Independent Thematic Review of portrayal and representation of the UK in BBC content

Authors:
Anne Morrison and Chris Banatvala

January 2026

Executive Summary

Portraying and representing the diverse communities of the UK is one of the BBC's core purposes, as set out in the Royal Charter. It must do this accurately and authentically. We were asked to assess how well the BBC is doing this across its content.

Our Thematic Review has reached several key findings and conclusions. This Executive Summary highlights most of these in brief, but we direct readers to the full set of findings in each chapter. We hope that, taken together, they will support and enhance the good work that the BBC is already doing in this area.

Defining portrayal and representation

Throughout this review, we consider the words 'represent' and 'portray' to be distinct and specific and therefore treat them separately. For us, 'represent' is about *whether and how much* a group is shown or included in BBC content – it's essentially objective; 'portray', on the other hand, is about *how* a group is depicted – and that is, by its nature, subjective. We believe this difference is important and think the BBC should approach the Charter requirement to '*accurately and authentically represent and portray the lives of the people of the UK*' in the same manner. Such an approach will help the BBC think more specifically about whether and how groups are represented in its output.

BBC performance and what it should focus on

We found that the BBC is much more inclusive and authentic in the way that it portrays UK communities than even a few years ago and this was borne out by most of our stakeholder interviews. In fulfilling its duty fully to reflect the UK, depicting diversity remains hugely important – it is at the heart of portrayal and representation. This has been an area of strategic focus for the BBC. Audiences overall feel more satisfied than not with their portrayal and representation in its content. However, we believe further steps need to be taken. The two most persistent issues that we identified are the need for the BBC to focus on and connect better with (*i*) working class audiences and (*ii*) those based outside London and the south of England. Perceptions of the BBC are often lower among these groups and they are also less likely to be satisfied with how they are represented and portrayed.

Geography and class

We found that, when considering diversity, the BBC tends to concentrate on race, disability and, to some extent, female representation. Significantly less attention is paid to geography and class. This approach is accentuated by the fact that much of the BBC's work on diversity is framed by the nine 'protected characteristics' set out in the 2010 Equality Act. However, these were designed principally to combat employment discrimination and not to assess portrayal and representation in broadcast material. Importantly, they do not include class and geography.

There has been a marked improvement in the portrayal and representation of the devolved nations and English regions. Nevertheless, London and south-east England still dominate. Our audience research found that the perception of the BBC remains that it is skewed towards the middle class and is London-centric – and that the power in the organisation still lies in the UK capital. We found that this has consequences for portrayal and representation. Genuine production, rooted in the location, made by people who understand it in depth was described to us as fundamental to on-air authenticity. We agree. The key decision makers, who ultimately choose the stories to be told across the whole of the UK, must understand the audience and what will appeal to them – whoever and wherever they are. We believe the BBC should take the lead in devising a new set of diversity characteristics specifically for measuring portrayal and representation which would include class and geography. This would help ensure

that BBC presenters and contributors come from across the UK and from all classes and that this is measured consistently over time.

Which under-represented groups should be prioritised to achieve more authentic portrayal?
The make-up of the UK's population is constantly shifting and evolving. If the BBC is to represent the lives of the people of the UK accurately, commissioners and programme makers must understand its composition, as it changes, and reflect this in the BBC's output. They should be held accountable for broadly reflecting these demographics, in content, over time. The content analysis, audience research and stakeholder interviews we undertook have all indicated to us that there are certain groups that are under-represented. In particular, we think genre commissioners should be proactive in developing on- and off-air talent to ensure authentic portrayal of these groups: people from working class backgrounds (in a way that represents and celebrates their own cultures); South Asians (particularly in drama and entertainment); East Asians (all genres); East Europeans (all genres); and disabled people with a range of impairments (particularly incidental representation). In addition, we believe the BBC needs to consider carefully its succession planning as we have identified areas, *e.g.*, black journalists, where the current representation is reliant on a few individuals.

Measurement of on-air gender balance
We also noted that, while there has been some improvement, there are still more men than women featured in BBC news, nations and factual programming. We would like to see a renewed effort to achieve gender balance in content for contributors and reporters in news and factual programmes. In addition, we found that male presenters significantly outnumber female presenters in the older age groups. The BBC has not been making full use of the data it holds to keep track of this issue. We believe that women on-air ought to be able to have as long a career at the BBC as their male counterparts.

Audiences' priorities
Our research revealed that the way audiences define themselves first and foremost is around their values, family relationships and state of mind (*e.g.*, mental attitude, temperament, mental health), rather than the classic demographics of, for example, race or disability. Nationality and where people are from or now live are more important to how they see themselves than their ethnicity, age, political views, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, language and social class for UK adults overall. We encourage the BBC and its programme makers not to think in terms of a core group versus a diverse group, whether in the audience or their own teams. Instead, they should prioritise diversity, in the sense of a range of opinions and outlooks, over a solely characteristics-based approach. We believe that this will also enable the BBC to achieve more authentic portrayal in its content. In addition, our audience research showed us that people and communities want to be portrayed in ways that make them feel accepted, expected and unremarkable in society – a process described to us as normalisation.

How a different approach to measurement can enhance authentic portrayal
As in all organisations, assessing progress requires regular measurement. The BBC does measure diversity in its content with the aim of portraying and representing the UK. However, this is currently done largely at programme level. As a result, this can sometimes lead to a sense that there needs to be a smattering of diversity in every programme which can lead to inauthentic portrayal. In some cases, this can look clunky, particularly in scripted programmes. We think that the BBC should measure its success in diversity at genre and not programme level to avoid this. While the BBC must accurately reflect UK society overall, this would ensure it had creative freedom to make programmes where the diversity is organic, natural and arises from its location and context.

Authenticity: getting detail right

We also found that measuring diversity by aggregating groups of sometimes very different people (such as BAME, disabled people, LGBTQ+) misses crucial detail which is required to ensure an appropriate range is present in content over time.

Talent development out of London

We believe network commissioners should take more responsibility for developing on-air and off-air talent, in the nations and regions, to help the BBC fully reflect all of the UK. BBC programmes need a talent pool to draw upon and we see its investment in the creative economy across the four nations of the UK as one of the greatest justifications of the licence fee in the 21st century and a way of ensuring that it fully represents and portrays the whole of the UK. In addition, to maintain a suitable 'pipeline', we think that programmes made out of London, aiming to become returning series, should be required to create a long-term training plan to ensure they secure a lasting legacy of talent development.

Strategic relocation

Communities outside London differ considerably in their make-up from the capital. Consistent with the BBC's Across the UK project and to connect better with UK audiences, we think that more senior editorial staff, including TV genre commissioners, should be located outside London. We believe that the BBC would represent and portray the whole of the UK more successfully if at least half of the BBC's senior TV genre commissioners lived and worked closer to those communities across the nations and regions who are currently more disengaged from its content, appointing where possible those who are rooted in the location, not commuting to it. The genres which bear most strongly on UK portrayal and representation and have the greatest impacts for audiences would be the most appropriate to move to these locations. We also believe that network radio not based in Salford should move elements of its commissioning out of London over time.

Sustaining independent production companies ('indies')

We believe that it is important for the BBC to support indies, with substantial bases in the devolved nations and in England outside London and the south-east, to be sustainable. This would enable them to develop and retain local programme makers who are closer to the communities around the UK. The BBC should also ensure that nations-based indies are not limited to making programmes only about their own nation.

A distinctive BBC

We live in a devolved and diverse country and the BBC must reflect that not just in content but also in the way it commissions. Getting this right, particularly with more accurate representation and more authentic portrayal, means the BBC can provide UK audiences with genuinely distinctive British content.

Background

In May 2024, the BBC Board invited us to undertake an independent Thematic Review into 'how accurately and authentically the BBC portrays and represents different communities in the UK across its output'. As part of its Royal Charter, the BBC must meet five 'Public Purposes'. The fourth Public Purpose is:

> *To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom: the BBC should reflect the diversity of the United Kingdom both in its output and services. In doing so, the BBC should accurately and authentically represent and portray the lives of the people of the United Kingdom today, and raise awareness of the different cultures and alternative viewpoints that make up its society. The BBC should bring people together for shared experiences and contribute to the social cohesion and well-being of the United Kingdom. In commissioning and delivering output the BBC should invest in the creative economies of each of the nations and contribute to their development.*

In short, **the BBC should reflect the UK to its audience** – and we have looked at how well it's doing. This is essential because the licence fee is universal and the BBC is meant to serve everyone. Research by the communications regulator, Ofcom, says that 70% of adults think that it is important for society that the BBC provides '*content that reflects the life and culture of communities throughout the UK*.'

The public expects the best from the BBC.

> *I hold the BBC to higher standards than other content providers. As a public service broadcaster, you have a responsibility to represent all communities fairly and consistently.*
>
> [Audience Research: 25, Female, West Midlands, South Asian]

The UK is a mix of cultures and communities made up of many diverse groups. As you go around the UK, it varies significantly from place to place. It's up to the BBC to make sure it portrays and represents this in its content (television, radio and online). So, we've looked at how well it does so and reached conclusions on how things might be improved, where necessary.

To embark on a discussion about how and how often different communities are represented is immediately to wade into controversy. Personal opinions and lobby groups abound and we have gone out of our way to hear from a wide range of interviewees with a panoply of different views.

We encourage the BBC to elevate the debate above the concept of diversity and the arguments about culture wars, to one about how it represents the whole of the UK. This includes the diversity characteristics but goes way beyond them and directly plays into the BBC's fourth Public Purpose.

Programme-making isn't a science. It needs to be informed by data, but you can't approach it with a checklist and produce something genuine. It's an artistic and creative process that requires intelligence, instinct, collaboration and often a deep emotional connection to the material. Directors, journalists and producers play a crucial role. Above all in scripted programmes, writers generate the narratives which we watch and listen to. Collectively, these creative voices are the ones shaping the stories and perspectives that audiences hear and see.

To reflect this richness of life, you need programme makers from a wide range of backgrounds – different cultures, regions, classes and experiences – because **authentic storytelling starts with lived experience, not box-ticking. Programme makers also need to understand the population around them and how people see themselves**.

The views here are entirely our own and, given the subject matter, are inevitably subjective. No individual has expertise in every area we're covering, so we've drawn on our combined years of experience in broadcasting, programme-making, and regulation to try to make sense of it all. We appreciate that not everyone will agree with our assessment or conclusions, but we hope that, overall, they offer useful insights to help the BBC as it works at improving how it portrays and represents the UK.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank the small but outstanding team at the BBC for their support throughout this review.

Methodology

The BBC asked us to assess how accurately and authentically it portrays and represents different groups and communities in the UK across its output. We've chosen to approach this subject through overarching themes, so the review is organised thematically rather than with a chapter for each specific group.

We've considered all genres across all platforms. As radio isn't a visible medium, which makes it less easy for audiences to recognise portrayal and representation, we've inevitably focused to a greater extent on television. Nevertheless, we have points to make about the important role that radio plays. With its wide range of stations across the UK, BBC Radio has an essential function in representing and providing programmes for specific groups.

We have not examined religion or politics in this review. The BBC Board did not ask us to look at either topic, which could each merit a thematic review of its own. We have not sought to consider representation and portrayal in BBC content based on beliefs – political or otherwise.

We have chosen to treat the words 'represent' and 'portray' separately. For us, 'represent' is about *whether and how much* a group is shown or included in BBC content – it's essentially objective. 'Portray', on the other hand, is about *how* a group is depicted – and that is, by its nature, subjective.

Our report begins (pp. 10-20) with **the UK census and what the UK looks like today** – not to suggest that the BBC should replicate the population statistics in a formulaic way, but to build a clearer picture of the UK's demographics and understand better what its content should broadly reflect.

From there, we examined (pp. 21-31) **how the BBC currently measures its success in portraying and representing the UK**. Once we assessed the strengths and weaknesses of these measurement systems, we explored how they influence actual content: do they result in box-ticking or do they help to deliver genuinely authentic representation? (pp. 32-43).

Our audience research and discussions with stakeholders found that one of the approaches to authenticity is normalisation – **portraying people and communities in ways that make them feel accepted, expected and unremarkable in society**. We examine why normalisation matters, and how it might be more effectively achieved (pp. 44-56).

Finally, we turned to **geography** – an aspect of diversity that many argued to us could do with more emphasis. We consider how the BBC can better reflect all parts of the UK, including Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the regions of England (pp. 57-79).

The BBC produces a huge amount of content every year, and it would not be possible for us to review even a small fraction of it. On top of that, it portrays a very wide range of groups – for example, ethnic minorities, disabled people and people from different class backgrounds. Any of these could easily justify a Thematic Review of their own. It would be impossible to be comprehensive. That's why we've focused our efforts where we believe we can make the biggest difference, and where any lessons learned could be applied more widely. We've therefore concentrated on the largest groups by size. We recognise that some communities may feel disappointed that they haven't been included but, ultimately, that was our decision – not the BBC's.

In conducting this review, we've looked at evidence from:

i) **External and internal stakeholders**. We interviewed well over 100 people inside and outside the BBC. These included programme makers, commissioners, executives, commentators and media experts. We visited each of the devolved nations and spoke to a wide range of people, including those in independent production companies ('indies'). We have included quotes from these interviews throughout the report. Where the speaker was employed by the BBC at the time, they are labelled as 'internal'; those who were not are identified as 'external'. We would like to thank everyone who took the trouble to speak with us, often at length, about the issues. The candour and thoughtful nature of the contributions helped us greatly.

   Note: Throughout this report we have referred to 'talent'. We've used this term to mean both on- and off-air talent, apart from where we specify one or the other.

ii) **Audience research**. We first considered the extensive research that already exists in this area and, in the light of this, commissioned our own quantitative and qualitative research from the market research agency, Yonder Consulting. We would like to record our thanks to them and to BBC Audiences for the thorough and professional work they carried out on our behalf with audience groups and their efficient and nuanced analysis.

   The first phase was a **quantitative study** involving a nationally representative survey of 4,518 respondents, aimed at understanding how different groups in the UK view themselves and how they believe others perceive them. For example, respondents were asked whether characteristics like race, disability or nationality were more central to their identity than aspects such as family or personal values. Through a series of questions, they identified which traits they felt most defined them, and then how they thought others would define them. We also asked how they felt about the BBC's portrayal and representation of people like them. This allowed us to gauge how well different communities felt represented in BBC content, in terms of both visibility and portrayal.

   Second, we carried out **targeted qualitative research** to explore more deeply how participants felt the BBC portrays and represents the UK. This phase focused on identifying the types of content participants felt represented them authentically, as well as the content they felt fell short. We have quoted from some of our audience responses.

   The research document compiled by Yonder is published alongside this report.

iii) **Content analysis**. We assessed a wide range of BBC content between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 ('the review period') but also looked outside this time frame. We focused on first run commissions over this period, rather than repeats or acquisitions. However, we recognise that BBC platforms like Sounds and iPlayer, with their ability to keep the archive accessible, play an increasingly important role in how the public views the BBC's ability to reflect the UK.

iv) **Complaints**. We considered audience feedback, over the review period, as expressed through complaints made to the BBC.

v) **Additional evidence**. Anyone who wanted to provide us with additional evidence was welcome to do so and, after the review was publicly announced, we received many unsolicited submissions, which we considered carefully.

Unlike the previous two Thematic Reviews (on taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt; and on migration), this review mainly focuses on non-news output. However, news and current affairs are still included as their main purpose is to tell stories about people in the UK (and around the world).

Our focus throughout is on how groups and communities are presented on-air and not about their programme tastes and preferences or about programme performance.

The fieldwork for this review was conducted between 2024 and 2025, with interviews undertaken from May 2024 to May 2025 and the audience research completed in April 2025. Since the review was drafted in June 2025 and submitted to the BBC, a number of developments have taken place. These include the UK Government's publication of its Green Paper on Royal Charter review, as well as a series of significant announcements by the BBC – particularly in commissioning and spend in the nations – which we welcome and which align with the themes and findings set out in this review.

Context

Since its foundation, the BBC has had public service at the core of its remit. However, it wasn't until 2006 that the Charter obliged the BBC to represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities.

As the national broadcaster, the BBC is expected to be broad and inclusive, reflecting the full diversity of the UK – in both the audiences it serves and the people and perspectives it portrays. It takes these obligations very seriously and tries to offer something for everyone, whoever they are and wherever they're from. But while its obligations continue to grow, its funding is shrinking. This is happening in a tough commercial landscape, with content freely available and growing competition for audio and screen time. The BBC has looked to additional sources of funding – such as international co-production – but this can make the task of portraying and representing the UK even harder.

There was almost universal agreement from the people we spoke to that portrayal and representation are extremely important for the BBC and that they have greatly improved over the years, even if some still think there's further to go. It has been a priority for the BBC. Its Creative Diversity Commitment, which aimed to invest at least £112 million of existing commissioning budgets over three years on 'diverse content' (with on-air diverse portrayal, off-air diverse production leadership and/or diverse company leadership) across TV and Radio, concluded in 2024. This target was exceeded, and in fact more than doubled, with £243 million invested. The BBC's current commitment (announced in September 2024) is to invest more

than £80 million annually. This also includes increased targets for TV production roles from 20% to 25% for ethnicity, disability and socio-economic diversity.

We heard from a very wide range of views from inside and outside the BBC. Some believed that the broadcaster has not gone far enough in representing, for example, race, gender and disability. Others said that the BBC has gone too far and it worries too much about diversity. We have listened to them all and aimed to be objective in our assessment, driven by the evidence.

We have reached several findings and what we see as the review's main points are set out in the Executive Summary. Our full set of conclusions can be found in the report at the end of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Who's under-represented?

The census and representation

The make-up of the UK's population is constantly shifting and evolving. If programme makers and commissioners are to represent accurately the lives of the people of the UK, they must understand its composition, as it changes, and reflect this in the BBC's output. Although commissioning and programme-making are arts rather than sciences, some objective data can help in working out who should be featured more in programmes than they are. This is particularly important at the BBC, with its obligation to represent all communities in the UK, and where, in common with other broadcasters, the demographics and life experience of those in charge do not completely replicate those of the UK as a whole. The census is therefore a good starting point.

