

RTÉ's Response to Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, Phase One: The Digital Opportunity

RTÉ welcomes the opportunity to respond to *Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, Phase One: The Digital Opportunity* Consultation. In January 2008 RTÉ responded to Ofcom's *Consultation on the Future of Digital Terrestrial Television*, with specific reference to the requirements of Northern Ireland and the importance of cross-border collaboration and co-ordination of spectrum frequency planning and DTT deployment.

This *Ofcom Second Public Service Broadcasting Review* specifically refers to RTÉ and its services under a number of headings, and while the major focus concerns the provision of free-to-air Irish language television services, the Consultation document also opens a wider debate concerning the distribution of RTÉ services in Northern Ireland.

Section 1.49 of the Consultation document addresses the need for new approaches to meet the needs of the UK's nations, regions and localities, and states:

1.49 In Northern Ireland, UTV appears financially robust through to switchover and plurality is further supported by healthy press and radio sectors and, uniquely in the UK, the widespread availability of media from the Republic of Ireland, which to a greater or lesser extent cover Northern Ireland events. The outstanding questions remain obtaining secure and widespread distribution in Northern Ireland for the Gaelic service TG4 and also for RTÉ, and funding for indigenous language production.

In Section 9 of the Consultation document specific Scenarios for Northern Ireland are examined (Sections 9.59 through to 9.69).

RTÉ wishes to correct the designation of RTÉ as a solely English language broadcaster in the Republic of Ireland, as suggested in section 9.60. RTÉ has a statutory obligation to broadcast in the Irish language as the first national language of Ireland. RTÉ currently operates an all-Irish radio service, RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta; provides an annual subvention of one hour's programming per day to TG4; as well as investing in specific home-produced and acquired Irish language programming in television and radio schedules. The RTÉ website also publishes Irish language material online. RTÉ services, therefore, are bilingual.

Free-to-air terrestrial broadcasting in Northern Ireland, even since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, has remained largely that of the British Public Service Broadcasting channels. The viewer choices offered free-to-air, while localised, have never included RTÉ, Ireland's National Public Service Broadcaster and the major provider of television programming of choice in both Irish and English languages in the Republic of Ireland. (Apart from areas where overspill allows RTÉ services to be available). RTÉ certainly welcomes the commitment by the British Government to continue to support the Irish language through TG4 on DTT. However given TG4's particular Irish language remit, we believe that this does not fully reflect broadcasting or indeed the culture of the whole island. Language is one part of a complex of identities. Therefore, the making available of TG4 in Northern Ireland, while desirable, will not by itself be a sufficient step towards the achievement of the objectives in the Belfast Agreement. And it will fall short of full compliance with the spirit of the Agreement.

RTÉ supports the suggestion by Ofcom in this Consultation, as stated in Section 9.64 that 'some degree of intervention or evolution may be required', namely, to 'maintain availability of TG4 and RTÉ channels in Northern Ireland after digital switchover and the continuing availability of cross-border radio services.' RTÉ recognises the ongoing co-operation and collaboration on spectrum frequency planning on both sides of the border to date, and suggests that the successful harmonisation of digital switchover in Northern Ireland with that of the Republic of Ireland is a goal for both jurisdictions.

In addition, the advent of the DTT platform in Britain and Northern Ireland, and soon in the Republic of Ireland, provides a unique opportunity for broadcasters to contribute to the further establishment of peace and reconciliation and play a part in supporting the normalisation of Northern Irish, and indeed Irish, society by allowing for the full expression of '*all traditions and identities on the island*' free-to-air in both jurisdictions.

Furthermore RTÉ supports the contention, as stated in Section 9.66, that:

9.66 The issue is a live one and consideration has been devoted to it in recent months by the BBC's Audience Council for Northern Ireland, the Trust and the Executive. In January 2008 the BBC Trust agreed that there was a case for an incremental increase in Irish and Ulster Scots broadcasting and online services and invited the Executive to come up with proposals for the provision of indigenous minority languages in Northern Ireland. The Trust also noted that there was an opportunity for the Executive to work in collaboration with other language providers in Ireland and Scotland. This supports the suggestion we made in our first Public Service Broadcasting Review that there was scope for BBC Northern Ireland to explore the development of synergies with TG4 and RTÉ as regards Irish language programming and indeed with BBC Scotland, some of whose programming in both Gaelic and Scots may be relevant to Northern Ireland audiences.

Therefore RTÉ is eager to play its part in supporting plurality in Northern Ireland and would be glad to see provision made for the carriage of its services to all the communities of Northern Ireland. In addition, RTÉ has been active in supporting the independent production sector in Northern Ireland and would envisage continuing that support in the future. Finally, RTÉ notes and welcomes that Section 9.101 considers the issue of funding for indigenous language provision in Northern Ireland, and refers to '*the importance of obtaining secure and widespread distribution for TG4 in Northern Ireland and the prospects for similar distribution of RTÉ*' in this regard.

RTÉ would welcome the opportunity to engage with Ofcom and the other relevant UK authorities in order to explore the potential of distribution of its services in Northern Ireland.

RTÉ, Dublin 4, Ireland.

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