



Meeting of the BBC Northern Ireland Committee

MINUTES

Thursday 1st February 2024

BBC Blackstaff House, Belfast

ITEMS OF BUSINESS

- 1 Chair's welcome and minutes of previous BBC Northern Ireland Committee
- 2 Director, BBC Northern Ireland, Report
- 3 Director, BBC Nations, Report
- 4 Broadcasting House Belfast development
- 5 Audiences
- 6 Finance
- 7 AOB

ATTENDANCE

Members:

- Michael Smyth, Non-executive Director, Member for NI (Chair)
- Nick Serota, Non-Executive Director
- Adam Smyth, Director, BBC NI
- Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director, BBC Nations

With:

- Mark Adair, Head of Corporate and Community Affairs, BBC NI
- Rab McConaghy, Head of Audience Research, BBC NI (for item 5)
- Jeremy Ankers, Finance Business partner, BBC NI (for item 6)
- Mark Grinnell, Executive Lead, BBC Nations (secretary)
- Samantha Sing, Finance Director, BBC Nations (observer)

1. Chair's introduction and previous minutes

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1.2 The minutes of the previous Committee (19th October 2023) were approved and no new conflicts were disclosed.

1.3 The Chair congratulated Samantha Sing on her appointment to the position of Finance Director, BBC Nations and invited Samantha to observe the Committee as part of her induction to the BBC.

1.4 There were no apologies for absence.

2. Director, BBC Northern Ireland, Report

2.1 The Director outlined the progress made in completing a move to digital rotas in News in agreement with the trades unions.

2.2 There would be stakeholder engagement with other community and business groups to follow recent successful meetings with Northern Ireland farming community groups.

2.3 The Director outlined the latest RAJAR radio listening figures and expressed confidence in the BBC Northern Ireland audio content. While BBC Radio Ulster is no longer the biggest station by reach in Northern Ireland it continues to outperform the rest of the BBC network.

2.4 Work on the BBC Belfast Broadcasting House transformation project is underway. The Committee would receive regular updates throughout the year.

2.5 The Director commended the Stephen Nolan and News production teams for coverage of this week's power sharing political updates. No audience complaints had been received.

2.6 The Committee heard about plans for an integrated offer with Network News for the forthcoming elections.

2.7 The Committee heard how BBC Northern Ireland would challenge anonymity legislation for sex offenders, in common with other media, London newspapers and Irish press.

2.8 BBC Northern Ireland Priorities for 2024 would be shared with all staff in a meeting on Monday.

2.9 The restructuring work at BBC Radio Foyle had been concluded as planned.

3. BBC NI Centenary

3.1 The Committee heard about plans for commemorating the forthcoming centenary of BBC services in Northern Ireland.

3.2 A steering and implementation group would meet regularly.

3.3 A centenary initiative, *The BBC comes to town* would visit at least six regional/county towns in 2024 and host outside broadcasts, screenings of BBC films, musical performances and school and workplace outreach.

3.4 There would be two signature orchestra concerts in Northern Ireland along with the Ulster Orchestra performing at the BBC Proms.

3.5 A new piece of public art would be commissioned for the refurbishment of BBC Broadcasting House.

3.6 A BBC heritage plaque would be placed near the East Bridge Street Power station, the site of the original BBC transmitter.

4. Belfast Transformation Project

4.1 The Committee heard an update on the project to update and refurbish BBC Broadcasting House in Belfast.

4.2 The project is on track for completion within the approved budget by July 2026.

4.3 The contractors are working overnight to minimise disruption and noise during broadcast hours.

4.4 A new outside broadcast and gallery vehicle will be received. This vehicle will also be used in Scotland and for Network and can provide infrastructure for large sporting and musical events.

4.5 An open day would be planned to showcase the new vehicle.

5. Director, BBC Nations, Report

5.1 The Committee heard about work in the Executive Committee to review the budget forecast for 2025/26.

5.2 The Committee heard about plans to offer greater prominence to Northern Ireland content on the iPlayer and News app.

6. Audiences

6.1 The *Newsline* programme remains the second most successful BBC news programme, after *BBC Spotlight* in the South West of England.

6.2 The BBC in Northern Ireland performed well in the last quarter of 2023, with higher than average consumption in 'chosen often' and 'universal' measurements on the pan BBC scorecard.

6.3 The Committee heard an update on how the audience figures break down by political voting intentions. The BBC performs equally amongst those who say they are nationalist, unionist and those who are neutral.

6.5 The Committee heard there had been a small decline in network radio listening in the most recent RAJAR. This would be discussed in the next Committee.

7. Finance

7.1 The Committee heard the 2023/24 forecasts for service spend, hours and equivalent full time information that will be disclosed in the Annual report and Accounts, along with 2022/23 comparators and a summary of reasons for movements across years.

7.2 Spend in Northern Ireland as a percentage of licence fee raised in NI is forecast to increase.

7.3 TV Spend is forecast to increase in 2024.

7.4 While the forecast spend for BBC NI is projected to rise in percentage and actual terms it is set against a backdrop of falling income at UK level.

7.6 BBC Northern Ireland is increasing spend in co-commissioned content.

7.7 Savings targets set for BBC Northern Ireland will be brought about by reducing cash spend. The savings plans would be revisited at the end of the first quarter of 2024.

8. AOB

8.1 There were no other matters arising.

8.2 Date of next meeting, 1st August 2024.

Meeting ends.