The most recent UK-wide census conducted in 2021 (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), and 2022 (Scotland) provides a snapshot of, among other things, the population size, demographic characteristics, social and economic conditions and the overall diversity of the UK (*e.g.*, disability and age). Importantly, some – but not all – of this data is updated by the ONS, the National Records of Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, every year, using surveys and a range of other sources.

The UK population (as of mid-2024) was approximately 69.3 million people, an increase of about 6 million since 2011. The population of England, in 2024, was 58.6 million, Scotland was 5.5 million, Wales was 3.2 million and Northern Ireland 1.9 million. The proportion of white people decreased, while there were notable increases in the Indian and Pakistani Asian populations. This was the largest percentage increase among non-white ethnic groups. In terms of languages, Polish emerged as the most widely spoken language in the UK, as a first language, after English.

One of the most notable changes in the UK has been in its racial mix. In the 2011 census, the proportion of people describing themselves as white was 87%. The remaining 13% belonged to a minority ethnic group. By 2021, according to the census, the white population was 83% and the ethnic minority population had risen to 17%. This varies by nation and includes people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

Across the UK as a whole, people from an Asian background make up 8.6% of the population, people of a black background (African, Caribbean and other) 3.7% and mixed ethnic background 2.7%. The devolved nations tell a different story, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all having white populations above 90% and a smaller proportion of people of colour. So, the UK-wide figures don't capture the real diversity you find from one community to the next, from urban to rural, coastal to inland, poor to prosperous, with a range of distinct cultures, histories and dynamics. In particular, they disguise the fact that London is very unlike the rest of the UK in prosperity and ethnic mix. (See 'London is Different' in *Chapter 3: Authenticity or ticking the boxes?*, pp. 33-35.)

Alongside data on ethnic backgrounds, the census gave us valuable insights into a number of other demographic areas – which we believe are under-represented in the BBC's output. We outline these later in this chapter.

Understanding the differences

In interviews with key BBC staff, when asked how they would determine who was missing or under-represented in content, they struggled to provide clear answers or offered responses that, in our view, were unconvincing. The general sense was that it would either emerge through team discussions or be flagged by Creative Diversity (a BBC team whose aim is to ensure that the broadcaster authentically represents the UK population both on- and off-air).

There is no satisfactory framework in place to help programme makers and commissioners recognise how the UK and all its constituent parts actually look and assist them to keep in touch with how these are changing. **We believe that, when producing programmes, commissioners and programme makers should have a greater awareness of the census overall and the make-up of the area they're portraying**. **However, this awareness should not override artistic or editorial merits.** Placing too much reliance on census data in an effort to replicate population statistics would lead to a formulaic approach to casting and storytelling, ultimately stifling creativity. (See *Chapter 3: Authenticity or ticking the boxes?*) In short, while better knowledge of the census is required in representing the UK overall in programmes, programme makers shouldn't feel constrained by it.

In scripted programmes, a solid understanding of the data can support better-informed casting decisions resulting in more authentic representation of places, by considering factors like ethnicity, income and other local demographics. With that baseline in place, producers can then make intentional choices to deviate – whether for artistic licence, editorial judgment, staying true to a book or script or for any other appropriate reason. But this way, it becomes a thought-through decision.

How does BBC output compare with reality?

Research commissioned specifically for this review indicated that a large majority of people (65%) believed that representing different groups in the media is important (compared with 10% who thought it was not).

> *I feel it's especially important for young children to see the wide range of people we have in this country and for each group of people to be represented fairly… I think it matters more to people who feel under-represented.*
>
> [Audience research: 39, Male, Scotland, white]

However, many of those we spoke with, inside and outside the BBC, questioned whether the BBC's output as a whole really added up to a full picture of the UK. The view remains that, because the BBC is essentially still – though considerably less – London- and south-east England-centric, programming is more likely to represent these parts of the UK. Our audience research shows that when specifically asked if they should be represented more, less or the same amount as now, men overall, middle class and white people, together with those living in London and the south of England were most likely to be content with the current level of their representation on the BBC. On the other hand, the groups that most wanted to see greater representation of themselves were black communities (Caribbean and African), East Asians, people with mental health conditions, LGBTQ+ people and older women. However, there's a noticeable gap between those whom the general audience wants to see more of and what specific groups within the audience feel they need. This gap is widest for LGBTQ+, black African and Caribbean communities, who express a greater desire for increased representation than the wider audience does for them.

We have identified those areas where we consider there is under-representation – based on research we've commissioned and existing studies, content analysis, complaints and our conversations with programme makers, commissioners, executives, commentators and media experts.

Conversations with BBC staff, especially commissioners, showed that when they thought about diversity, they mainly focused on race, but also considered disability. These were the characteristics that were top of mind. Geography, class and age (particularly older women, see further below, pp. 14-16) were less often brought up spontaneously and discussions around these topics sometimes had to be prompted.

Geography (out of London and the south-east of England)

Diversity covers a wide range of issues including geographical location. **Most people we interviewed said that the BBC could do much better at representing those who live outside London and the south-east of England. We agree that it should. This means an increased focus on not only the devolved nations, but also the rest of England.**

> *What we have neglected is actually other English voices outside the south-east. The north of England, I think, is really under-represented. The Midlands are really under-represented. And obviously there are huge populations there and I don't think you're really hearing those accents on the BBC. I do feel we've got a way to go there.*
>
> [Internal]

There is almost universal agreement that the BBC has made significant progress over the past ten years in moving departments, programmes and content out of London and the south-east of England. However, the BBC powerbase is still in London with key decision-making remaining there (for more, see *Chapter 5: London-centricity*).

This London-based perspective can cause programme makers and commissioners to assume that the rest of the UK is close to London's demographics. London – like many diverse and international cities of the world – is not typical in its prosperity, size and in having a split between white and other ethnic groups of 54/46, according to the latest census.

> *You could say there are six pillars of diversity. Yes, there is race; yes, there is gender; yes, there is disability; and there's also class, political diversity and regionalism. Each one is equally important, but I think that making sure that programme makers are aware of the make-up of British society is crucial. If you live in Islington, you don't think that the make-up of British society is as it is.*
>
> [External]

Research for this review clearly showed that audiences living in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as the north of England were more likely than those in the south of England and London to want more representation of their nation or region on the BBC.

The problem of the BBC appearing too southern and London-centric is a long-standing one. But, despite the BBC's many efforts to adjust the balance, it is clear from our research and many other sources that the issue persists and that those outside the BBC's heartland are – and perceive themselves to be – under-represented. We explore these themes in more depth in *Chapter 5: London-centricity*.

Class

As well as being seen as southern, the BBC is also regarded by many as white and middle class, both in terms of who it serves and who it features. There was strong agreement (although not universal) that the BBC has come a long way in representing the UK, and reflecting its people more accurately. However, some we interviewed felt that the BBC still does not adequately represent working class people and their voices and experiences, given that, according to surveys, they make up about half of the population.

In the audience research we commissioned, there was a clear divide between the middle and working classes over how happy they were with their level of representation in BBC content. Over 60% of the middle class audience were content with their current level of representation, whereas 44% of working class respondents felt the same. Importantly, 26% more working class individuals than their middle class counterparts said they would like to see more representation in the BBC's output.

> *People who generally make programmes are still middle class, white people or the majority and so you're not often aware of working class voices. It doesn't seem that we get enough of them.*
>
> [External]

> *The people who are least represented on the BBC are left-behind, white, lower middle class, working class Brits, the kind of voices you're least likely to hear and… the sort of attitudes that you're least likely to [hear].*
>
> [External]

There is a particular problem across the media industry in recruiting and especially in retaining working class off-air talent. Short project-based contracts and increasing casualisation make it very hard to survive in the industry without resources such as the 'bank of mum and dad' behind you. This has been exacerbated by the recent downturn in commissions which has led to many talented working class people having to find alternative employment. The difficulty of navigating the industry for less well-off production staff undoubtedly has a knock-on effect on-air.

Presenters on the BBC are predominantly (but certainly not exclusively) middle class, as are commentators – especially in news and current affairs output. Having said that, there is evidence that BBC radio provides overall a greater range and depth of socio-economic backgrounds. On Radio 2, Trevor Nelson, who describes his parents as working class St Lucians, hosts the weekday 2pm to 4pm slot. Tony Livesey, who grew up in Nelson, Lancashire, presents the weeknight late show on 5 Live. Mark Lamarr, from a working class background in Swindon, is on 6 Music. On Radio 1, Danny Howard, from Blackpool, presents *Club Mix* among other programmes. Radio 3 deserves credit for diversifying the accents of its presenters in recent years, with Tom McKinney, Elizabeth Alker and Linton Stephens.

Continuing dramas/soaps remain an ongoing source of representation of working class people on the BBC. *EastEnders* and *Waterloo Road* are overwhelmingly set in working class environments, while *The Archers* and *Casualty* span the social classes. In other dramas, the BBC also achieves a good reflection of the UK. For example, of the 39 original television drama titles transmitted by the BBC during this review period, more than half were set in, or heavily featured, a working class environment. In addition, 15 of these dramas could be described as being solely set within a working class context. This seems to us to be a good reflection of the UK and shows that the BBC can't be accused of ignoring working class communities. However, the degree of representation is patchy across genres.

For example, BBC newsreaders on network TV news do not come across as working class. Of course, this does not mean that there are no presenters from working-class backgrounds, but rather that such backgrounds are not readily apparent on screen. How they appear may be different from their actual origins – see the difficulties of measuring class in our chapter on measurement.

Looking at the review year, across the board, we believe the BBC does represent working class people. However, it varies by genre and, according to audience groups and people we interviewed, more could be done, particularly in the choice of presenters in news and factual content. We believe it is not so much the *quantity* of working class representation which is the issue but the *way* working class communities are portrayed and understood that needs further consideration. (See *Chapter 4: Normalisation*, pp. 46-50.)

Women and older women

Women make up 51% of the population, and in the UK 17% of the total population are women aged 55 and over (according to mid-2024 estimates).

Back in 2014, the landscape of news broadcasting among the UK's main public service providers (and Sky News) was heavily skewed towards men. Research led by Professor Lis Howell at City University showed that, for every female expert interviewed on flagship news programmes, there were 4.4 men. (Experts were defined as anyone interviewed because of their expertise, influence or authority, including politicians, CEOs, researchers, sportspeople and celebrities.) A decade on, there has been clear progress: by 2024 (the latest data available), across the board the ratio had improved to just under two men for every woman interviewed. The *BBC News* at 10.00pm (BBC One) and *Today* (Radio 4) had ratios of just over two men for every female expert interviewed. While this undoubtedly marks a shift in the right direction, it's still not as good as it should be. Furthermore, the BBC's performance in this area is not as good as some other broadcasters.

Currently, in the UK the ratio of male to female expertise in fields such as law, politics, academia and medicine stands at approximately 1½:1. This is the world which the BBC should be representing, and we see no good reason why it is not already meeting this goal, particularly as it's been ten years since the formal measurement of this area began. Not to reflect this proportion of women in its news output is to lag behind society and to present an inauthentic picture.

> *It's important that we reflect society… It's hard, but it is what we should be doing, not because we're social engineers but because we as broadcasters… have a duty to reflect society, particularly at the BBC where society, if you like, is paying for what you do*.
> [External]

In a different area of measurement – the gender balance between male and female presenters and reporters in news programmes – the BBC has made some progress. It's achieving more equal representation of women among presenters on both television and radio in its news programmes. However, according to City University, representation among BBC reporters remains less balanced, especially when compared with other broadcasters (with Radio 4's *Today* lagging).

In 2017, the BBC launched '50:50 The Equality Project' aimed at equal gender representation overall in its content (and not just news). We consider this initiative in greater detail in our

chapter on Measurement. The results show that, while gender balance has improved, it is still not near 50:50 (see pp. 26-27).

So, while the gender gap for expert voices, presenters and reporters in news programmes has narrowed it still requires attention. However, we have uncovered a much larger gap between men and women, in BBC output overall, as presenters grow older.

Analysis for this review showed a noticeable mismatch in the number of staff and freelance female presenters over the age of 60 in the BBC's programme-making areas (Content, Nations and News & Current Affairs) in comparison with men of equivalent age. This is based on BBC HR data, so it does not include presenters on programmes made by independent producers for the BBC, but it does encompass 1476 staff and freelance presenters directly contracted by the BBC.

- In Content, there were nearly four times as many men presenters over 60 as women (that is 47 male presenters over 60 compared with 12 female).
- In News, there were nearly twice as many older men (31 men vs. 16 women).
- In Nations and the English Regions there were between 3 and 4 times as many older men as women (113 men vs. 31 women).

Amongst over 70s, the imbalance is even more acute. Across the three divisions, there were 57 men over 70 and only 11 women.

Although women outnumbered men when we looked at presenters under 50 (461 women vs. 384 men), men significantly outnumbered women amongst over 50s (237 women vs. 394 men). We found no evidence of systematic discrimination and there may be a number of reasons for this imbalance. Is this, for instance, a legacy issue from an era when there were more men than women in long-term staff roles? The fact that the gender imbalance exists among freelancers too suggests not. Regardless of the underlying reasons, **we think there is no room for complacency.**

These figures don't make a distinction between TV and radio, but there's evidence that, as they age, women tend to move from television to audio. We were told that, as they get older, men in the media are portrayed gaining gravitas and wisdom associated with authority. It works differently for women. It was argued that, if they stayed on television, older women had either to try and keep looking younger or to opt out altogether from being judged on their looks and develop idiosyncratic personas.

> *There is an ageism in almost every organisation which, for all sorts of quite complicated reasons, tends to hit women harder than it hits men. I don't think the BBC is immune from that. I haven't felt it directed at me but it's easy to feel in the workplace, even the BBC, that somehow you're looking old. And this isn't about active dismissal. It's about no longer feeling part of the swim. It is still the case that wrinkly old men connote authority, they connote wisdom. Wrinkly old women connote witches!*
>
> [External]

Women generally seem to agree that, as they age, they're poorly represented. Nearly nine in ten say that women over 50 are represented poorly in adverts, films and television. And two-thirds of women cease to feel represented in the media from the age of 46. (Source: *Ageism Is Never In Style* consultancy survey, 2023.)

> *Older women do not appear on television as much as they should, just on a straight demographic basis… It's in front of your face every night… [But] women are looking and behaving and presenting themselves as vibrant and active and energetic and knowledgeable into their 70s and 80s now, and that's new.*
>
> [External]

There is evidence that lead roles for older actresses have increased in number in recent years, offering a wide range of characters who have greater agency in the narrative. However, in scripted shows in general, the minor characters are more often men than women and the number of older women smaller still. Actresses over 40 complain of being relegated to supporting roles or characters defined primarily by their relationships to younger characters. They quote the following recent self-tape requests for an actress in her 50s. These aren't just for BBC shows.

> *Maria – Perfectly groomed. Prides herself on being the perfect wife to her clever, accomplished husband, a professor at a local university.*
> *Carol – Glamorous and vain. Mother to Charlotte. By the end of the series, Carol has not taken full responsibility for her failure as a mother.*
> *Amanda – Loving and artistic mother to her 2 daughters and wants the best for them which can sometimes come across as pushy. (In one scene.)*

Given all of this, there is clearly much work to be done to represent older women's lives more frequently and authentically in fiction and as presenters on-air.

To achieve better representation of older women, particularly presenters and reporters, the BBC should regularly keep track of the representation in its programmes of older women in comparison with men and ensure there is a better balance. This can easily be done using existing data within the BBC and in anonymised form.

South and East Asians

At the time of the last census, around 8.6% of the UK population was of South, East or 'other' Asian heritage (with about 3.7% of African or Caribbean background including 'other' black backgrounds). Some respondents to our review questioned whether BBC output reflected this reality.

> *If you are growing up in Britain and you're watching the BBC, you have the impression that the black population is much larger than it actually is in real life… but I suspect there are far fewer Asian people working in the media and cultural industries generally, and very few in acting by comparison.*
>
> [External]

Several interviewees speculated that this might be linked to parental expectations in South and East Asian families, which often encourage more stable professional career paths over the relative insecurities of creative roles. Certainly, there do not seem to be as many leading actors of Asian heritage as those of black backgrounds, in BBC drama.

In the period under review, we identified 39 first run originated dramas. In those dramas, there was not one South or East Asian protagonist (or lead character), although there were a few secondary roles further down the cast lists. (We say more on this in *Chapter 3: Authenticity or ticking the boxes?*, p. 33.) The BBC is aware of this issue and, since then, although outside our review period, BBC One has broadcast the crime thriller series, *Virdee*, about a detective

working in Bradford, based on British characters with South Asian backgrounds, and Adil Akhtar starred in the second series of the legal drama, *Showtrial.*

> *Sikh, Hindu and other Asian communities are rarely explored, unless it is a one-off drama.*
>
> [Audience research: 80, Female, Greater London, South Asian]

This is not to say that those of South Asian heritage are missing from BBC output. In radio, there is most obviously the Asian Network. Amol Rajan, Anita Rani, Anita Anand, Samira Ahmed and James Coomarasamy feature prominently on Radio 4. Zara Janjua and Ravi Sagoo are presenters for BBC Radio Scotland. Riz Lateef and Asad Ahmad present for BBC London. In television, those of South Asian background are most likely to appear in news and current affairs, including Naga Munchetty on *Breakfast* and Reeta Chakrabarti on the *Six* and *Ten,* though they have made significant contributions to panel shows and successful comedies such as *Man Like Mobeen* and *Juice*. These two series appeared on BBC Three, which has been a fertile source of diverse and off-beat comedies, and also showed the comedy short *Man Eater* with an Iranian, black and British Asian cast. Other programmes in this genre with South Asians in ensemble or supporting casts included *Bad Education*, *Starstruck* and *The Cleaner*. There is less South Asian representation in mainstream entertainment shows, Romesh Ranganathan apart. Overall, the pan-industry diversity report, Diamond, said in its headline findings in 2022/3, '*The proportion of on-screen contributions made by people who identify as South Asian is not only low, it continues to fall'.*

East Asians (for example, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and others) are even harder to find on-air, although they do make up a smaller proportion of the UK population than South Asians at around 1%. In the cinema, there has been a surge of South Korean talent in recent years, with *Parasite* winning the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2020 and *Past Lives* and *Minari* gaining awards and critical acclaim. *Squid Game* has become a global TV phenomenon, like K-Pop in the music world. Yet there is little representation of this talent on the BBC.

