

## London Regional Audience Council

Meeting : Tuesday 16 January 2007  
35 Marylebone High Street, London W1H 4QA

### MINUTES

#### Present

Dwain Neil (Chair)	Dave Lewis
Paul Chapman	Shazia Mowlabaccus
Anthony Curran	Anne Yan Yan Teoh
Angus Fox (link to BBC London 94.9)	

**BBC:** Mike MacFarlane Executive Editor, BBC London  
John Sparrow, Public Accountability Manager, English Regions

**Apologies:** Patricia Adley, Paul Bakalite, Amrit Bhat, Anne Fendick,  
Christiana Ominiyi

Margot Billington had tendered her resignation and did not attend. Dwain will write to her.

**Action:** DN/JS

#### 1. iPlayer pre-consultation (BBC management not present)

A descriptive paper from the Trust Unit had been circulated. It included a series of questions around which discussion should be based. A short DVD presentation was shown. Two members of the council had been involved in early trials.

#### Points from the discussion:

- a majority valued this service as a means of seeing or hearing programmes they had missed on scheduled transmission. Ideal for fitting in with individual lifestyles. Previous seven days option most useful for catch-up.
- approval that it was to be a free service; good value for money compared to Channel 4.
- should be platform-neutral (perceived bias towards Microsoft products)
- Apprehension at prospect of viewing programmes via computer/ preference for watching on normal TV / hope for readily-available integration. (see Microsoft point above)
- Takeup may depend on download times (members understood that the service requires broadband)
- Concern about consequences of additional internet traffic.
- Seven-day window inadequate, especially for series – many would wish to have eg a *Dr Who* weekend of viewing, which the short window would inhibit. If a window was necessary, it should be varied dependent on programme type.
- A preference for no digital rights management (DRM), so that iPlayer could allow legitimate access to BBC output for an unspecified time (cf video, PVR) thereby challenging unofficial download sites (that use bittorrent technology). Otherwise some people would hack into the system or go where access matched their requirements.
- BBC could take lead by adopting public domain standards, to encourage development of appropriate technology.
- Concerns about effect on licence fee – re general policing, students, long-term viability since no traditional TV was required to view downloads.

- A minority suggestion that the name was confusing because of its similarity to the generic name-style of Apple products.

## 2. Minutes of 5 December 2006 meeting and matters arising

### Item 3.1 – review of *Shoot The Messenger*

Black council members asked for the minutes to reflect more clearly that their concerns were about the perceived effect on the black Caribbean community: inclusion of revelations 'had been uncomfortable for the black community'. One member wanted the minutes to include their question about whether the BBC would make a similarly controversial programme about any other racial group.

The meeting then approved the minutes as a true record. They were signed by Dwain Neil.

## 3. Programme Review

### 3.1 *BBC Sports Personality of the Year* (6 December 2006 BBC One)

This year's programme was transferred from its usual location in a London studio to the NEC in Birmingham, with an audience comprising paying members of the public as well as sports-men and women. The television audience was invited to vote for their favourite sporting celebrity by phone and text, choosing from a shortlist given during the programme. As usual, the winner was announced as the climax of the programme.

- Approval for moving the production out of London and of high production values.
- All agreed that this annual event was an institution, though less significant for them than in the past. There were high expectations, which this edition did not fulfil [largely due to the quality/range of sports people involved this year]
- Perceived by some as a cross between a game-show and reality TV, heightened by the phone-in element – though some members took part in voting. . A minority recalled past excitement from submitting a postal vote.

#### Minority views

- the presenters were not engaging
- programme was too long

In summary, Dwain recognised the step-change in presentation and advocated further evolution, perhaps focusing on the achievements of sports people rather than the notion of personality and including high-achieving amateurs and rising stars.

#### Public purposes

##### Sustaining citizenship and civil society

- High quality sports journalism, meeting expected BBC standards
- Assured reach into the sports community at all levels
- Celebrated contributions to sport at local level
- BBC's contribution to the sporting calendar – and still a key moment.

##### Building digital Britain / emerging communications

- No significant contribution, except through use of phone-in voting.

##### Promoting education and learning

- Inclusion of young gymnast's live performance encouraged take up of sport
- More could be made of the opportunity to showcase emerging talent, especially with the Olympics in prospect.

##### Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence

- A step change in style, content and presentation
- Inclusion of members of public approved

#### Reflecting UK

- Included and featured broad spectrum of British sporting talent, from all backgrounds, on merit of their contributions to chosen sports

#### UK to world/World to UK

- Included British sports people currently competing outside the UK.

#### BBC response:

Mike Macfarlane agreed that this was an institution, perceived as somewhat in decline – though audience figures had been sustained compared to previous years. It was still a major event, the BBC's contribution to the nation's sporting calendar, its new treatment opening it up to the public. Voting did enable live, universal participation, making the outcome feel more democratic, rather than restricted to those motivated to submit a postal vote [sophisticated arrangements prevent multiple voting from the same phone]. The shortlist of sportspeople was picked by a panel. Inevitably the extent (or lack) of sporting achievement in the year influenced the content and the level of interest.

### 3.2 Business programmes

Members had been invited to identify and consider business and economics coverage in BBC output from the beginning of the year to date. The aim was to contribute to the independent review of the impartiality of business coverage commissioned by the former BBC Governors and led by Sir Alan Budd.

#### Programmes and members' assessments:

*Newsnight* business correspondent Stephanie Flanders

Good clear explanations of issues and developments

*News 24*

Consistent emphasis on business news. Coverage clear, wide-ranging and often includes challenging interviews with captains of industry.

