding to council members' concerns about a media circus, speculation and reporting, he noted that the nature of news reporting had changed with the introduction of 24 hour news channels, whose role in stories of this kind was to maintain a presence, reporting developments as they unfolded. There was an assumption that audiences now recognised the distinction between this and scheduled news, where the expectation was for a factual summary. With this in mind, BBC news aimed to avoid speculation and reported only facts. Despite blanket coverage on all media, Tim felt it was important for the BBC to include high-profile reporting, the alternative being that people would look elsewhere for coverage, such was the appetite for the latest developments. *Look East* aimed to minimise duplication of national news coverage through differences in tone and focus. He commended Stuart White's sensitive handling of outside broadcasts which the council had noticed.

The test for contempt of court was quite high-level, relating specifically to any coverage from the point of arrest that amounted to a substantial risk of serious prejudice. The Attorney General had warned all media to be careful but the belief was that a possible trial had not been jeopardised by any BBC reporting.

In releasing the interview tape of Tom Stevens the BBC had to balance some exceptional circumstances - the overwhelming public interest, and that in this case the interviewee had given a very similar interview to a Sunday newspaper. The extracts used from the BBC interview therefore did not provide significantly more information than was already in the public domain.

He highlighted the way in which the police worked with the media, continually fielding DI Stuart Gill for press conferences, occasionally supported by the Asst Chief Constable, while others progressed the investigations. Media coverage was a key ingredient of what the police were doing.

Network news had an established group of familiar faces, presenters and reporters, who had a rapport with a national audience and who were despatched to cover major stories on the ground. Tim said he understood council members' frustration over the seeming lack of a

window for local knowledge or reporting, with the exception of Mark Murphy's participation in a 'special' presented by Fiona Bruce, but said the region's new network reporter Collette MacBeth had played a significant on screen role at breakfast and there had been more liaison with network news than in the past. However, members should be under no illusion about the scale of the coverage operation.

Tim had taken part in an Editorial Policy discussion about the coverage.

#### Summary

Assessing this feedback in terms of the Public Value criteria, Clarke Willis felt –

- Reach: high, because of intense public interest
- Quality: variable – dependent on developments
- Impact: high – a talking point throughout the UK
- Value for money: perceived as low – an apparent profusion of BBC presenters, reporters and crew.

#### 2.3. *BBC Sports Personality Of The Year*

##### Appreciations (individual comments)

- Move out of London and bigger scale approved
- Broader appeal (inclusion of David Walliams' swimming achievement)
- Brings British sport together; public recognition of the nation's sporting achievement and its sports men and women.
- Inclusion of live gymnast approved.

##### Negative points (individual comments)

- *[Withheld from published minutes under section 36 of the Act.]*
- Was it shorter than previous years? And was this because there was no review of the sporting year?

##### Other comments

- The quality and significance of the programme was dependent on the nation's sporting achievement during the preceding year. The nation's choice of Zara Phillips reflected the fact that she was the only achiever in 2006.
- A discussion about the voting system, with some feeling that voting was 'rigged'. A few members preferred the previous method of inviting postal entries while others saw the value of spontaneity enabled by phone voting. [The voting system prevents acceptance of multiple calls from the same number]

#### Summary

Assessing this feedback in terms of the Public Value criteria, Clarke Willis felt –

- Reach: high, because of broad public interest and an element of national pride
- Quality: good – high production values, staged as a major event and moved from London
- Impact: high – much discussion about outcome in press & elsewhere
- Value for money: Good (one member highlighted the tacky look of tables)

#### 2.4 Coverage of business and economics

Each council has been invited to identify and consider the impartiality of business and economics coverage in BBC programmes. Members were asked to identify and review any items they found within their normal listening, viewing and online activities for a period from the beginning of the year to the first RAC meeting.

Views will be submitted to the independent review of business and economics coverage commissioned by BBC Governors. It was being led by Sir Alan Budd and due to report to the BBC Trust in March 2007.

#### General points

- There was some uncertainty about the exact identity of a business story. [The briefing note gave a few examples, and on the meeting day there had been news about house prices, inflation and interest rates]
- Two members with business interests felt that coverage was important but superficial and perpetuated a negative image of business
- Some felt that there was little local coverage of business news (eg on local radio)
- Others thought this was equally true of *Look East*

Individual members commented on a selection of programmes and services they had sampled:

- *Wake Up To Money* (weekdays, Radio 5 Live)  
Strong, but did not deal with economic issues. Also rather early.
- *Today* programme business items Radio 4)  
Enjoyable and informative. Correspondents were talking to the top people from commerce and industry and seemed to ask the right questions
- *What's Britain Worth?* (Peter and Dan Snow programme on the economy)  
an inconclusive discussion about whether the programme had been incisive or simply enlightening.
- Local business coverage on BBC Radio Norfolk  
At least one local station in the East included business news
- *Real Story* item on Farepak (presenter Fiona Bruce)  
Highlighted as an example of impartial coverage of a contentious and emotive issue – a well-handled interview with the CEO
- *Dragon's Den* (presenter Evan Davis)  
An insight into the challenges of business startup and the kinds of people who were successful in business
- BBC economics website  
Praised by those with direct business interests for its breadth and authority, in contrast to their perception of relatively superficial broadcast coverage

#### Chair's summary:

In general business and economics news was not well signposted, though when it was, people found it a turn-off. There was also a tension in coverage between the interests of licence-payers in general ('ordinary people') and business people, who were also licence-payers. The Farepak and *Today* items were the only examples members identified which were discursive rather than factual.