There is no current equivalent to David Yip's pioneering role as Detective Sergeant John Ho in *The Chinese Detective*, or *Ken Cheng: Chinese Comedian* (Radio 4). These significant roles are absent today, although James Phoon in *Wreck* and Katie Leung in *Annika* (an acquisition from UKTV) provide some representation, with James Wong (*Gardeners' Question Time*), Phil Wang (*Unspeakable*) and Kevin Fong (*The Artificial Human*) on Radio 4. *Awkwafina Is Nora from Queens* was the exception in having as its protagonist a Chinese/Korean American, but was an acquisition from the US. Sandra Oh's much acclaimed co-lead in *Killing Eve,* also an acquisition, ended in 2022 (becoming the first woman of Asian descent to be nominated for a Lead Actress Emmy in a drama series). *Nail Bar Boys* on BBC Three was a rare representation of East Asians in factual programmes. **We would like to see the BBC include East Asians in their plans appropriately across all genres in future.**

Disability

Around 18.2% of the UK population described themselves as disabled, according to ONS sources, with some surveys putting the figure at around 25%. In its review of 2022 to 2023 (The Seventh Cut), the Creative Diversity Network that oversees Diamond says that on-screen contributions by disabled people across the industry amount to 8.7%, with the BBC performing marginally better at 8.8%. Although this figure has increased since 2019/20, the change has been minimal. The most under-represented disabilities, they found, are visual impairment/blindness followed by deaf/hard of hearing.

We found widespread agreement, both inside and outside the BBC, that there was not adequate representation of disabled people. There was also some dissatisfaction with portrayal (for more on portrayal see *Chapter 4: Normalisation*, pp. 51-53).

> *Everybody knows someone in their family circle and friendship circle, someone who's deaf, physically disabled, neurodiverse. And that's what I think our soap operas definitely need to represent.*
>
> [External]

We agree that continuing drama should represent disability on a regular basis through core characters. We welcome the return of the character, Penny Branning, in *EastEnders*, now played by Kitty Castledine, who uses a wheelchair. Rose Ayling-Ellis, who is deaf, played Frankie Lewis in *EastEnders* who appeared from 2020 to 2022 and the show currently includes two characters with bi-polar disorder. In *Casualty*, Max, the clinical lead, has a chronic kidney condition. The character, Rosie Cornwall, is played by Nicola Chegwin who is a wheelchair user, while three other characters have had mental health issues.

In *Waterloo Road*, the school secretary, Wendy Whitwell (Jo Coffey) who is a mainstay of the cast, has dwarfism and uses a wheelchair but, refreshingly, her disability isn't her main story. She previously appeared in *EastEnders* as well as the comedy series, *Avoidance*. We found that our disabled interviewees in particular wanted to see more disability included incidentally across all programmes i.e. in the general mix of people represented on screen without their disability always being the focus (for more see *Chapter 4: Normalisation* in particular, pp.52-53).

We shouldn't underestimate the challenges with ensuring disability is apparent on-air. Sometimes, disabilities are not visible. There are also times when those featuring in content may consider their disability irrelevant. As a result, there are likely to be more people with disabilities appearing on the BBC than we know. For example, in two series of *Have I Got News For You* in 2023, around 25% of the guests had at some time publicly reported disabilities (including neurodivergence) or issues with mental health. On Radio 4's *News Quiz*, in a series within our review period, the number was similarly around 25%.

> *Disability continues to be a challenge. It's a hard one because it can often not be visible, so it's harder to get a conversation going about it, and we've wrestled with that a bit. You're never quite sure how much of an assumption to make about whether people want to talk about their disability, how much it forms a central part of their identity and so on. But I think we could certainly do more – and in the BBC in general, I think, everyone recognises that it's an area that needs some improvement.*
>
> [Internal]

> *I think* Strictly *has really flown the flag in terms of different kinds of disability being represented and being at the centre… But how do we know when we're looking at people who are neurodiverse? Well, we don't unless they talk about it*.
>
> [Internal]

There is no doubt that the BBC has tried to improve its representation of disability and the following are just a few examples – Yvonne Cobb is a regular TV chef on *Morning Live* and presents her cooking segments with British Sign Language (BSL). The series often features content related to disability in a very natural and integrated way along with the rest of its items. *Dinosaur* is a comedy drama from Scotland about an autistic woman, starring and co-written by Ashley Storrie, which had a successful launch and has been recommissioned for a second series. Mark Lane, who uses a wheelchair, is one of the presenters of *Gardeners' World*, while

the award for memorable moment of the year at the BAFTA TV Awards in 2025 went to Chris McCausland, who is blind, and Dianne Buswell for their waltz on *Strictly Come Dancing*. Guests on *Strictly* have also previously included Rose Ayling-Ellis, Tasha Ghouri and Ellie Simmonds. The drama series *Reunion* is bilingual – British Sign Language and English. The majority of the cast and many members of the production team and crew are deaf or use BSL. On radio, there are the long-running series for blind and visually impaired people presented by Peter White, *In Touch*; *Ability* (written and performed by disabled actors); and *The Carnival Family*. *Access All* has been a successful regular podcast about mental health, well-being and disabled people. But despite these examples and many more, the BBC readily admits that in terms of disability it is 'behind [its] expected ambition' (Leigh Tavaziva, BBC Chief Operating Officer, 2024).

The BBC tells us that it is actively addressing disability representation on-screen. But more needs to be done and quicker, as the amount of on-screen representation by the BBC is half of what it is in the UK's population, so this is an area which should be prioritised.

East Europeans

According to the ONS, 3.3% of respondents in England and Wales identify themselves as of white, East European background (Northern Ireland and Scotland do not collect this exact data). However, East Europeans are either rarely depicted on air or appear disproportionately less frequently. East Europeans make up around 1.6 million of the population of England and Wales (with the largest groups being Polish, Romanian and Lithuanian). In fact, Polish is the second most common first language in the UK after English, a trend that emerged following EU enlargement in 2004 and then 2007.

> *[Poles] feel their community is invisible. It absolutely is… Poles are very resilient. They've had to be for years and they get on and do things, so what they've done in the UK since 2004 is to set up their own radio stations.*
>
> [External]

We were offered several explanations as to why individuals from certain backgrounds may be more prominently represented than others on the BBC and other broadcasters. These included everything from likely career choices pursued in certain communities to whether they lobbied effectively for more airtime. One interviewee suggested that the combination of wanting to assimilate and also their fears at the time of Brexit, meant that the Polish community was less likely to lobby the BBC for fair and accurate representation.

> *Poles and the Czechs haven't agitated about it because they just want to get on with life and they don't want to cause ripples and problems. Since Brexit, they don't want to make a feature of their Polishness because I think they don't want to attract negative publicity or confrontation.*
>
> [External]

This isn't to say that East Europeans have never been represented on the BBC. Examples include the TV series *Exodus: Our Journey To Europe* in 2016 and Gary Younge's Radio 4 series, *East Europeans in Brexitland* the same year. Dancers on *Strictly Come Dancing* include Aljaž Škorjanec (Slovenia), Jowita Przystał (Polish), Nadiya Bychkova and Nikita Kuzmin (Ukraine). In 2013, Radio 4's *The Archers* featured a Polish character, Pawel, and in 2019 a Bulgarian, Lexi Viktorova. The World War II drama, *World On Fire* (BBC One), which ran for two seasons 2019-23, included Kasia Tomaszeski who joins the Polish Resistance, and her

brother Grzegorz. **However, across the huge range of the BBC's output, these examples, even if not comprehensive, are thin on the ground and span a great range of time. The BBC needs to catch up and include these more recent arrivals in the UK, whether they lobby for their own representation or not.**

- Commissioners must understand and keep themselves up to date with the demographics of the UK so that they can be accountable for broadly reflecting them in content, over time.

- Commissioners should now take a proactive role in developing on- and off-air talent, to ensure authentic portrayal of the following groups:
  - People from working class backgrounds (in a way that represents and celebrates their own cultures)
  - South Asians (particularly in drama and entertainment)
  - East Asians (in all genres)
  - Disabled people with a range of impairments (particularly focusing on incidental representation)
  - East Europeans (in all genres)

- Using existing data, the BBC should keep track of presenters' ages on an annual basis with the aim of achieving a better gender balance across the age groups over time and, in particular, to ensure older women can have careers as long as their male counterparts.

- BBC News should focus on achieving a 1½:1 male-to-female ratio among 'expert' contributors (reflecting UK society).

Chapter 2: Measurement

What an organisation chooses to measure and how it measures profoundly affect its actions and how it holds itself accountable. If you don't know you have a problem, you're not going to fix it. The BBC is no exception to this. Effective measurement is vital in monitoring how the BBC is meeting its commitments to portrayal and representation, for both itself and external scrutiny.

This chapter therefore focuses on what the BBC measures and how it measures it. We then examine whether these metrics are effective for assessing how well the BBC portrays and represents the UK.

We found that only certain diversity characteristics are regularly monitored by the BBC. There is concentration on ethnicity, disability and, to a lesser extent, gender but, for example, the regionality of presenters and reporters on-air in network programmes is not regularly measured. Class is only at an early stage of measurement. While there's a new focus on class at the BBC in production and indies' leadership, there's no current regular tracking of it on-air. Certain intersections of characteristics, such as age with gender (*i.e.*, older women on-air), are not tracked by any BBC monitoring system that we could find. This led us to do some of our own analysis (see *Chapter 1: Who's under-represented?*, pp. 15-16). As we can see, failure to measure or an inadequate system of measurement means that under-representation of certain groups is not recognised or addressed.

Given the range and scale of BBC content across platforms, it's impossible for anyone to have informal oversight over the totality. Therefore, anecdotal evidence and gut feel aren't sufficient to enable the organisation to know how it is doing, if it doesn't have a robust system based on objective statistics.

We understand that many people working for the BBC already feel that they have to do too much measurement. While the need for this is largely driven by the accountability required of a publicly regulated national broadcaster, we are keen not to add unnecessarily to their workload. Where we suggest additional areas of measurement in this chapter, we believe these can be captured within the same post-production form as is currently used. We also make a distinction between measurement and targets. What goes on-air needs to be recorded and measured, but the success in meeting targets should mainly be judged at a genre – and not programme – level (see *Chapter 3: Authenticity or ticking the boxes?*).

A flawed system of measurement?

Much of the BBC's approach to diversity monitoring revolves around the protected characteristics listed in the Equality Act 2010. These are:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin)
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

However, the aim of this legislation is to combat discrimination in, for example, employment and services. It was never designed to focus on how a public service broadcaster portrays and represents people in content. If it had been, it would have been written very differently and so it is ill-adapted for this purpose.

Two of the most important categories for the BBC to measure, which go to the heart of its public service mission, are regionality and class. Neither is included in the list of protected characteristics. **We therefore believe that when it comes to portrayal and representation, the BBC should end its reliance on these nine characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010 and develop a new list specifically for the purpose of portraying and representing UK communities. This will inevitably include many of the characteristics above but also other ones highlighted in this review, such as class and regionality**. (The BBC would, of course, continue to be subject to the Equality Act in its employment practices.)

Relying on the nine protected characteristics has significant consequences, which we saw play out in our interviews with commissioners. We generally started with an open question to them about how they thought the BBC was doing on portrayal and representation. In their answers, race usually came to mind first, followed by disability. Female representation was sometimes mentioned, but largely as an issue which had been sorted out and required little or no further action. Occasionally, they would move on to class. However, they usually needed a prompt to talk about regionality and geography. **Commissioners are aware that the BBC has obligations to represent all parts of the UK, but they don't generally associate that with diversity. We think this is an artificial and unhelpful distinction, which is why we advocate a focus on representing all UK communities, rather than the specific groups and characteristics which the word 'diversity' seems to bring to mind**.

Diamond, to which the BBC contributes, is the tracking system which gathers and publishes information on the television industry annually. It monitors on- and off-screen gender, transgender, race and ethnicity, disability, age and sexual orientation. It collects its data from those working on programmes and the production companies making UK commissions. Only the broadcasters participate, with the streamers choosing not to join in. In the Diamond review in 2022/23, only about a third of people eligible to complete it did so. It is mandatory to fill in data for certain senior roles in a production, but people in middle and junior ranking roles less often do so, giving a skewed view of the industry. Geography is not included. Until April 2025, neither was socio-economic background, though that is part of what is asked on the current form. However, the data from this won't emerge until 2027 and, even then, it will be for only part of a year. Although Diamond is being relaunched and there are big plans for its improvement, relying on it to track how the BBC represents UK communities will not be sufficient for the foreseeable future, as it doesn't fill in all the gaps.

The problem with self-definition

One of the problems with measuring characteristics is that many have to be self-defined and are therefore more subjective. Class, disability and race are never going to be precisely and consistently measured because they are partially based on an individual's perception of themselves. (We did not explore the issue of people who self-define as transgender because doing justice to the range of views on this controversial topic was beyond the time and resources we had at our disposal.)

Despite the flaws in the measurement systems, it's still very important to keep tracking on- and off-air, in order to understand as far as possible the content of the programmes being made and

who is making them. As we've said before (in *Chapter 1: Who's under-represented?*, p. 11) the aim is not to get BBC content precisely to replicate the UK's demographics in the course of one year, but to ensure that broadly, and over time, it authentically reflects the make-up of the UK.

In the BBC's published advice to producers on 'Growing diverse production teams', it asks production companies to commit to at least 25% of their production teams being from the following under-represented groups – BAME, people who identify as deaf, disabled and/or neurodivergent and people from working class backgrounds. There are elements of self-definition within some of these characteristics.

The problems of measuring class

How working class is measured remains a subject of controversy in the UK. For the BBC, it is defined as whether the main breadwinner in the household of the staff member was in a routine or manual occupation when that person was aged 14. Others, such as Diamond, use a basket of measures, including parental jobs but also whether the individual attended a state school or received free school meals. Universities often use a system which classifies prospective students according to the prosperity of the area they live in by postcode.

Although class is one of the most important areas for the media industry to tackle, on- and off-air, the persistent difficulty in agreeing how to measure it means it's too easy to brush aside, and for no one to be held accountable. Ofcom agrees and expresses concern about the data gap around class. It says of the broadcasting industry in general, the '*data gap is shrinking but we remain largely in the dark on [the] socio-economic background of broadcasting employees*'.

What is required is a system which is accurate, simple and consistent so that results can be compared over time. Self-definition of class is a minefield: billionaires might define themselves as working class because of where they grew up, while others might regard themselves as middle class solely by dint of working for the BBC. We've been told that middle class people are inclined to exaggerate the modesty of their childhoods, perhaps to make their achievements in life seem greater and more deserved.

> *Middle class people, by definition, like to say they're working class. It's less likely the other way round… I think it's partly because they're thinking back to when they grew up and also it's fashionable to say, "Yes, I'm from an ordinary background". It's interesting, the people that say class doesn't exist often are the people that are more privileged.*
>
> [External]

In his 2024 MacTaggart Lecture, the screenwriter of *Sherwood* and *The Way*, James Graham, tackled the issue of measurement of class, arguing that being working class is a culture rather than about how much money you have.

> *You do not stop being [working class] the second you get a pay raise. Nor would I offer – and I'm sorry if this sounds exclusionary or gate-keepery – do you become it the instant you might drop below a certain level. Because it is a culture. And the cultural reference points you grow up with. A mindset you may develop. Never universal or one size fits all. But shared outlooks. Learnt behaviours. And yet we are squeamish about defining it and, as a result, we quite often still exclude it from industry measurements around diversity.*

The widely used measure of classifying people according to the occupation of the main breadwinner in their household when they were 14, defines people *for all time* in one class. It takes no account of social mobility and may not be very relevant by the time they are 60. However, if the purpose is to reveal whether the person started life with social advantages likely to help them in their career or not, it is generally accepted as the best measure we have, although it is much more easily applicable to individual programme makers than fictional roles on-air.

If the Diamond methodology for identifying socio-economic deprivation (free school meals, state school, breadwinner occupation at 14) gains traction, then there is a prospect of a consistent, industry-wide agreed measure, eventually enabling year on year comparisons to be made. However, their results are a long way off and the BBC should not hang around. There is a lot more work to be done on how consistently to classify working class roles on-air, possibly using AI, and the organisation is well-placed to influence how this develops, potentially working with others. What is most important is that the system of measurement can be used as a forward-looking tool to bring about change and make the BBC more representative of the UK. **We believe the BBC should be measuring class on- and off-air as a matter of urgency.**

The problems of measuring disability

Self-definition has also become a contentious issue as regards disability. There is an ever-increasing number of people diagnosed as being autistic, while ADHD diagnoses rose 20-fold in the UK between 2000 and 2018 (according to the National Institute for Health and Care Research). This may be due to heightened public awareness and increased recognition of the condition among adults, alongside other factors. Many of these people would count themselves as having a disability, though these conditions encompass a wide range. The self-definition of disability has become controversial, particularly with regard to those with mental disorders or mental health issues. This is especially marked when all disabled people are treated as one homogeneous group, despite having a range of conditions and degrees of impairment. We say more about the problems of this kind of aggregation below.

> *When people are desperately searching to see if somebody's got the mildest of allergies so they can meet the quota, that's problematic.*
>
> [External]

The problems of measuring race

At first glance, defining one's race seems straightforward, but it often isn't.

When people of mixed ethnic background are given the option to self-define, half of those who could tick 'mixed heritage' don't. Some tick black or Asian and some tick white, meaning that the mixed group is estimated to be only half the size it could be. In the second and third generation, evidence suggests that people assimilate into white or black/Asian or stay in the mixed group. This means that all options are possible and the figures are therefore hazy, especially given that, in England and Wales, a tenth of households and relationships involve people from different ethnicities.