Coverage of Farepak

Seen as a human interest story as much as a business issue.

*Working Lunch* (Weekdays BBC Two)

Engaging, but apparent lack of clarity about the target audience – was it ordinary consumers or industry? One member sought a weekend summary edition.

*Dragon's Den* and *The Armstrongs*

Insights into the challenges of running a business and the kinds of people who were successful.

Gerry Robinson / NHS

Illustrated the difference between a business and an institutional approach to providing an important service.

### 3.3 *I'm With Stupid*

This series had been proposed for review for its portrayal of disabled people in a comedy setting. It featured the interaction between people with a range of disabilities living in a residential home, and their relations with authority figures and the able-bodied tramp befriended by a wheelchair-user.

Members were invited to watch a DVD of the first programme of the first series.

- Broad approval of this light and humorous way of featuring a minority. It highlighted the greater number of similarities than differences with able-bodied people. Members were drawn to the dialogue and interaction, rather than characters' disabilities. 'Handled disability with sensitivity'.
- Younger members enjoyed the programme without feeling it required deep insight
- Portrayal of the main characters countered stereotyping – eg in gambling scene.
- Dialogue between able-bodied tramp and main disabled character robust and amusing but not offensive

#### Other comments

- Its location (in a residential home) tended to reinforce stereotype of disabled people as dependent, powerless and segregated
- Production not sufficiently daring
- Stereotypical minor characters
- Some lazy humour
- Cast not multicultural

#### Public purposes

##### Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence

- A bold and challenging context, though for some not daring enough
- Main characters believable; some stereotyping
- A realistic microcosm, but ideally more diversity

##### Reflecting the UK...

- A lighthearted insight into the lives of people with disabilities
- Rare opportunity for disabled actors

#### 4 End of Charter report from London RAC

Members were invited to contribute thoughts and aspirations:

- Maintain representation of younger age-groups on council
- Continue to include national programmes in range of programmes discussed
- Develop alternative accountability structure for BBC London 94.9

Angus Fox had contributed an end of era report, which will be included in an LAC valedictory document.

#### 6. BBC London 94.9 report – Angus Fox

Angus Fox noted the final meeting of the LAC. The following was an extract from his valedictory note, *Our Voices*.

Over the last few years it has been my pleasure and a privilege to be a member of and latterly to chair the BBC London 94.9 Local Advisory Council. I wanted to give something of a flavour of the voices from the council. Although it has been in existence for almost 40 years I can only look at the relatively recent past.

Earlier in its life it was a place for those who bemoaned the loss of the older music focus of the station. By the time I joined, those voices were moving on. The council settled down to a regular group of people who shared one passion - BBC London 94.9. This diverse group really shared nothing else in common.

Over the course of the years we have reviewed every program on every slot by every combination of presenter. Our informed 'critical friends' are not professional broadcasters but they could give an opinion on the relative merits of Jon Gaunt versus Vanessa on weekday mornings or Eddie and Kath versus Simon and Lowry for Drivetime. These insights are valuable information and intelligence about the people and the mix that makes up the style and substance of the station.

The vibrancy of the debate at a council meeting was often because the diversity of the group means that people have very different opinions about the content. This is one of the strengths of the structure which we will be losing. We had many memorable meetings over the years including one in a disused tube station. Unfortunately the name of the producer reduced to tears one evening at the fairly blunt feedback on the program in question escapes me. Mostly in

recent times our council delivered concise measured and concentrated feedback to the Managing Editor and his team.

In 2006 the Council rather slipped away as it became clear to the members that it was to be disbanded in favour of a new approach to Local Radio Accountability in 2007. We undertook the full program of content review, and provided feedback about the approachability of the station sports programs for new listeners, about the interplay between the presenters of the shows and their colleagues, about the quality of sound especially on phone calls and outside broadcasts, and about the wider reach of the station through digital radio, and the *Listen Again* facility.

At times it is hard to identify something that makes the station's content particularly BBC London 94.9. Of course the station is branded consistently but the diverse range of programming across the weekday and the varied schedule at the weekend means it does not have homogenous 24x7 output. This is perhaps what distinguishes BBC London 94.9 from other radio stations.

Our final meeting in 2006 was a social one, where we undertook an informal programme review followed by interaction with presenters and staff. I have invited all the members of the LAC to stay in touch with me on accountability in London and to consider coming to the accountability events as they are announced in 2007: I will be there representing the RAC and it would be great to achieve some continuity.

The managing editor asked the members to continue to feedback on BBC London 94.9 content by email at any time.

We presented the members with certificates and a small gift and disbanded the LAC for the final time.

Angus will work with David Robey to develop the proposed Local Audience Forums.

## 7. Executive Editor's report

In view of the short timespan since the previous meeting, Mike Macfarlane had little to report. He highlighted the return of *Inside Out London* on Fridays at 7.30pm. He asked council members to comment on the suitability of this transmission time.

**Action: ALL**

He also noted that a video podcast of selected BBC London reports was now available to download from 5pm each weekday. The overall length would vary from day to day but it would contain the key reports about the region. This would enable commuters to keep in touch with London if they were unable to see the BBC London programme live at 6.30. The average journey time for London commuters was 55 minutes.

**Action: Comments from all**

## 8. Chair's report

Nothing to report. Dwain would be attending the first Audience Council for England meeting in London at the end of January.

## 9. Meeting dates 2007 – June meeting

John Sparrow confirmed the date of the June meeting.

**10. Workplan for next meeting**  
Regional sports coverage  
*Nature's Calendar*

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.]*