#### BBC response

Tim Bishop noted that *Look East* had a business correspondent. The programme aimed to feature successful local entrepreneurs and to sustain 'Made in the East' reports – stories about regional products and services. There was also an intention to feature the EEDA local food initiative as one example of routine coverage.

### 3. Significant points from other local stations in the East

#### **BBC Radio Cambridgeshire**

Nothing significant.

#### **BBC Radio Norfolk**

A new schedule had recently been introduced but it was too early to comment on its effectiveness.

#### **BBC Radio Northampton**

No report. Helen Hunt had agreed to become the new link to the station. John Sparrow would make arrangements for her introduction to the station.

**Action: JS**

#### **BBC Radio Suffolk**

(see discussion on Ipswich murders)

#### **BBC Three Counties Radio**

Peter Lerner noted that a new schedule would be introduced later in the month.

### 4. Minutes of 12 December meeting

The minutes were approved.

#### 4.1 Matters arising

##### Link role to BBC Local Radio stations

John Sparrow distributed a guideline paper summarising expectations and process for this new role.

### 5. iPlayer demonstration and discussion

This was demonstrated and discussed at the 12 December meeting; the demonstration was played again for the benefit of the observers. It explained how BBC programmes from the preceding and following seven days can be selected and downloaded once they have been broadcast. Downloads required broadband, and a computer, on which they were stored and available for playback for seven days. After this period, files were automatically deleted due to copyright agreements.

The BBC Trust had circulated a pre-consultation document describing the system, explaining the service licence approval process and inviting council responses to a range of questions. Members were invited to submit their comments which will be added to views already minuted and submitted to the Trust.

#### 5.1 Council members' reactions on 12 December

Seven members saw this as a beneficial innovation – one was undecided.

##### Individual responses

- Seen as a good idea, but debate over its market impact.
- How would this influence the licence fee – since no TV is necessary?
- People who have traditionally watched a television set wouldn't want to watch programmes on a computer
- A 'traditional' viewer accepted the eventual necessity to acquire new technology

- Older viewers would probably depend on younger generations to facilitate the changeover
- Concern that the technical quality might not match expectations.

5.2 Council members' comments on iPlayer consultation document

One member submitted a paper dealing specifically with each question.  
See appendix.

7. Report from BBC Head of Region

In view of the short time since the previous meeting, Tim Bishop had nothing to report beyond his contribution to the discussion about the Ipswich murders.

8. Programmes and services for review

Overview of BBC Radio Norfolk  
Regional sports coverage (on television, Local Radio, online)

9. Date, time and place of next meeting:

February 2007

BBC Norwich – The Forum, Millennium Plain NR1 1BH

[please note this is the last meeting for members who retire in March 2007. It is also the first for new members recruited in November 2006]

Ends

*[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

### Individual response to iPlayer questionnaire

1. What value do you think the proposals would create for you and other consumers?

At present with existing technology I think this proposal has only limited value to consumers. Consumers already have methods for recording output through video and DVD recorders and on hard disk such as Sky +. The on demand services have one extra feature in enabling the viewing of programmes broadcast in the last 7 days and missed by the consumer when broadcast. However I consider this is of limited value when put alongside delivery through a broadband connection (growing proportion but not universal) and by computer not TV. The value will improve as new technology linking broadband and TV becomes readily available.

2. What value or impact do you think the proposals would create for or make on society as a whole?

I do not see the proposal creating any significant impact on society as a whole as the additional functionality over existing devices to allow viewing times to be shifted is quite small.

3. Do you think the proposals would provide value for money?

In testing value for money the normal approach would be to look for a return on investment. The costs have been outlined in the paper but unless there is a charge for access, a reduction in costs elsewhere or value created in broadening the appeal of BBC output it is difficult to see how this test is passed at present. With TV/broadband technology the use would be expected to be greater but the use of viewing through a PC is likely to inhibit demand and I am not clear how the value for money test is passed.

4. Imagine a scenario in which most broadcasters are offering on demand services. Would you like the BBC to be investing in the described on demand service proposals too or would you prefer the BBC to be offering its existing services only?

I think this is similar to Q3 in that it is a timing issue. Improved technology may increase demand for the service. Other providers may also take a lead in developing the market. I think it is questionable whether a licence fee based provider should be developing the market and commercial organisations would be expected to object. If the market is developing then an early following position to maintain market share might be a more defensible position unless a very clear value for money test has been passed and explained.

5. Could you see the new service as a replacement and development of any of the BBC's existing services?

To the extent that some services repeat programmes from other channels there is overlap. For example is it better to repeat a BBC2 programme a few days later on BBC3 or BBC4 or to make it available on demand? If on demand reduces the appeal of repeat programmes, what will replace this output?

6. What downsides do you see to the proposals?

The up front cost without any obvious payback. What will the impact be on the licence? If programmes can be viewed through a PC via broadband will the user need to be a licence payer?

7. We know from earlier consultation that series stacking is an issue of concern to some stakeholders.
- o Do you consider series stacking to be a useful feature?

Possibly in the situation where programmes in a series have been missed due to other commitments/holiday.

- o What kind of series would you expect to be included?

More likely to be in serials rather than series where missing an episode or more would lose a thread of the plot. Also in series such as Coast or Plant Earth.

- o Is catch up access to 13 episodes of a series the right number?

Difficult to see why it would need to be more

- o If not, how many episodes feels right to you?

N/A

8. Are there any specifically English or regional issues the trust should consider?

None I have thought of

9. What is your general impression of the service proposals?

Initial impression is that this is something that can be done rather than something there is a strong demand for given alternatives.

10. Are there any other issues you would like to feed into the consultation?

No

*ends*