> *Real life is like this and, if real life messes up categories, then it should be the categories that adapt, rather than telling people that they need to be a bit neater and tidier. Would people of mixed heritage who are young have the view that they're not represented*

because they can't see enough mixed people? They would be more likely, I think, to have a view that diversity is either being handled well or badly.

[External]

Geography matters too

A very important factor which currently goes unmeasured is the regional or national background of presenters and contributors to network shows on radio, TV and iPlayer. **On-air regionality is not widely counted and recorded by the BBC as a diversity measure. We would argue that, in terms of the BBC representing the UK and collecting the licence fee from all four nations, it is one of the most important**. Of course, there are the Out of London ('OOL') targets and, within those, the nations' targets, but they take account of a production company's substantive base, where the production team members live and the location of the production spend. These are concerned with industrial planning and the development of the creative workforce. We don't believe these measures work well as currently constituted because up to now there has been a mismatch between what is counted as 'nations qualifying' and what makes a genuine creative contribution to the nation. We go into more detail about this in *Chapter 5: London-centricity*.

However, there are no published targets for nations and OOL portrayal on-air. In the past there have been erratic peaks and troughs in representation with, for example, three or four dramas visibly portraying Wales one year and none the next. We are told this issue has now been addressed by the new buying model, with better planning and tracking in the network slates, and there is clearly monitoring of where shows are visibly set. However, **in entertainment, factual and reality shows on network television from any part of the UK, there is no oversight or record of the representation of OOL presenters and contributors. We believe this should be part of the BBC's duty to reflect the whole of the UK back to itself and is as important as any other aspect of diversity. Portrayal of the devolved nations and English regions is not just about the visible setting of a drama or a comedy. It's also the accents we hear or the regional background and knowledge to which, for example, a BBC One presenter refers**.

In 2024, BBC Scotland undertook some in-house research and discovered low representation of Scottish on-air talent in these shows, compared with the 8% of the UK population who were estimated to live in Scotland. The analysis was prompted by a widening of the gap in 2023 between how likely people in Scotland are to say 'The BBC is for me' compared with the rest of the UK. Research at the time found approximately 2% of programme images on the iPlayer home page featured Scottish portrayal and fewer than 5% of celebrity contributors across key BBC brands such as *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Celebrity Weakest Link* were Scottish. Although this exercise was undertaken with regard to Scotland, there is no reason to think that the results would be very different in non-scripted network output in Northern Ireland or Wales. This is just one aspect of an issue between the network centre and the nations which we address at greater length in chapters 5 and 6.

Commissioners and executives to whom this research was communicated expressed surprise and a desire to do something about it. It seems to be a case where there is no ill will, but the lack of measurement meant that it was not brought to network decision makers' attention. We think that this issue should be addressed with the aim of representing the four nations fairly and proportionally in network shows over time, with a particular focus on the number of presenters and contributors from OOL. **We recommend that the geographical background of presenters and contributors should in future be monitored**

as a diversity characteristic for all network programmes with programme makers and commissioners held accountable.

> *As soon as you've got something that can be measured, people start doing it because we are a competitive industry. We want to do things better.*
>
> [Internal]

50:50 – not there yet

The '50:50 The Equality Project' is a voluntary BBC self-monitoring system to track the representation of women in on-air content. It originally started informally, in 2017, on the London-based news programme *Outside Source*, on BBC News Channel and BBC World News, as a bottom-up rather than top-down initiative. Later, it sought to capture TV, radio, online and digital in the divisions of News, Content and Nations. The goal is to achieve equal on-air representation of men and women for reporters, analysts, academics, experts and case studies. Programmes only track contributors they have **direct control in selecting**. So, the prime minister of the day or the only eyewitness to a bomb explosion wouldn't be included

Over the six years to 2024, there has been some progress with 31% of programmes meeting the 50:50 'gender target' (that is for at least three months and not dropping below 45% in any other month). This is up from 7% of programmes meeting that target in 2017. However, we can therefore assume that 69% of programmes that were reporting to the scheme didn't meet this standard. Overall, across the whole of 2024, only 48% of programmes that reported hit the 'gender target' for women, the lowest since it went BBC-wide in 2019 and down from a peak of 70% in 2021.

While there are certainly more women panellists and contributors to many radio and television shows than several years ago, it's clear to us that there is **much further to go** to achieve equal numbers in BBC output.

Despite this, we came across the view that aiming for parity of men and women would either mean the programmes would be of a lower standard or there would be a need to change the news agenda.

> *I'll give you the classic example. This is not a rarity. You're producing a running order, you're aiming at 50:50 male/female contributors in that programme and you can't find a woman to talk on one of the items and the other items are fixed and the question is: do you change that item? Do you take something out of the running order that you wanted to cover and put something else in entirely because you want a female contributor? And that does happen, that happens quite a lot… More pertinently, you have a very good obvious guest who is male who has a senior position – because the men more often do – and you say, 'Let's not use the man, let's use the woman,' who's probably not as good a guest.*
>
> [Internal]

We think if this were common practice the statistics on the inclusion of women would be a good deal closer to equality than they currently are. We don't believe that including more women will lessen the quality of programmes – quite the opposite – and certainly do not think that news or any other items should have to be changed. If, for example, news programmes can't find the right female contributors, then they urgently need to do some research and update their contact lists – this, after all, is what journalists should be good at.

However, despite the evidence, **there was a sense from many of our interviewees inside and outside the BBC that, in general, when it comes to equal representation between men and women, the job is done. It appears to have slipped down the priority list in comparison with other groups. It was tempting to remind people that 50:50 is the name of the initiative, not what they've actually achieved.**

As we've seen in the previous chapter, there is a huge mismatch between men and women as presenters age, with nearly four times as many men as women over 60 on-air in the Content division, between three and four times as many in Nations and nearly twice as many in News & Current Affairs. No one was monitoring this – or seemingly noticing it – until we commissioned some original research. Only when men and women are able to have the same lengths of careers on-air will we have got closer to equality. As we pointed out earlier, if you don't measure it, you won't know whether you should fix it. Although there is monitoring through Diamond of the number of women on-air and also monitoring of age, the intersection of the two was not looked at, despite Ofcom, in 2018, having previously highlighted the relative absence of older women.

The prevailing model of much news, entertainment and factual programming in the past was to have an older authoritative man and a younger attractive woman in the presenting team. There's been a great shift towards recognising women's authority and with less necessity for them to be young, but everyone can convince themselves that we are further on that journey than we are – and measurement has proved we're not there yet. **We recommend that the BBC repeats the exercise we did in looking at presenters' ages on an annual basis with the aim of equalising men and women in the age groups over time**. The data for this already exists within the BBC.

To be clear, this isn't a call for a raft of older presenters, but for the BBC to address the evident gender imbalance, specifically between older men and older women presenters.

Aggregation misses crucial detail

To help achieve diversity, measurements often group people together under labels like BAME or LGBTQ+. The term disability is itself an aggregation of a number of different conditions and experiences. This can result in some peculiar outcomes where very different groups are lumped together for no other reason than they share some common characteristic, such as being 'non-white'.

In the audience research we commissioned, we asked people to outline the important elements of 'who you are' and 'what makes you, you'. Across the board, participants outlined attributes connected to their personality, approach to life and values (*e.g.*, resilient, empathetic, straight-talker). They also commonly raised factors that shape or impact their lifestyle, such as marital and parental status, work and hobbies.

> *I'm a 39-year old female. Mum to 4 children, 2 girls, 2 boys. Motherhood has shaped me hugely to be the person I am today. I work in the NHS and feel it is truly my calling; it gives me great satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment*.
>
> [Audience research: 39, Female, Scotland, South Asian]

We also commissioned a quantitative survey asking people which, from a list of characteristics, were most important to them when they defined themselves. The results were fascinating. **It was striking that, irrespective of who they were, the top three categories were the same across all demographic groups. These were: my core values; my family; and my state of**

mind (*e.g.*, mental attitude, temperament, mental health). These came well above other options like my ethnicity; my age; my political views; my sexual orientation; and my class. It confirmed that interior qualities around values and personality, as well as key relationships, were more important than traditional demographics in people's conceptions of self.

However, when participants in the qualitative research considered themselves **in the context of media portrayal**, characteristics associated with minority experiences came to the fore. This may also be because broadcasting is an audio-visual medium and so encourages consideration of the presentation of characteristics that are more obvious visually and aurally.

When we asked our respondents, 'To what extent do you feel that people who have just met you define you in the same way you define yourself?' the results were interesting. This question was designed to assess the extent to which respondents felt understood by people they had just met. Respondents tended to feel a gap between how they defined themselves and how they think others defined them. Those who defined themselves as working class tended to feel less well understood than those who defined themselves as middle class. The gap was also larger among those with physical or mental conditions and LGBTQ+ people. So, overall, there was a gap between how people see themselves and how they feel they're seen by others. How identity feels from the inside is different from how it's perceived from the outside, which fits with the research above showing that, in a non-media context, it is mostly defined by interior qualities.

This demonstrates that categorising people is a slippery business because how they think of themselves and their identity is infinitely variable and unexpected. No one is a stereotype and an individual's hobbies, friends, family, work – not to mention their beliefs, ambitions and what gives them purpose and joy – make simple classification challenging. One way of identifying authenticity in fiction is the rawness, contradictions and peculiarity of each character which can be too random to fit a clear pattern. But, for simplicity's sake and particularly for audience research, there is a gathering together of those who are seen to share certain characteristics into aggregated groups who, in reality, may have little in common. Even though this is often done for budget reasons, there can be a cost. **The more you aggregate, the more information you lose. This can also lead to very skewed results unless there is a focus on the different elements which make up the whole.**

Ethnic minorities

The increasingly disliked term BAME is a case in point and the BBC has tried to move away from it. June Sarpong, former Director of Creative Diversity at the BBC, said in the introduction to the 2021 report 'BAME: We're Not All The Same':

> *[T]he catchall term of BAME may feel like a convenient box for those interested in counting people, but when you fail to acknowledge the difference in people's lived experience and history, then people won't feel like they count.*

Measuring ethnic diversity at this level (which really denotes 'not white') can disguise the fact that the majority of that total may be made up of people from one ethnic background rather than a range. For instance, as we'll see in the next chapter, protagonists of colour in drama, in our review year, tended to be black, and not from other backgrounds. This is the converse of *e.g.*, Oxbridge colleges which discovered their BAME figure was composed predominantly of people of Asian background, with very few black Britons. A deeper understanding is required, including the realisation that the terms black or South Asian are themselves aggregations of very diverse people – black Nigerian and Kenyan or Jamaicans, for example.

The lifestyle of a taxi driver from a Pakistani background in Bradford is a world away from an Indian doctor who lives in Harrow. They may look the same to some people, but their whole lifestyle is completely different. Yet somehow they're lumped together in BAME.

[External]

We heard some arguments that there was still a purpose, on occasion, in thinking of people of colour in Britain as a group, even if what they should be called collectively was a matter of dispute.

The experience of being an ethnic minority is still 'a thing'. People's perceptions of the riots in the summer of 2024 were partly influenced by being from a minority background in a way that was visibly different from other people. But I think if you can have the granular detail, that's what you want.

[External]

There is sometimes a tendency to think that diversity has been achieved because there are a certain number of people of colour on-air and in the workforce. However, if the underlying purpose of seeking diversity is to include and benefit from different ways of thinking, having an ethnic mix (even from a broad range of racial backgrounds) may not fully achieve that if they all come from middle class, university-educated backgrounds. Some interviewees argued that, in contemporary Britain, education and social class are the predominant features differentiating people and likely to predict their political and social views, rather than ethnicity. We've been told that many organisations feel more comfortable employing people who share the same cultural, class and intellectual references and who are black or Asian, than white, working class people from a different geographical background. This also means organisations claiming to have a good range of people from a BAME background may not be diversifying much at all.

White people and people of colour who act more 'white English' get more represented.
[Audience research: Female, East of England, 34, white]

The BBC has made real strides in this area through its extensive apprenticeship schemes, employing talented young people of all ethnicities and classes, most of whom have not been to university, and it should continue to embrace diversity of thought and outlook in this way.

Disability

'Disability' is another overarching label which aggregates many different elements within it. When decision-makers consider representation in this area, they often think first of conditions which are immediately apparent, such as being deaf, blind or using a wheelchair. But there are also many invisible physical disabilities and a wide range of mental conditions and cognitive impairments which vary by individual. Disabled directors, producers and presenters we talked to observed that some disabilities tend to feature more than others, with severe impairment generally under-represented. Again, being aware of the breadth of conditions which make up disability and measuring over time which of them have been represented on-air is a better strategy than having many annual micro-targets.

We all know that when you meet one neurodivergent person, you've met [only] one person. Everybody is completely different.

[Internal]

There's a slight discontent between those people who are obviously physically disabled and people with invisible disabilities who are getting far more work… So I think we need to have a balance, because physically disabled people are a massive part of society, as are neuro-diverse people. We need to have a really healthy diverse mix and also recognise the intersectionality of the community… But it's true of the industry that the more 'normal' you look, the better your opportunities are.

[External]

Young people

The 2023 Ipsos research on *Generation Z – do they exist and what influences them?* explains that 'by some margin', people are most likely to say that, of all the generations, Gen Z are not prepared to work hard to get ahead in life and are too easily offended by the things people say – as well as being self-centred. It also warns that any assertion about generations should be considered carefully and that terms such as 'millennial' carry a lot of baggage:

When we use cohort names rather than age groups, we are making a subliminal statement that we believe what we are describing is a characteristic which is an enduring feature of the generation under question. When used widely they also suggest a level of uniformity of thought among the group which is rarely accurate.

As with all aggregations, there is a simplification in the terms Generation Z or Millennial, which denies the essence of the individual and their infinite variety. We would be annoyed ourselves to be lumped together with others with whom we have little in common, so should be wary of doing it to other groups of whom we have less knowledge and therefore less sensitivity.

I think often young people can be thought of as rude or obnoxious which isn't always true. They're rude or arrogant, they are self-absorbed and don't listen to others. This can often come across as the case on reality TV such as Love Island*, where young men have little regard for others, and are closed minded. I think young people overall are polite and should be represented like this. It makes a narrative that we're arrogant and haven't got time for people. This creates a divide between the older generation and younger.*

[Audience research: 24, Male, North East England, white]

LGBTQ+

The aggregation 'LGBTQ+' tries to encompass a range of sexual orientations and gender identities, with the plus at the end used to ensure inclusivity of all identities beyond those in the term. It's widely used as a term for gender, sexual and romantic minorities and, unlike some of the terms above, it specifically points out the range and variety it includes. However, it presents another issue in that the various groups in that umbrella label don't always want to be associated with each other, specifically some of the L and some of the T. **While we think it is still useful, it is worth pointing out that a single person cannot be LGBTQ+, any more than an individual can be BAME. As with all the above aggregations, where a**

programme is talking about an individual, it is best to be specific about that person rather than using an umbrella term.

- The BBC should devise a new set of characteristics specifically for measuring portrayal and representation.
- The BBC should work with Diamond and others in the industry to establish a consistent method of measuring class and apply it on- and off-air across its output.
- The BBC should measure UK geographical background (including nations) as a diversity characteristic, particularly among presenters and contributors to network programmes.
- There should be renewed focus across the BBC on achieving gender balance in programmes for contributors, presenters and reporters.
- The BBC should disaggregate measurement categories (*e.g.*, BAME, disability, LGBTQ+) to capture more specific details and ensure a more accurate representation of communities over time.

Chapter 3: Authenticity or ticking the boxes?

As we've seen in the previous chapter, **what** is measured and **how** has a major influence on what is broadcast. Thinking of diversity characteristics such as race, disability and gender as being in a different category from, for example, regional representation has led to some perverse outcomes, while the nine protected characteristics devised to prevent employment discrimination are not a good fit for the world of portrayal and representation.

This review's audience research shows that people did not define themselves primarily by their demographic characteristics until asked to think about themselves in the context of media presentation. There was also a gap between how people saw themselves and how they felt they were defined by people they'd just met. Our perception of ourselves and how we are perceived are two different things and we don't fit into neat categories.

Some of our interviewees thought the BBC should do more on 'diversity', while others consider it already thinks far too much about these issues and over-represents certain communities. This is an area where it is truly impossible to please all the people all of the time. **We recommend that the BBC elevates the debate above the concept of diversity and the arguments about culture wars, to one about how it represents the whole of the UK. This includes the diversity characteristics, but goes way beyond them and directly bears upon the BBC's fourth Public Purpose**.

We realise that the concept of diversity is under attack in different parts of the world. But we believe it is still a valuable term when understood in its broader sense and we use it many times in this report. Research consistently shows that diverse organisations (in the sense of employing a wide range of people with different backgrounds, heritage and ways of thinking) tend to be more successful in decision-making, greater innovation and profitability than those which are less diverse. **However, achieving diversity is only one element of the BBC's role in representing the UK to itself and the word tends to be associated with a few characteristics, rather than its wider remit.**

The clear emphasis put on portrayal and representation from the top of the organisation downwards and the need to report on them have meant that the BBC is much more representative of modern Britain than it was even a decade ago. Nearly all our interviewees recognised this progress and praised the BBC for it.

Development of black talent

There has been a successful push over many years to develop proactively on- and off-air talent from black backgrounds and increase black representation on television. It was given extra impetus in 2020 when David Harewood spoke about black British actors having to move to America, as he had done to make *Homeland*, because the UK TV industry did not support them. In the same year, the killing of George Floyd and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter campaign led all areas of society, broadcasters among them, to reflect on black rights and representation. **The BBC engaged positively with this issue, probably helped by the fact that much of the black population in the UK lives where most network commissioners live, in London, and there has been great success in increasing the pool of black talent on-screen, particularly in drama.**

Commissioners' role in developing talent is huge. They have influence over casting decisions and across their slate (the range of programmes they commission) can build informal talent ladders to propel actors and presenters to the top, giving them the right degree of stretch at each step and making sure they progressively build up experience and range. **We believe that this demonstrates what can be achieved where there is a clear will to develop strength and depth in a talent pool and that the same principle can and should be applied to other areas of on-air talent**.

In the 24 new drama titles (originations) launched by the BBC in our review period (*i.e.*, not including returning series or continuing drama), 6 had black protagonists and 2 mixed race black/white, making a third of the total – *Boarders*, *Boiling Point*, *Champion*, *Domino Day*, *Grime Kids*, *Murder is Easy*, *This Town* and *Wolf*. The other 16 had white protagonists. There were 39 titles in the drama slate as a whole. The 15 returners either had ensemble casts with a range of ethnic diversity or had white leads, except for *Waterloo Road* which, in our review year, had Angela Griffin in the lead role, who is of black/white heritage.

There were no other ethnicities, no South Asian, East Asian or other ethnic backgrounds represented as the lead character in these dramas, despite the South Asian population (8.6%) being slightly more than twice the size of the black population (3.7%) in the UK. Some appeared in the cast, but not as the protagonists. We recognise that, South Asian people were better represented in comedy with *Man Like Mobeen*, *Peacock* and *Juice*. Children's comedy and drama had a wide range of ethnic diversity across all programmes.

As we have previously stated, we don't believe in having to follow the census figures too closely on-air and, in any case, the mix of programmes can vary from one year to the next. There is evidence that the mix of protagonists changed in 2024-25 with a smaller proportion of black protagonists, particularly in new dramas, while the drama series *Virdee* and *Showtrial* had South Asian leads. Several black programme makers have argued that representation has slipped back since 2023-24 and justifiably point to the lack of black representation among industry leaders. We can see from *Diamond: The Seventh Cut 22/23* that there are more than twice as many people of all black backgrounds appearing on television than working behind the screen, so on-screen success does not seem to be mirrored in production teams.

We welcome the fact that so many talented black actors have come to prominence, but we note that there doesn't seem to be a proportionate representation of the UK's ethnic diversity, if one looks at the drama slate alone. A broader-based approach to talent development to include all ethnicities should be adopted.

In TV news, there appears to be a noticeably low number of black reporters and presenters on-air. Clive Myrie is the best-known exception, but this runs the risk of over-reliance on one particularly prominent senior black journalist. We understand that news management is aware of this under-representation and is seeking to address it. We would like to see stronger representation of black journalists across the BBC's platforms.

London is different

London in the 2021 census was the most ethnically diverse region in the UK with 46.2% of residents who are Asian, black, mixed or other ethnic groups. 53.8% of its population identified as white British or white other. This is very different from the rest of the UK, particularly in rural areas. In Scotland, for example, 93% of the population is white, rising to 97.8% in the Highlands and Islands. For viewers there, it would be easy to feel that the ethnic mix

represented on television, which feels natural and normal in London, bears little relation to the world in which they live.

Our audience research showed that people's views are a product of their experiences and cultures, and that no individual has personal access to the wide range of experiences and cultures that exist in modern Britain. Therefore, there is no consensus on what the UK looks or sounds like or on what the media should do to reflect it. This makes the BBC's task of representation and portrayal significantly harder.

The majority of people, but not all, tended to agree that the representation of different groups in the media is important. There is a spectrum of engagement, first from those who are emotionally invested in improving the portrayal and representation of communities because they think it is important to minority groups. Then, there are those who don't give it much thought. Finally, there are those who think that the media places too much emphasis on portrayal and representation to the extent that it could be actively detrimental to society. The first group might be exemplified by the 80-year-old woman from London with a South Asian background who said,

> *I have lived a full life, raised a family, contributed to the community but people like me are rarely shown on-screen as whole people. I want someone like me on the screen and to feel seen.*
>
> [Audience research]

In the second group, who don't give it much thought, is the 25-year-old white man from the East of England,

> *I've never really felt like I'm in a box or I'm a certain "type" of person. I've never felt I've needed to be represented.*
>
> [Audience research]

Engaged at the other end of the spectrum was the 69-year-old white man from south-east England who said,

> *I just can't [watch TV shows where I feel the casting has been done in the name of representation]. Yet another way for the BBC to tick boxes.*
>
> [Audience research]

Does it matter if programmes reflecting a racial mix which is lower than that in London, but higher than all other parts of the UK, are broadcast on network television across the country? Some believe that one of the BBC's roles is actively to project a multicultural, inclusive society to the whole of the UK, in which all are welcome. However, most people we spoke to in the BBC claimed not to have an agenda on diversity, but simply that they want to represent all aspects of modern UK society. Some interviewees felt that the BBC should err on the side of diversity, particularly as the UK is becoming ever more ethnically diverse. Others thought the BBC believes that 'the more diversity the better' and that it is disinclined to see a downside to 'too much diversity' which the interviewees believe might ultimately drive audiences away. If viewers are uncomfortable with seeing a racial mix on screen, is this a sign of racial prejudice or a reasonable desire to see their local community in a recognisable way on the BBC?

> *One of the things that's most important about the BBC is to help you understand who you share society with and what they're about… I think it is especially important for people in Cumbria and Norfolk to understand that – not in a push-it down-your-throat way but just in a normal way – in the areas where people have least contact with people*

who are different from them. It's about the normalisation of your fellow citizens. A sixth of people were born abroad and a fifth of people have got different ethnic heritage. People's imagined contact and media contact is, I think, as important as their lived experience contact.

[External]

Only 3% of the UK is white, heterosexual, male, non-disabled, living in or around London… So, if you really want to talk about over-representation…those are the people who are madly over-represented… For every one of those, you should see 97 people of different groups… This is where it's, I think, driven by politics – that the people who are complaining about "over-wokery" of too many black people – they're not complaining about the insane over representation of white, heterosexual, non-disabled men from London.

[External]

However, young, white, working class boys living, for example, in the north of England were frequently raised with us as a very disadvantaged group, who should be represented more than they are. A rare exception was their depiction in *Freddie Flintoff's Field of Dreams*.

We don't feel this should be a zero-sum game with a competitive hierarchy of diversity characteristics. It is no easy job to deliver programmes which transmit across such a widely varying UK and feel relevant everywhere. **What is critical is that, given the range of programmes to choose from, there should be enough to suit audience tastes and in which people feel themselves to be represented**. There is no shortage of BBC programmes featuring white people, far more than any individual could watch or listen to in a single week. We agree there are communities who should have more coverage, as we have previously highlighted, and these include working class communities outside London. While there are complaints from people feeling that racial diversity has been forced upon them, these comprise a small proportion of the overall number of complaints.

The pros and cons of targets

Where complaints do arise they are usually where the audience feels that diversity seems inauthentic, suspecting it's included to meet a target or tick a box. Targets are widely used at the BBC (and other broadcasters) to hold commissioners and production teams accountable and make sure that they don't just pay lip service to the strategy but take action. They are the more acceptable face of quotas which smack of enforcement and sometimes lead to the accusation of untalented people being appointed to make up the numbers. However, targets which are clear and prioritised can have the force of quotas. They are often necessary to make sure something changes in areas where softer methods have been tried and there is persistent under-representation, *i.e.*, where a certain group needs to be represented more frequently.

Targets are still reported to be a vital methodology for disability and regionality – which have not had as much attention as race – and where there is an ongoing lack of representation. Disability 'needs quotas', said the writer Jack Thorne in his 2021 MacTaggart Lecture. Meanwhile, programme makers in the nations and regions felt that the BBC's Out of London targets were essential to ensure that the work was spread around the UK, even if the methodology by which a programme was allocated to a nation was felt to be deeply flawed.

There are certainly many incentives in the BBC to push productions in certain directions. For TV programme makers in the UK, there is a diversity form which now requires 25% diversity in off-air talent from under-represented groups, defined in terms of black, Asian and minority

ethnic, deaf, disabled and/or neurodivergent or those from low-income backgrounds. A conversation is scheduled with the commissioner to discuss diversity in each programme at the point of commission. There is also a commitment to spend £80m from within the genre budgets for programmes with two of the following three criteria – (*i*) on-air diversity, (*ii*) diverse-led productions and (*iii*) diverse-led production companies. **Since there is so much emphasis on diversity as a prerequisite to commissioning a programme, it's not surprising that independent production companies, which aim to please commissioners in a bid to win work, look for every opportunity to put diversity to the fore to try to give themselves an advantage**.

However, these forms of incentivisation and enforcement, while driving the change which is desired, may be having unintended consequences. **Targets can serve a useful purpose in increasing representation, but if they are applied too rigidly across the board so that a smattering of diversity needs to be present in all programmes, they can have a clunky effect on portrayal, which audiences often notice**.

> *By tokenism I mean when a show includes someone from a minority background just to appear diverse, but doesn't really give them equal screen time, depth, or storylines. It can feel like they're included to tick a box rather than being genuinely valued as a part of the cast… where only one or two people of colour are included, and they often get less attention from the show's editing or aren't chosen by other contestants as often, which can come across as isolating. It's not just about being present on screen – it's about feeling equally represented and included in the experience.*
>
> [Audience research: 25, Female, West Midlands, South Asian]

Representation may sometimes feel to the audience shoe-horned into programmes in an inauthentic way. This criticism was particularly directed at the portrayal of ethnic minorities appearing in job roles and in areas of the UK where this would still be unlikely, despite the fact that society is evolving and there is more integration than in the past. Targets provide a form of measurement and hold commissioners accountable but have been accused of being anti-creative.

> *You can almost be too cerebral about the question of representation and portrayal. In the end it's trying to tease out what feels authentic to our viewers, real people. It's not an academic approach to data. Can we commission by data? No, you can't. The data is super-important because it can give you insights that you maybe never thought of… [but] that authenticity is important.*
>
> [Internal]

Ultimately, what is required is something more sophisticated, nuanced and authentic where the diversity is organic, rather than a system which comes across as tick box.

> *My feeling about diversity in the broadest sense is that there are two different types. One is organic, natural diversity which is that the make-up of the programme makers and the staff broadly represent Britain – and I think that's a very desirable sort of diversity. And then the other sort of diversity is top-down, kind of forced, perhaps artificial diversity where you have a like-minded group of people making the programmes who then give people what they think is good for them. And my feeling is that the BBC has too little of the former and too much of the latter.*
>
> [External]

Often when something appears clunky it is because it's not a successful programme creatively and the diversity seems superimposed rather than arising out of the subject

matter. Audiences are particularly unforgiving of this if it challenges their expectations of what they have switched on to see. If there's an Agatha Christie murder mystery over the Christmas period, they won't expect to be taken into anti-colonial struggles, alongside the country-house murder. Unless it's very skilfully done, there is a danger it will feel overly didactic and preachy, as if the viewer is being lectured or a point is being made heavy-handedly. **A vital component of quality for the viewer is authenticity.**

> *Diversity needs to be handled with subtlety and care and my feeling is that diversity is very much like acting: when it's done well you don't notice, but when it jars or irritates then it hasn't been done well and actually has the opposite effect to the one intended. If you turn on the television and you're not seeing the world you understand reflected on TV but think you're being forced into something from an elite in London, where the make-up of society is very, very different, then it will first of all jar and then it will irritate and then you will stop watching.*
>
> [External]

Of course, great liberties can be taken with classic and popular texts and, when the production works, such reframing can shed new light on a story that we thought we knew. However, the quality of the production is the most important factor. **In fiction, good portrayal and representation arise from the genuine and deeply understood vision of the writer and the world they create. This is why it is vital to have a diverse range of writers with a wide variety of hinterlands and life experience from which to draw.**

The BBC is unique among British broadcasters in having a large department, BBC Writers, which sits within BBC Drama, and is dedicated to finding, supporting and creating new pathways for new and emerging writers from all parts of the UK. It seeks to create a ladder of progression from raw talent to someone who has the professional capacity to write for the screen, and it targets under-represented groups for particular attention. Obviously, because a writer is from a particular community does not mean they always want to write about it and they certainly don't want to be restricted to it. But, whatever the subject matter, the diversity of story-telling perspectives and ways of thinking is crucial. **We see BBC Writers as an important contribution by the BBC to scripted programmes for its own and the wider industry's benefit.** Clearly, not all of those on these schemes go on to professional success, but some do and occasionally they manage to get their own authored shows commissioned. Recent examples who have come through BBC Writers initiatives are Daf James, who wrote *Lost Boys and Fairies,* Lauren Sequeira who created *Domino Day* and William Mager, a deaf writer who wrote the thriller *Reunion,* which features both British Sign Language and spoken English.

Colour-conscious and colour-blind casting

We were told by some of our interviewees that sometimes when roles played by actors of colour appear, they can be isolated figures, divorced from their own communities. The question has been asked, for example, does Luther have no black friends? The suspicion is that when this happens, the role may have been written for a white actor and an actor of colour cast without any adaptation of the role, or perhaps that their hinterland doesn't matter to or is not thought relevant by the creators. There is a call for colour-conscious rather than colour-blind casting to address this, portraying the community the character comes from, being aware of small cultural signifiers and giving them a back story in the interests of authenticity. Even if the decision is taken not to make reference to the race of a protagonist, the ramifications of this creative decision should be thought through to make sure it is authentic and credible.

Colour-blind casting in drama is still controversial among some commentators and some audience complaints on this topic were received during the review year about *Doctor Who*, *Agatha Christie: Murder is Easy* and *Great Expectations*. Two of these were based on famous books and some people felt the television adaptations should have been more faithful to the original characters. However, all adaptations change the original text to a greater or lesser degree and we are after all in the world of fiction. Theatregoers have become used to interpretations of our most lauded playwright, Shakespeare, which play fast and loose with the original text and often include colour-blind casting. The controversy over *Doctor Who* concerned a mixed race (Indian/white) actor, Nathaniel Curtis, playing the part of Sir Isaac Newton, a white historical figure. Some complainants argued that it would cause offence if a white person were to portray a black historical figure and it is certainly hard to imagine a modern equivalent to Sir Lawrence Olivier 'blacking up' to play Othello.

However, without colour-blind casting, the range of roles available to actors of colour would be severely restricted, in a way which would not be the case for white actors, so we find this a false equivalence. In period drama, the controversy tends to be related to whether the series wants to be taken seriously as historically accurate, or whether we are in the world of fantasy (*e.g.*, *Bridgerton* on Netflix). Also, people sometimes assume that the history of the British Isles was entirely white, without recognising that some degree of ethnic mix has always existed.

In *Doctor Who*, if we can ask viewers to believe that the central character is an extra-terrestrial being who can regenerate into a range of different actors and travels in a time machine through the space-time continuum, a mixed-race Sir Isaac Newton seems much less of a stretch.

> *When [there was] a production of* Rigoletto *by the ENO in the mid-Eighties and the great Willard White, bass-baritone, was cast in various different roles, people said, 'Well, you can't. How can you cast a black person in* Rigoletto*? That's not what Verdi was about.' Well, the answer is obviously you can, and now you won't think twice about it. I mean, you can't limit Willard White to playing Otello!*
>
> [External]

However, productions should consider their choices carefully when it comes to colour-blind casting. In depicting an anachronistic historical world in which people of colour are able to rise to the top of society as scientists, artists, courtiers and Lords of the Realm, there may be the unintended consequence of erasing the past exclusion and oppression of ethnic minorities and breeding complacency about their former opportunities. According to Omari Newton, a black Montreal-based theatre actor, director and writer,

> *Colour-blind casting is rooted in systemic racism. It is a form of erasure. It is the theatrical equivalent of ignorantly telling your black friend, 'I don't see colour', when they try to engage you in a conversation about race. It is passively dehumanising in the way that it dismisses the racism that is embedded in the very fabric of how colonised countries were founded.*

We're not in the business of issuing blanket recommendations on this topic, because each production will differ and the pros and cons will vary. **What needs to be avoided is ethnic diversity which looks forced and tick box, and we found our interviewees of colour as emphatic on this point as those who were white.**

The search for authenticity

Clunkiness is not confined to race. It can also apply to disability and other characteristics. The uniting factor is that the audience feels the inclusion is perfunctory and often stereotyped. You have a sense of the production team conversation which has gone on behind the scenes which betrays a certain cynicism, a surface diversity which paints-by-numbers rather than feeling lived.

> *The key thing is to get the shows right and, on the whole, if you commission with a particular target demographic in mind, most of the evidence is that you don't achieve it. And I think people can find it patronising. It's so obvious, but great content is what would bring people in.*
>
> [External]

> *When something is authentic, it's like the truth is a bell. And so, when [audiences] hear from people they haven't heard from and they're hearing the truth, they respond to it. And the more specific and untold it is, everybody recognises it. It's the goal that everyone's looking for.*
>
> [Internal]

While this review has been asked to focus on on-air representation, **we've been repeatedly told by interviewees that having people writing and making the programmes who are from the demographic in question is much more likely to lead to authentic portrayal. When this goes against the majority demographic, they need not just to be employed in junior roles, but at a level where they can have creative influence**. This must be in a culture which actively seeks to learn from their feedback and makes it possible for them to criticise a programme without jeopardising their future employment. We welcome the fact that the BBC in its 2024 Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Strategy says it will drive representation on and off air by, amongst other things, '*increasing our focus on aligning diverse on-air storytelling with stronger off-air representation in senior production roles and leadership within production companies*.'

Looking in more detail at the example of the popular long-running drama series, *Shetland*, it's clear that it's not trying to give an accurate depiction of life on the islands in all respects. There have been only two murders in the last 50 years, so accuracy would make for a dull crime drama. This is one of many scripted series in which the emphasis is on a gripping and entertaining storyline rather than accurate representation. In series 8, which transmitted in our review year, the Procurator Fiscal, Harry Lamont, was played by an actor of Tanzanian heritage. He took over from the previous Procurator Fiscal, Maggie Kean, who was of Sri Lankan heritage. In series 10, the Procurator Fiscal was played by Samuel Anderson, an actor of Jamaican and Irish heritage. Meanwhile, in the Shetland Island police, PC Lorna Burns was played by an actor of Nigerian heritage, while in previous series, DI Calvin Walker and DCI Thomas Coombes were also of Nigerian heritage. Shetland residents, Azir Sadat and his wife, Farida Sadat were played by actors of Middle-Eastern and Indian heritage respectively. The vicar's wife, Amma Calder, was played by a mixed-race actor, Nina Toussaint-White (black/white). All of these are supporting roles, while the protagonist and other characters in series 8 on *Shetland* are white. These actors are undoubtedly chosen for their acting ability, but there is clearly an over-representation of people of colour, particularly amongst senior law officers and police in Scotland (let alone Shetland) where the percentages of ethnic minorities are 3.2% and 1% respectively. But is this a problem? It could be said to provide inspiring role models for young people of all racial backgrounds, showing that no jobs are barred to them. Or it could breed complacency that there isn't a problem about the number of ethnic minorities in senior roles such as these, when in fact there is. Or could it alienate some viewers who feel

this is a distorted view of their part of the UK? It clearly hasn't put people off, as this very popular show has run for 10 series so far and indeed we feel that the diversity of the Shetland cast may be part of its popular appeal, making the show feel more inclusive to a UK wide audience.

How does the audience describe good and bad portrayal?

For the audience, the intention behind programmes and their real-world impact shapes how portrayal and representation are perceived. In our audience research, the panel in the qualitative phase considered the impact the content has in society and whether it reinforces negativity, division and misunderstanding through stereotypes. They were also interested in the impact it had personally – how does it make me feel about myself?

In terms of **good representation**, the factors they described were: the breadth of representation within and not just between groups (see our section on aggregation in *Chapter 2: Measurement*, pp. 27-28); regularity of inclusion; normalisation via incidental representation; deeper understanding through focused representation; as well as representation in the team making the programme. For **good portrayal**, they looked for authentic demonstration of someone's multifaceted and complex humanity and that it should be accurate, fair and respectful. **Poor representation** would be exemplified by tokenism or box-ticking, invisibility, erasure or limited inclusion, and repetitive casting in limited roles. **Poor portrayal** was indicated by stereotyping and being reduced to clichés or lazy tropes, exaggeration of specific traits, misinformation and inaccuracy, mean-spirited mockery or ridicule, exploitation of trauma, marginalisation and limited narratives (*e.g.*, lack of lead roles).

Tokenism was criticised by both those seeking **greater representation** of minority groups and also those who thought there was **already too much**. In the latter category, there was a concern that people were appearing in order to tick a box rather than for merit. In the former category, there was particular concern about the person from the minority group appearing to be isolated, marginalised and not fully included in the experience, potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Examples of good portrayal quoted by members of the panel included *Man Like Mobeen* and *I May Destroy You.*

> Man Like Mobeen – *it reflects on the lives of British South Asians, especially Muslims, with depth and humour. The characters feel real and relatable. Not reduced to clichés. It made me feel seen and represented*.
>
> [Audience research: 25, Female, West Midlands, South Asian]

> *For me, it's the programme,* I May Destroy You *by Michaela Cole, where I feel the black, young, creative woman was navigating trauma, identity and friendship (which I believe is normal when you're a young adult). It felt realistic. She was made to be messy, funny, smart and human. What I believe was portrayed well was the complexity – the story was hers. It also had cultural truth of a black British woman navigating life. And lastly, she wrote, starred and directed the movie. It made me feel proud.*
>
> [Audience research: 35, Female, Scotland, black African]

While some participants wanted positive portrayal of the group they belonged to, they realised that only showing positivity can create unrealistic images and be seen as a different type of reductive lens. Instead, they appreciated broad and varied representation, without stereotypes and thought it was fine to show flaws – if you also show strength and growth. They appreciated

'relatable struggles' and people showing resilience in the face of adversity, such as in the BBC's *Ambulance*.

> *When I think of content where representation of people like me has been done well, the first thing that comes to mind is* Ambulance*. The show does a brilliant job of showcasing the diverse and hardworking staff of the NHS, reflecting real, everyday people from all walks of life. The show didn't just focus on the 'hero' aspect of paramedics, but really highlighted their personal struggles, the challenges they face in their daily lives and the emotional toll it takes on them.*
>
> [Audience research: 36, Female, North West England, mixed black/white]

However, concern was expressed by some white, male participants regarding female presenters and presenters of colour appearing in a way that they believed was 'tokenistic'. Some male participants mentioned female sports pundits as examples of hires to serve an agenda rather than being merit-based. In contrast, some female participants valued the inclusion of women in these roles for their expertise as well as the inspirational message it sends. **We think this is a case of the BBC not being able to please everyone all the time and that it should not be deterred in widening the pool of sports commentators**.

Some of those who are part of the demographic majority were concerned about what they saw as misguided attempts to give forced prominence to minorities. Those who are dissatisfied with their own level of representation can feel that certain other audience groups should be represented less. In particular, they have in mind South Asian, black and LGBTQ+ people.

> *I feel over the last ten years you have moved away from trying to represent British people and are more interested in appeasing minority groups.*
>
> [Audience research: 73, Male, East of England, white]

However, younger, white qualitative participants often showed awareness that they are among a relatively well-represented group.

Overall, many participants in the qualitative study claimed that representation and portrayal didn't influence their viewing and listening behaviour. However, others said they would tune in more if the content was relevant and reflective of them and turn off if they felt it was inauthentic or forced. The largest group of people by a small margin in the quantitative study (35%) felt that the BBC tries an appropriate amount to represent different groups of people on its services, though more respondents think it tries too hard (30%) rather than not hard enough (12%).

At an overall level where UK adults had an opinion, they were much more likely to be satisfied than dissatisfied with the BBC's portrayal and representation of them, and of the UK as a whole. **Many in the qualitative research credited the BBC with progress in terms of portrayal. We agree with them and believe that the BBC's focus on improving the representation of minorities has improved and it is heartening to see that it's being recognised**.

Assessment at the top

There is a strong argument for monitoring content and knowing how well and how frequently the organisation is representing UK communities, *vis-à-vis* the overall population statistics, even if the aim is not to replicate them precisely in programming every year. If this were currently working well, the gaps in representing, for example, East Europeans and East Asians,

would not come as any surprise. Measurement and communication of the results may be the main things required in an organisation which wants to do the right thing, rather than setting targets at a micro level.

Currently, some programme makers seem to believe it is a requirement to have a smattering of ethnic diversity in all programmes; 20% on-air diversity was quoted to us.

> *If the target for ethnicity is 20% across the board, that's quite challenging in a nation where that ethnic population is 4% or in Northern Ireland it's 2%. And what I think is wrong is when you're parachuting certain people in in terms of class, neurodiversity, ethnicity, geography.*
>
> [External]

20% ethnicity does not exist as a BBC target and we think it is being confused with the off-air targets or the criteria for tapping into the money committed to Creative Diversity. The push for diversity on-air may also be reinforced by the discussion with the genre commissioner during development and at the point of commission. **We would like genre commissioners and programme makers to feel that they don't have to include diversity regardless of context, in each and every programme, especially in cases where it will seem inauthentic and clunky. We believe that they should have the creative freedom to make programmes where the diversity is organic and natural rather than seeming imposed**. **To be clear, we are not calling for less ethnic diversity on-air overall, but we believe that this and other diversity characteristics should be measured higher up than at the individual programme level.**

If the BBC at a genre level (across TV and radio) is representing a broad range of UK communities every year and all substantial groups within, say, three years, it doesn't need to tick all the boxes in each series. It may make total sense for a drama series to be set in a south Asian community, a documentary series to be in an all-white setting or a comedy set among a group of black friends, without feeling that each programme needs to be everything to everybody. *Rye Lane* from BBC Films and the series, *Mr Loverman*, are examples of content confidently and authentically set in almost entirely black communities which won critical acclaim and broad audiences.

> *Pull the targets back from an individual strand or programme… and hope the commissioners can be sensible and imaginative about diversity.*
>
> [External]

However, where an unscripted programme has created its own environment in entertainment and factual shows, it remains important that a wide and diverse range of contributors is cast.

The crucial factor will be measurement and feedback so that at a top-level people know how representative the output is of the UK as a whole. With disparities, an 'explain or change' policy can be taken, meaning that gaps can be filled in the following year or an area for talent development can be identified. In general, it's better for programmes to be driven by key talent and what accomplished writers and creatives of genius want to make, rather than to start with targets and work out how to commission into a complex matrix. However, this requires proactive development of talent across the UK, from a wide range of different backgrounds.

- Annual measurement and feedback are crucial to keep track of how representative the output is of the UK as a whole. This should lead to an identification of gaps to be filled and areas for talent development.
- The BBC should assess its success in representing the diversity of UK communities at a higher level – genre rather than programme level.
- Having people writing or making programmes who are from the demographic being depicted is more likely to lead to authentic portrayal as long as they have real creative influence.
- The BBC should pursue a stronger representation of black journalists across its platforms.
- The BBC should aim for an organic and authentic approach to diversity rather than it looking forced or tick box.

Chapter 4: Normalisation

Audiences often brought up 'normalisation' as something they were looking for when people like themselves were portrayed in the media. Normalisation is the process whereby the way you look, behave and live your life becomes accepted, expected or unremarkable in society. The media can have a huge influence on social attitudes, widening our experience beyond that of ourselves, our friends and family and exposing us to new ideas and opinions. It can build empathy for people we might never meet in everyday life and reassure us that we are not alone in how we feel.

> *I remember once, somebody said 'people with tattoos aren't violent' because they'd watched a programme with a heavily tattooed bloke who was gentle and a good father and, you know, it's as simple as that. People are just seeing people as people, rather than as their characteristic, and it's a very powerful role of broadcasting and the media, because if you don't meet people like that day-to-day, it sort of normalises.*
>
> [External]

In our audience research, we saw that being recognised and understood in the media by people different from oneself was considered important by 57% with only about 9% saying it was unimportant. Ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+, younger women and those with a mental disability were particularly likely to say it was important.

> *If people like me are represented in the media, people are more likely to be empathetic towards my disability.*
>
> [Audience research: 62, Male, South West England, white]

Some people even said that how they were portrayed on-air affected how they felt about themselves.

> *[First and foremost,] I am a woman of British South Asian heritage. [I am also] creative, empathetic and someone who values family, community and staying true to my roots while being open-minded. Representation in the media is very important – it shapes how I feel about myself, especially when I don't see people who look like me or share my background being celebrated. It matters massively – the media influences how people see each other, and better representation can create more empathy, unity and opportunity for everyone*
>
> [Audience research: 25, Female, West Midlands, South Asian]

Those who thought portrayal and representation were very important said it made them feel seen and understood, boosting their confidence, building understanding and appreciation of difference and strengthening their sense of belonging. It tackled isolation, reduced the risk of discrimination and prejudice and reduced the sense of otherness.

> *[When people like me are portrayed well it means] I am accepted into society and not judged on how I look. [When people like me are portrayed poorly it means] people are less likely to approach me or speak to me and may go out of their way to avoid me.*
>
> [Audience research: 55, Male, London, white]

Of course, unhelpful or prejudicial attitudes can be normalised by the media as well as positive ones. To our audience panel, it depended on the intention of the portrayal and whether it impacted on people positively or came across as reductive and mean-spirited.

I can say that I don't feel that people like me have been portrayed well in EastEnders. *The only characters in my time of watching it who have been bigger ladies are Heather Trott and Bernie Taylor. Neither have ever been main story characters and have never been sought-after or desired. They are usually in the background with little or no real story lines. Heather's main story line was getting pregnant by a young guy, but she was seen as a joke and the thought of being with her was truly preposterous or hilarious. I think people like me could be portrayed much better and given bigger and better opportunities and seen as more than lazy, ugly jokes.*

[Audience research: 38, Female, Northern Ireland, white]

Many groups and communities want to be portrayed simply as people living their everyday lives, without storylines which always focus on their differences. This incidental form of portrayal is a clear form of normalisation and was most clearly expressed by those with disabilities. From wanting to see a background actor in a wheelchair in the back of a shot in a drama, to a disabled presenter in a children's programme, the desire was for inclusion and a true picture of real life so that it becomes unremarkable.

It was also clear from many interviewees outside the BBC, that despite all the organisation's efforts to be more inclusive, they still thought the organisation was most comfortable in portraying middle class, middle-aged, university-educated, white people, living in the south-east of England. This group also forms the BBC's core audience.

In fact, those who conform to at least part of this description scarcely feel they have an identity at all. They are just 'normal'.

I don't feel like I have an identity, I'm just me. I think I'm in the majority who don't have an identity and just live their lives not worrying about belonging or how things make me feel. 'People like you' isn't a concept to me. I'm white, male and middle class.

[Audience research: 35, Male, Northern Ireland, white]

I think because I've never really felt like I'm in a box or I'm a certain 'type' of person, I've never felt I need to be represented

[Audience research: 25, Male, East of England, white]

In Chapter 1 on *Who's under-represented?* we looked at how the demographics of the modern UK are changing, and stressed how important it is for commissioners to keep up to date with the shifts in the makeup of the population between one census and the next, so that they can reflect this in their output. There are also major changes over time in attitudes and opinions in the UK as a whole; understanding these and staying close and connected to audience groups of all classes, wherever they live in the UK, will be critical to the BBC remaining relevant in the future. If it is most comfortable with the demographic group described above, that will be apparent in its output. Rather than going out to **s**tud**y** audience groups who are not part of that demographic, we believe the most authentic results will be achieved if people from those communities are part of the decision-making process. This will happen when the BBC's decision makers are more representative of – or closer to – the whole of the UK.

Othering

There is a danger that programme makers and commissioners with traditional BBC backgrounds may have a tendency to view people from communities outside their own as different or 'diverse' – *e.g.,* I am normal, you are diverse. This leads to 'othering', the opposite of normalisation, in which a person or a group is treated as intrinsically different from and alien

to the core group. Often the traits that differ from the perceived 'norm' can be over-emphasised or exaggerated, resulting in inauthentic portrayal.

As we've seen in previous chapters, our research shows that individuals' identities centre around three core attributes – values, family and state of mind. Those areas which are measured by the broadcasting industry such as ethnicity and physical traits (for example, physical disability) come much lower down. So, in terms of normalisation (and authentic portrayal), we must see beyond the obvious – someone's social class, colour or disability.

However, these characteristics are still important when members of the audience come to think of how they are portrayed in the media and the various ways in which they might feel othered or normalised. Ofcom research tells us that audiences say they want the BBC '*to do better at authentically portraying their real lives*', as it '*can miss the nuanced everyday aspects of the lives of people from working class backgrounds, and often reverts to stereotypical or 'tokenist' characterisations*'. This disconnect in how different parts of the population feel represented also shows up in the BBC's own audience research, where certain groups give lower scores for the extent to which they feel the BBC 'reflects people like me'. Typically, these sections of the audience can also feel less positive overall about the BBC.

Normalisation in portrayal matters across a range of characteristics. Here we focus on class, colour, geography and disability – but our findings could equally apply to other areas.

Class

Although working class communities are represented frequently in BBC output, audiences from C2DE socio-economic groups are less likely to feel, than those from ABC1 backgrounds, that the BBC 'reflects people like me'. According to Ofcom research from 2023/24, 44% of people from socio-economic group DE feel that the BBC 'reflects the lives of people like me', compared with 50% of UK adults overall.

In terms of representation of different socio-economic groups in drama, the BBC does achieve a good reflection of the UK. As seen in *Chapter 1: Who's under-represented?*, pp. 13-14, of the 39 television dramas commissioned by the BBC during this review period, more than half were set in, or heavily featured, a working class environment.

But the *way* people are portrayed can be more problematic.

> *Every time the BBC goes into a working class area, David Attenborough might as well do the voiceover.*
>
> [External]

> *I think geography and class are inextricably linked, particularly in a country like the UK… you can't live in Glasgow and not understand working class people because they'll talk to you on the bus whether you want to or not! But if it's only London and it's only a certain part of London, then you're never going to come across that. It's something you read about rather than a lived experience.*
>
> [External]

Some people feel less positive about the BBC because they believe that it doesn't portray them authentically. This may be because a working class background is not the norm for most BBC staff or programme makers in independent production companies.

This issue is particularly prevalent in news and current affairs, according to some we interviewed. The view was that, while working class voices may be heard on the BBC, they're not fully understood.

> *After the Brexit vote there was an awful lot of gnashing of teeth [about its coverage]… but this was a vote about many things and one of them was about austerity, small town Britain left behind, and what the eff did we really hear about that for the last few years in mainstream news and current affairs?*
>
> [External]

BBC News has made significant efforts to 'get out' of the metropolitan bubble and reach those parts of the audience it has seemed less familiar with – but there's further to go.

> *If you are recruiting someone to work on the news on the BBC, you will try and recruit highly capable people and you will probably think, well, what is a signifier of high intellectual ability? Well, it's high educational qualifications and so you will set about acquiring people with high intellectual qualifications. Where do those people live? Mostly in cities. What sort of people are interested in media careers, certainly in the beginning and certainly in some of the more junior roles? Younger people. So, you are therefore quite likely to be recruiting young, urban graduates. This was totally fine until it became really a big political dividing line between people who are from those categories and people who are not, in terms of social attitudes, and it has occurred to me that it is a very difficult problem for the BBC to solve.*
>
> [External]

As we have seen elsewhere in this review, it is often those off-air who can make the real difference to authentic portrayal. It's the editorial decisions you make, the lived experiences and the ability truly to understand the community you're trying to reflect that count. This applies as much in drama as it does in news and current affairs.

> *Huge amounts of Britain are white and not affluent. It's small towns, it's smaller cities… The English seaside has poverty levels that are absolutely equivalent to the inner city... As a drama-maker, you look at people not like you, not disdainfully but with a level of pity and, actually, that's the thing that ITV has never had. ITV has always understood that working class people and even the poor can still have a bloody good time.*
>
> [External]

We found that working class people are often portrayed first and foremost through their class focusing on their perceived problems and deprivation.

> *I do think representations of the working class that are not miserable-ist are few and far between, like* The Royle Family*: an amusing, warm and wonderful show about working class people who are not sad. But it's quite rare… I do think there is a tendency within the BBC to see the working classes as 'other' or as maybe not happy – which is not my experience of working class people!*
>
> [External]

Overall, there appears to be less positive portrayal of white, working class men and women in BBC output particularly when looked at cumulatively. Portrayal of working class communities can often rely on the themes of poverty, crime, addiction and de-industrialisation with an absence of role models.

In *Denmark*, a one-off drama in Blaenau Gwent, the white working class characters are portrayed as hopeless and the locality as a trap. One character says, '*So you never got out then?*' implying life is much better elsewhere.

Positive and celebratory portrayals of working class life were thin on the ground, particularly when compared with the range of more favourable depictions of middle class experiences. We did find positive portrayal of young, white, working class men in *The Gallows Pole*, and *The World on Fire* – however, these were both historical dramas. The second series of *Time* positively portrayed a young, white, working class woman, played by Jodie Whittaker, imprisoned for fiddling her electricity meter. She is a caring mother, intelligent, plucky and the viewer is drawn into her story with empathy.

In reality, most people want to be portrayed living their everyday lives in a way that feels authentic to them and not being othered by always being seen through the lens of a problem – working class people having to deal with the cost of living crisis or older people as victims of the care system or people of colour battling racism every day. Clearly, these problems exist and should be explored and not ignored or diminished, but often these issues do not define people. Overall, there is a wish for a general 'normalisation'. Many from working class backgrounds take great pride in their heritage and lived experiences and this should be authentically reflected in BBC output as everyday life.

> *I've also watched* Happy Valley. *This was a really good, gripping series and I enjoyed it. I thought this was relatable as the main characters were of ordinary economic status – they were just normal people with normal jobs. It's good to see main characters that aren't really posh or don't have a perfect/polished/fake look, as often they're not relatable.*
>
> [Audience research: 24, Male, North-East England, white]

Previously, comedies such as *Only Fools and Horses*, *Rab C. Nesbitt* and *Bread* all celebrated working class life and, importantly, were much loved by a wide UK audience. Their appeal was universal and explored themes that cut across social class boundaries. They didn't come across as patronising or treat the setting as something strange, unfamiliar or out of place. More recently, the series ***Alma's Not Normal*** **and the 2024 Christmas finale** ***of Gavin and Stacey*** **are welcome examples of comedies that positively reflect and celebrate working class lives. Research shows that audiences want escapism and entertainment which also portrays their own lives.** ***Mrs Brown's Boys*** **is a comedy which consistently delivers high ratings and scores well with those from working class backgrounds. It is largely disliked by critics. However, this comedy reaches parts of the audience the BBC otherwise finds difficult to attract. Whether or not** ***Mrs Brown's Boys*** **is to everyone's taste is beside the point, and it may well not deliver a significant middle class audience. But, like other parts of the BBC schedule, not everything is for everyone and such programmes are an important part of its public purpose obligation**.

> *Comedy is one of the most powerful tools for showing cultural truth and I'd love to see more humour that comes from the valleys or council estates, or the banter in the staff kitchen of a local health board and – whilst we're at it – maybe a few more middle-aged women who aren't there to play mums or background extras wouldn't go amiss.*
>
> [Audience research: 40, Female, Wales, mixed black/white]

Historically, factual entertainment television in the UK has had a patchy record of portraying working class communities. Programmes, mainly non-BBC, such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show, On Benefits and Proud* and the later seasons of *Big Brother* were often seen as exploitative and patronising, parading working class people for the audience's entertainment. But this 'theatre

of cruelty' based on conflict has thankfully diminished and we have moved on to factual entertainment shows which don't hold people out to be mocked.

> *I do think* The Traitors *is one that casts mostly average normal people. I think it's refreshing to see because for a lot of reality shows that are popular, the type to be cast are usually influencer level people, so to see a reality show being very popular that casts the average UK person is validating to see.*
>
> [Audience research: 25, Female, Scotland, white]

The BBC has positively used the opportunities offered by these types of programmes to cast widely and effectively reflect the diversity of the UK. With significant discretion in selecting contestants or participants, producers successfully ensure a broad representation from across society. *The Repair Shop*, *The Traitors, Race Across The World, The Great British Menu* and *Gladiators* provide a measured and realistic portrayal of the UK in areas of class, disability and colour.

> *In many ways [the BBC] does cover the UK well. Things like* Countryfile*,* Antiques Roadshow*, they are national programmes. They travel up and down the country.*
>
> [External]

> *I watch* MasterChef *on BBC iPlayer. I feel like the portrayal of people like me and others is widely diverse on this show, which I love! They have a range of different ages, genders, cultures, profession but they are all focused on cooking. I felt like someone like me was well portrayed in this TV show because I can see people like myself. This made me feel positive in general, it's always nice to watch something that's relatable in some kind of context.*
>
> [Audience research: 25, Female, East of England, white]

Of course, developing content about (or for) working class people doesn't mean that the BBC should ignore those that it already serves well. Radio, in comparison with television, presents a more segmented and differentiated audience across its range of stations. For instance, Radio 4 can and should extend its audience but it would be wrong to alienate its current listeners in search of an entirely different audience it is unlikely to attract.

> *I do think it's okay to be middle class and older. I don't think every bit of the BBC has to be universal as long as the BBC as a whole is universal. I personally think it's entirely okay for Radio 4 to acknowledge and accept that it probably does have an audience which is more middle class, that probably lives more in the south [of England]*, *that is probably whiter than the average. Having said that, that shouldn't be a cause for not always looking for opportunities to broaden the mix and you broaden the mix in two ways. One is that there are stories you need to tell which the wider Radio 4 audience needs to hear. You can't really tell them stories just about themselves. You're constantly having to put people on this network who can broaden people's horizons.*
>
> [External]

We believe that it is important that Radio 4 becomes more geographically representative of the whole of the UK, given that it is the only radio station which offers a full range of built speech programmes. Even if its core audience is university-educated and middle class, that doesn't mean it also needs to sound southern by default. This is one way in which its audience could be broadened, even though we wouldn't expect or wish every outlet to represent, portray or cater for all groups. BBC radio stations, such as 1Xtra, the Asian Network and local radio, do an excellent job of reaching specific audiences. Radio is often better placed than television to

tailor content to particular demographics. It also has a strong track record of nurturing presenters from under-represented communities, focusing on long-term talent development rather than expecting overnight success.

Ethnic minorities

Ethnic minority audiences report lower levels of satisfaction than their white counterparts when it comes to how well the BBC provides programmes, content and services relevant to them. According to BBC data for 2023/24, 45% of audiences from minority ethnic groups say that the BBC is effective in providing 'programmes, content and services that are relevant to them', compared with 56% of white audiences and 54% of all UK adults.

There is still a tendency at times, when featuring people of colour, to focus on their ethnicity rather than other equally – or even more – significant characteristics. They may consider other factors – such as their job, where they live or even which sports team they support – to be far more important in determining who they are than the colour of their skin.

> *Any time a person of colour is on the BBC, they always have to be interrogated about how they feel about racism. Why is that important? It's important because actually being discriminated against by and large for most people of colour is not the principal determinant of their existence or their choices or the things that matter to them or their family. But the BBC treats us as though that's the case.*
>
> [External]

While we don't agree that 'any time a person of colour is on the BBC' it focuses on racism, it is important for commissioners and programme makers to be aware of the complexity that makes up how people define themselves – and the fact that, depending on where they live, some may rarely come across racism or classism.

> *I think that you've seen some really good programmes that have black people just being normal… Idris Elba's thing on* Luther *was very good because I don't think race was mentioned once in that whole series.*
>
> [External]

> *There will be a policeman, à la Luther, who has no black friends. They exist… There will be an Asian woman who is in an inter-racial relationship where the white mother doesn't say anything about the race. They exist… all you want to do is make sure that the actors and the director and the writer realise it's not an irrelevance.*
>
> [External]

'*An Asian woman who is in an inter-racial relationship where the white mother doesn't say anything about the race*' refers to the Netflix series *One Day*, where the female lead, Emma Morley, is played by Ambika Mod, of Indian heritage. For some people we spoke to, this was a refreshing take on the UK, where race wasn't an issue and wasn't relevant to the story. Others found it unrealistic.

We firmly believe that race doesn't have to be the central focus of a storyline or programme simply because it features a person of colour. It is credible that an inter-racial relationship in the UK would not raise any eyebrows or even that a black character may not have any black friends. In *One Day*, Emma Morley was not defined by her ethnicity but by her characteristics – funny, intelligent and a little awkward. We thought such normalisation was authentic and

refreshing. The crucial thing is that it is thought-through, so that every character is behaving believably.

Our audience research revealed a nuanced picture of how people perceived themselves and how they wanted to be represented. Overall, respondents expressed a desire to see and hear people like themselves – reflecting their demographic characteristics, but without allowing these identities wholly to define them.

Outside London

With London and other UK cities serving as broadcasting hubs, there is the constant risk that these metropolitan, multicultural centres are treated as the default or 'norm'. Of course, many people live in cities and the BBC must represent and portray this. But equally, many do not.

The BBC's London- and city-centric perspective is evident across its content. For example, audiences outside urban centres can feel alienated by the portrayal of people who fall outside what's seen as the usual mould.

> *[In Scotland], your voice and your perspective is deemed unusual or non-mainstream. And I suppose that's my biggest observation: that you can have a mainstream point of view when living anywhere in the UK. If you're a young crofter on the Isle of Barra your perspective on the economy is as valid as someone who's working in the City of London. But how we portray that perspective is quite different… They're marginalised and in some way on the edge of what we would deem to be the mainstream*.
>
> [Internal]

A licence fee payer living in the Outer Hebrides is as 'normal' as a City banker working in London and it's just as valid to see the world through their eyes as someone from south-east England. Careless language, such as introducing items with 'Today, we've come to Scotland', as if Scotland were a town, is often alienating. Furthermore, for audiences in Scotland, they are already there and a presenter would be unlikely to start a programme with 'Today, we're visiting England'.

These issues around London-centricity are for many, even within the BBC, 'ingrained' in the way it thinks. We discuss this further in *Chapter 5: London-centricity*.

Disability

As we saw in *Chapter 1: Who's Under-represented?*, pp. 17-19, disabled people are generally under-represented in the media, including the BBC. But, more importantly, they say, even more strongly than other groups, that they want to be portrayed as normal people with jobs and relationships and not how non-disabled people may view them.

Disabled people have a less positive perception of how they are represented and portrayed on the BBC compared with non-disabled people. In fact, when asked by the BBC in 2023/24 how effectively or ineffectively the BBC 'reflects people like me', the percentage of disabled people saying 'effective' was 45%, lower than people who are not disabled (52%). Similarly, 55% of disabled people felt that the BBC 'raises awareness of the different ways of life and perspectives in UK society' – again, lower than people who are not disabled (61%).

Interestingly, though, the BBC doesn't receive many complaints specifically about the representation or portrayal of disabilities in its content. (The vast majority concern accessibility issues.) This lower level of complaints may indicate an unwillingness to complain or perhaps that there is a limited amount of representation for the audience to complain about. It's worth noting that, from ONS data, 18.2% of the UK population define themselves as disabled (some surveys calculate the figure at around 25%). They are also more likely to be found in social groups D and E. Disabled adults on average, according to Ofcom, watch more than twice as much TV daily as those who are not disabled (5hrs 20 mins vs. 2hrs 38mins). BBC One is the most watched channel for disabled adults and therefore the BBC plays a central role in reflecting disabled communities back to themselves.

There's a particular desire for disabled people to see themselves in a variety of roles but especially where disability is not a defining characteristic. In other words, they 'just happen to be disabled', nothing more, nothing less. We heard many views that, when portraying disabled people, broadcasters often tend to frame disability with stories of either inspiration or struggle. Peter White's Radio 4 series on disabled people who've achieved success against the odds is extremely well named *No Triumph, No Tragedy.*

> *I think this is across the industry in terms of disabled storytelling – is there that positive story where they aren't in a struggle but they aren't a hero at the same time? That's where I think it's less seen.*
>
> [Internal]

> *It is that sense of 'I just want to see people like me', just as part of the landscape. There is also real appreciation if there is a particular landmark piece of content. But in the end the cry is always 'I want just to be treated incidentally. I want contestants on game shows. I want people you see in the street, the correspondent on the news, just to be a range of different people.'*
>
> [External]

So, while landmark portrayal (roles which are pivotal, mark a significant step forward in representation or can challenge stereotypes) is important, many told us that 'incidental' portrayal, in both scripted and non-scripted programmes, is actually more meaningful and impactful as it helps to normalise disability in everyday contexts. The Chief North America Correspondent for BBC News, Gary O'Donoghue, is a case in point. An episode of the BBC comedy, *Ludwig*, was another example. Rose Ayling-Ellis played a headteacher of a secondary school where she is seen with a BSL interpreter. Her deafness was not alluded to, and she was portrayed as someone who happens, incidentally, to be deaf.

> *It's fantastic seeing [disabled] actors who are not necessarily the lead actor, they're just there like the life that is around us, you know, and I have enjoyed that immensely. As a producer, if you look at any script you receive, there are so many characters that could be played by people with disabilities. Often, it needs no adaptation at all… it's the solicitor you meet or something like that. I also equally like programmes that reflect the culture of disability… There isn't a problem with audiences. It's ourselves as programme-makers that really have the problem...*
>
> [External]

Children's television – CBeebies and CBBC – performs especially well in terms of normalisation of disability. They have a long and distinguished history of doing so. When Cerrie Burnell, whose right arm ends below the elbow, first appeared on CBeebies in 2009, her disability was never referred to on-air. It sparked controversy, though, among some parents who said she was scaring their children. This was more likely revealing of their own

prejudices, children often being much more accepting of difference than their parents. She remained with the channel for eight years, the complaints died down and lots of children learnt that we don't all look the same. In an interview, Cerrie said children used to ask her about her arm, '*But it's less so now. Now they want to talk to me about Igglepiggle*.'

In the same tradition, one of CBeebies' current animated series, *Pablo*, is about a five-year-old autistic boy who uses his imagination and creativity to navigate everyday challenges. It's been widely praised for its understanding and embracing of neurodivergence issues – seeing the world through autistic eyes but in a way that non-autistic children can identify with. Elsewhere, there is visible disability in several children's programmes. George Webster, who has Down's syndrome, continues to present on CBeebies and Abby Cook, who uses a wheelchair, presents *Blue Peter*.

We were told how these children's channels consciously aim to develop roles for incidental portrayal of disabled people. But, as with all genres, an inclusive approach is not enough on its own. The quality of the show is paramount.

> *At the end of the day, the content has to be good. It has to be a well-written script; the characters have to be interesting… It doesn't matter if the characters are white or black or disabled or from a different socio-economic background. The story has to be engaging and compelling.*
>
> [Internal]

Comedies such as *Dinosaur*, about an autistic woman set in Glasgow and, more recently, *We Might Regret This,* with an authentic portrayal of the lead tetraplegic character, are excellent examples of the BBC dealing with these issues in an imaginative, empathetic but also challenging way.

> *Letting us [disabled people] tell our story is the big thing and that's fantastic… the number of disabled stand-ups that are coming up is great. It's a long time coming, thank God for that, and they're actually funny!*
>
> [External]

Portraying disability on radio presents distinct and often greater challenges. Unless it's specifically referred to, listeners wouldn't appreciate whether a guest, presenter or participant is physically or mentally disabled. Programmes such as Radio 4's *You and Yours*, *Fit for Work* and *In Touch* all deal with disability issues upfront. Although not recently, *The Archers* has featured characters with disabilities too. The role of Jazzer McCreary is not blind but Ryan Kelly, the actor who plays him, is. The character Bethany Tucker, who was born with Down's syndrome, has since moved away from Ambridge, which is a missed opportunity to include disability in ongoing storylines.

With around 1 in 5 people in the UK reporting as disabled, ensuring normalised portrayal is important if the BBC is fully to reflect the UK – otherwise it is showing a false and narrow picture of our society. Disability is just another part of the human experience. Portraying disabled characters and addressing these issues can help challenge barriers and combat discrimination.

Niche or mainstream?

The BBC has moved on from decades ago, where it addressed diversity mainly through a range of targeted niche services and units – *e.g.*, the Asian Programme Unit (APU), the Afro

Caribbean Unit, the Disability Programmes Unit (DPU), making programmes such as *Ebony*, *Desi DNA*, *One in Four* and *Over the Edge*.

> *Having a lot of minority units to produce minority stuff feels to me more like the 1970s and 1990s more than the 2020s. You could fill quotas and targets in two different ways, but I don't think we want minority programming by minorities for minorities. I think we want British programmes for British society in which the minorities are equally present.*
>
> [External]

The approach in recent years is more about diversifying the mainstream. We welcome this, as audience feedback shows the majority of people value seeing not only themselves reflected in content, but also others with different backgrounds and experiences.

> *When I want to watch a documentary, I purposefully choose ones that come from different perspectives/demographics as I want to learn something outside of my own lived experience.*
>
> [Audience research: 32, Male, Scotland, white European]

Research we commissioned showed that 65% of UK adults felt that representation of different groups in the media was important (with only 10% thinking it was not) and 57% said being seen and understood in the media by people different from oneself was important (9% said it was unimportant).

> *It's also really important for people different from me to hear perspectives like mine. It helps builds empathy, breaks down stereotypes, creates a more connected, understanding society.*
>
> [Audience research: 36, Female, North West England, mixed black/white]

Diversifying the mainstream also makes sense as niche provision has become readily available elsewhere following the explosion in podcasts, YouTube and specialist channels.

Therefore, as the broadcaster which brings the UK together for major events and popular shows, the BBC's role in reflecting the whole country to itself, with all its range and diversity, is vitally important.

> *There are universal themes that land in every community: love, life, death, they land everywhere. So, if you are commissioning for* EastEnders*, you have a responsibility to inform the mainstream of what it means to be in Britain today… Yes, there's an argument about being able to see yourself reflected back, but that's not all it's there to do. You could very quickly go down a route of having a patchwork of mini-genres, every day, all the time and that isn't going to do the bigger job of shifting the mainstream's understanding of the world around them.*
>
> [Internal]

As we mentioned above, entertainment and factual entertainment have led the way in representing the UK and, more recently, normalising disability. The top-rated show, *Strictly Come Dancing*, has featured many disabled people over the years, successfully bringing disability into mainstream on Saturday night. The stunts of stopping the music or turning the light off in the cases of Rose Ayling-Ellis and Chris McCausland were considered to be patronising or simplistic by some disabled people because they didn't replicate the realities of living with a lifelong disability. Others found them a very positive

portrayal which got the country behind them, cheering them on. We applaud the programme for naturally and organically including disability at the heart of the schedule.

One of the most memorable participants from series 2 of *The Traitors* was Mollie Pearce, a model with a limb difference who lives with a stoma. While some of the physical challenges were more difficult for her, the range of roles in the missions enabled her to play to her strengths and, in one task, her disability gave her an advantage. Such portrayals in factual entertainment are not only crucial in representing the UK, but also help normalise the differences between us all.

Ceremonial events are another way for the BBC to '…*bring people together for shared experiences and help contribute to the social cohesion and wellbeing of the United Kingdom*', as the Charter requires. They're often seen as being quintessentially English, traditional, middle/upper class and white, so present some of the biggest challenges in representing modern Britain, and attracting new viewers without alienating their core audience. Often, the event itself is controlled by others – and the BBC is simply covering it. On other occasions, the broadcaster creates the event as well as filming it. **The BBC has worked hard to ensure its presenters and guests for these events represent the diverse nature of the UK and to ensure that they look natural, also prioritising expertise. In the *Festival of Remembrance 2024*, the BBC did receive some complaints saying the coverage was 'too diverse'. But in Events in general, we believe that, over the years, the BBC has updated its coverage gradually and relatively unobtrusively, coaxing in a younger and broader audience without diminishing what are traditional occasions**.

> *When we are filming, without forcing it, we will obviously try to be as representative as we can. But if you've got an event that is 98% white and you pick out the two people that aren't white on the parade, it's just not authentic anyway. So, we will try and do it in a very genuine way. You have to be authentic to the event that you are creating or representing but not only trying to satisfy that core audience which is always going to come.*
>
> [Internal]

> *BBC Events is a really good example of something that's modernised over the years and now is more diverse, but can still do those amazing D-Day moments and* Festival of Remembrance *with a more modern cast but with a sense that it's still got the BBC values about it.*
>
> [External]

We think this is a good example of normalising the portrayal of diversity of the modern UK, placing it in the mainstream and helping to realise the fourth Public Purpose.

Other occasions which bring the UK together for shared experiences are the big music festivals – such as Radio 1's *Big Weekend* and *Radio 2 in the Park*. The presenting line-up and the artists involved in these are diverse, but authentically so, coming from a range of backgrounds across the UK (and beyond). In recent years, the *BBC Proms* have embraced diversity not only in presentation but also with choice of repertoire, range of ensembles and styles of performance, while still recognisably drawing inspiration from the season's originating idea. Furthermore, outreach has extended well beyond the Royal Albert Hall and other London venues. During our review year, the *Proms* visited Gateshead, Truro, Derry/Londonderry, Aberystwyth, Dewsbury, Perth and Great Yarmouth.

Peak-time budget dramas are also an example of the mainstream, watched by millions. *Call the Midwife* deals with race and disability in an exemplary way with story lines in our review

year about a disabled woman who is pregnant, played by Rosie Jones, and a black midwife, Lucille Anderson, played by Leonie Elliott. Lucille's story reflected the real experiences of many West Indian nurses who came to the UK in the 1960s. However, **in dramas requiring substantial international co-production to get funded, the BBC is regularly dealing with partners who have purely commercial aspirations and no public service obligations. With reducing BBC budgets, this becomes an increasing pressure, as co-producers push for star talent in key roles to launch series, rather than taking risks on less well-known, diverse talent. Dramas which reflect domestic issues in the UK and don't attract international partners become harder to finance**, witness Kevin Lygo at ITV (in April 2024) explaining that they had not yet broken even on the much lauded and BAFTA award-winning, *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*.

> *When it comes to drama, what I'm increasingly hearing is that BBC – ITV as well – are rarely the sole commissioner. And so people are then having to go and get co-funding from different sources. And a lot of the black and Asian indies that I'm speaking to are saying that it's a real problem. It lies less with the British broadcasters and more with the co-funders, who tend to be American and tend to want actors they know.*
>
> [External]

The tension between attracting American money and the BBC's desire to normalise an inclusive vision of the UK came up in comedy as well.

> *There was an American streamer that we were talking to about a project and they said to us, 'We're not interested in shows from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland because we can't really understand their accents.' So, that's what you're dealing with sometimes when you speak to Americans!*
>
> [Internal]

- The BBC should not think in terms of a core group and a diverse group. It should prioritise diversity of thought and outlook over a characteristics-based approach and ensure the normalisation of all communities in its content.
- The BBC should encourage more positive and celebratory portrayal of working class culture.
- The BBC should continue to prioritise mainstream, popular programmes as the best places to reflect the whole of the UK, despite international pressures.

Chapter 5: London-centricity

The importance of geography

In our audience research, people's nationality and where they live were shown to be important in how they see themselves. In reporting the qualitative phase, the research says:

> *Nationality (e.g. being Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish) was mentioned more often than ethnicity, with some suggesting that it formed a core part of their identity (often more specifically the area/region in which they grew up).*

As explained by one participant:

> *First off, I would say that I'm a dad. That's probably what makes me, me. I look after two young girls, my wife. I'm Scottish. That's probably a large part of my identity as well. I'm a football fan so I could probably put that in there.*
>
> [Audience research: 40, Male, Scotland, white]

In our quantitative survey, interior qualities ranked in importance above my nationality, my community/local area I live in and the part of the UK I live in (*e.g.*, the nation/region) for how people define themselves. **However, nationality and where people are from or now live are more important to how they see themselves than their ethnicity, age, political views, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, language and social class for UK adults overall.**

When asked to define good examples of portrayal on the BBC, participants wanted to see elements of their identity and what is important to them portrayed in a way they recognise and that resonates, such as programming that is set in their part of the UK. Examples they gave included *Still Game*.

> *It portrays community, working class Scottish people who experience money worries, friendship, loneliness, getting old, but it still has the comedy aspect. It makes me feel like the BBC are celebrating everyday people like myself and not being overlooked. I love the Scottish humour. It's straight to the point – dry but with heart.*
>
> [Audience research: 37, Female, Scotland, white.]

Gavin and Stacey was also singled out.

> *A little cringe at times as I realise how I sound to other people, but it sums up Welsh life in some respects. Maybe not Nessa but the conversations with neighbours, etc. The close knit community shines through. As the programme is [co-]written by a Welsh person, it shows in the content.*
>
> [Audience research: 40, Female, Wales, white]

One of the key differences we found when talking to interviewees for this report was that the sense of local community is much stronger out of London. **People felt a greater identification with their own town, county or rural area and its distinctiveness than one finds in a city the size of London. One of the benefits of having widely dispersed groups of programme makers across the UK is that they form part of these communities and can reflect them from the inside with expert knowledge and understanding**.

Out of London Strategy

There is no doubt that the job of reflecting different communities geographically across the UK is one of the BBC's most important tasks in portrayal and representation. It goes to the heart of a universal licence fee and is enshrined in the fourth Public Purpose. It's a mission which the BBC takes seriously and which has long been a strategic priority. Over the last 20 years, the BBC has moved many staff and a lot of money out of London to give much better representation and an economic boost to the UK's nations and regions. In 2023, its Out of London ('OOL') spend on qualifying network TV production increased to 60%, with hours amounting to 69% of the total. In network radio spend, it reached 38.5% OOL. On headcount, over 50% of staff work outside London, including over 1,000 in both Glasgow and Cardiff and over 600 in Belfast, more than 3,000 in Salford and over 3,700 in English regional offices. The BBC surpasses its 17% target of nations spend in network television, and is currently achieving 21%.

The Across the UK project began in 2021 with an ambitious seven-year programme to take the BBC to the next Charter. This involved a move of £700 million of content and operational spend out of London and 400 jobs. At the end of June 2025, the project was on track with £412 million and 400 roles transferred so far. Editorial and journalism teams have moved, radio programmes have relocated to new bases and the BBC has signed regional production partnerships, significantly in the Midlands and the north-east of England.

The BBC's strategy of spreading the economic benefits of the licence fee in this way has had positive results in many parts of the UK. It has done this against a backdrop of financial cuts and against the tide, with other broadcasters reducing regional spend, making it more difficult to create and collaborate on talent clusters. The change in production model, with the creation of BBC Studios, has meant that the BBC centrally has a more arm's length relationship with its content providers, and has to work through indies rather than moving an entire in-house production department, as it did in the past.

There is evidence from two BBC reports that *Doctor Who* in Cardiff and the Natural History Unit in Bristol have boosted their respective creative economies. The IZA Institute of Labor Economics said, in September 2024, that the BBC's move to Salford had had a positive impact locally. Research, conducted by PwC in 2022, showed that a 15% increase in the BBC's local footprint doubles the rate of growth of the surrounding creative industries over time. Realistically, increasing financial pressure on the BBC means it's going to have to be even more strategic about how it uses its influence – with its own resources and in setting the conditions for others in the nations and regions to succeed around it, in order to galvanise the creative industries in different parts of the country. But it also needs other creative employers to show willing and for the UK and devolved governments to foster the conditions in which out of London clusters can prosper.

The effects on portrayal

Alongside this, there has been a marked improvement in portrayal of the nations and regions on the BBC, with clichés much less in evidence than a decade or two ago. National stereotypes across the media used to represent an outsider's view of each nation which at its worst focused on haggis, tartan and shortbread in Scotland, coal mines and male voice choirs in Wales, the grimness of life up north in England and nothing other than the Troubles in Northern Ireland. With the nations much more involved in their own portrayal, through co-commissioning (with the network) or in local output via a company based in the nation, howlers were largely absent in our review period. When we asked interviewees for examples, those they quoted were

usually from some time ago or of a more subtle variety. As with all areas of portrayal, there is no room for complacency and continued vigilance is required.

However, as we've mentioned in previous chapters, regionality is not perceived within the BBC, or in wider society, as a diversity issue in the same way as race, disability and gender. It's not a protected characteristic and within the BBC it is thought of differently, with the emphasis too often on hitting Ofcom's or its self-imposed targets for out of London and nations production, rather than ensuring that people from all four nations are represented proportionally as contributors to network shows (see the BBC Scotland research cited in *Chapter 2: Measurement*, pp. 25-26). But ensuring authentic portrayal of the English regions and the nations is a crucial part of the BBC's public purpose. **Audiences' approval of the BBC is influenced by many different factors, but it is significant that, despite the BBC's efforts in recent years, approval still broadly declines the further one moves away from London, with lower scores in the north of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.**

In our audience research, we too found the perception that the BBC can still be London-centric and skewed towards the middle class. When we asked people from various parts of the UK whether their area should be represented more, less or about the same as now on the BBC, the highest proportions saying **more** were in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the north of England with the **smallest** proportions saying more in London and the south of England. London had the largest proportion of people saying **less**, compared with other regions.

This view was borne out in some of the comments they made:

> *London and the south-east often dominate BBC content, leaving many regions (the North, Midlands, Wales, rural Northern Ireland, etc.) feeling under-represented. More programming should highlight local voices not just in the news but in drama, comedy, and documentaries beyond cop dramas… Challenge the London-focus, for example, by commissioning more shows filmed and set outside the city...*
>
> [Audience research: 35, Male, Northern Ireland, white]

> *What matters most in my view is balance. That doesn't mean everyone has to get equal airtime all the time – but it does mean not shutting out big chunks of the population. I'd like to see the BBC reflect real conversations happening across the UK, not just what's trending in London media circles.*
>
> [Audience research: 40, Male, Scotland, white]

Strikingly, the BBC is still perceived as a southern organisation, despite its moves around the country, while ITV is seen as a more northern organisation, despite having been centralised in London many years ago. Our research and interviews with stakeholders led us to think this may be due to *what* they each commission and *where* they commission.

> *If you look at BBC One every night, we take the* Six *visibly from London,* The One Show *visibly from London,* EastEnders *visibly from London and the* Ten *visibly from London. We make a statement that ITV would never make about where we are and where we believe matters… So, however well we might be doing in our scripted portfolio or our factual portfolio, we still screen every night about which city really matters in the UK. And I think it is problematic.*
>
> [Internal]

While the *Six* and *Ten* are no longer 'visibly from London', it is certainly the case that the programmes are produced and transmitted from London, unlike the *One* which comes from Salford.

Owing to the importance of where programmes are made and commissioned, we've looked at the BBC structures and targets which lie behind good regional/national portrayal and representation in this chapter. **Genuine production, rooted in the location, written and made by people who understand it in depth was described to us as the key to on-air authenticity.** It came up in every interview, both inside and outside the BBC, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The dominance of London commissioning – how to fix it?

The BBC's Across the UK project says there are now 41 out of 92 network TV commissioners (representing almost 45%) outside London in regional and national centres. This is up from 24 in 2021/2. However, ultimate editorial decisions about network TV programmes are made by genre commissioners in London, with the exceptions of Sport, Children's and Education, where the genre commissioners sit in Salford.

The network TV commissioners are pivotal in representing the whole of the UK, with all of its diverse and contrasting communities, to itself. They not only choose which programmes get made but are also 'taste-makers' because, as we've discovered, indies self-censor and shape their ideas to match the commissioning briefs which the commissioners issue. The commissioners get the ideas they ask for – rather than those the indies are most keen to make – because the companies need to win work. **If the commissioners have little understanding or curiosity about the UK outside London, (and, as we've shown, the capital is highly atypical), this will have significant consequences for authentic portrayal and representation.** This affects not only regional diversity but also everything which intersects with it, such as socio-economic deprivation, rural issues and the nature of the ethnic mix.

If anything, senior commissioning power at the centre has increased. In 2009, Cheryl Taylor was appointed Controller of Comedy Commissioning based in Manchester, but when she left the job, that role was brought back to London. **In all genres, other than the Salford ones mentioned above, the out of London commissioning teams in network TV can only say no, not yes to ideas**. They may champion an idea to the genre head, but essentially they are filters who are there to prevent the genre commissioners getting bogged down in the sheer number of ideas pitched. If they are trusted and have a strong relationship with their boss, they might even have a degree of influence over what gets commissioned, but they do not have decision-making power. Some indies out of London were frustrated by having to go through an intermediary rather than being able to speak directly to the person with the power. **This persistent concentration of editorial and structural power in London means that no matter how many assistant commissioners and programme makers are distributed around the UK, the people whom programme makers have to please with their ideas sit in London and this inevitably influences what is pitched**.

The BBC's London-centricity doesn't just revolve around content; across the BBC, the majority of its senior leaders are still based in London. Given that 60% of BBC programmes are now made outside London, the proportion of senior BBC staff in London, is not in kilter with this shift. It has other consequences too.

> *The power still sits in WIA and, even within London, we have homogenised from what used to be Lime Grove and Bush House and Broadcasting House and Television Centre. We've now got one building which has all the power. So, I think it's pretty obvious what's going on there. Whether you can create something which is akin to the old ITV*

system, I doubt, but you need a real, huge amount of commissioning power outside London.

[External]

If you have really trusted commissioning voices based around the UK, who live and work and grew up with and know their cohort and understand the concerns of those various parts of the UK inherently because it's in their bones, then I can't see why that would be a negative. The centre would lose some control. I think that's probably overdue.

[External]

Several indie leaders felt that the concentration of commissioning power in London with commissioners sharing the same cultural references, diminished the BBC's interest in the wider UK.

Every single one of them lives within 15 miles of each other. They go to the same restaurants and they read the same books. They go to the same plays and they have the same friends. I don't think for any organisation that's meant to represent the UK that's at all helpful… The issue around a lot of BBC network commissioners is that they're incurious. I don't mean about ideas – they're very committed to ideas and thoughts – but they're incurious about Scotland or Wales or Northern Ireland. It's not on their radar or in their comfort zone and they're not really interested in it. It's not that they're against it, but they're incurious about it.

[External]

The people you mix with and the experiences you have every day form your instincts as a commissioner, and if that is vastly southern, that's the way in which you view the world. And it's always been my problem with the BBC: that they should have points of power in every bit of the country that they depend on the support from.

[External]

There was much praise from the indies we spoke to in Scotland for the impact of having Channel 4's Jo Street based in Glasgow as Director of Commissioning, Nations and Regions and Lifestyle. This is despite Channel 4 doing far less outside London than the BBC.

It's always about following the money. The money's in London so producers go to London. Jo Street has the money so people come to her. She's got the biggest single budget in Channel 4. It's not rocket science. If you have people with sign-off powers based in the nations and regions, that is by far the most effective way of dealing with it.

[External]

We heard from several of our interviewees in the devolved nations that the concentration of editorial power in London meant that opportunities were being lost to spot projects with popular appeal which were huge stories locally but less known in the south of England. Many of these titles never got to air, or had to be made on a low budget, so this is impossible to prove. However, we were interested in the case of *The Ice Cream Wars,* which was commissioned by BBC Scotland but turned down by network. It did well on iPlayer and was then belatedly picked up by network at an acquisition price (much less than a co-commission). Even though it was still on iPlayer, it got 1 million viewers on BBC Two. It was subsequently bought by Netflix and at one point was in their top ten documentaries. It has since been bought by BBC Select in North America and Amazon UK.

If there is a mindset which underestimates nations' ideas, this is likely to extend to highly talented freelancers in the nations, who are not known further south.

> *It's not that there isn't the talent in the nations. It's that (a) the commissioners don't know them because they're not here and nobody is here to say, 'Oh, have you spotted this guy who's really smart?'; and (b) they wouldn't know the director of a BBC Scotland programme if they fell on them in the street.*
>
> [External]

We say more on the issues about talent in the next chapter.

The over-concentration of commissioning power in London is at odds with the aims of the BBC's enlightened project Across The UK to 'shift its creative and journalistic centre away from London' and 'move power and decision-making across the UK'. We think the current structure undermines the BBC's ability to get closer to audiences and portray and represent all communities on air authentically.

In the course of conducting this review, we heard many proposed solutions for how editorial decision-making could become more devolved geographically. Some argued that the current nations commissioners should be able to commission across the genres for network. However, we believe there is a need for specialist genre knowledge, so this is not the best solution.

Others said that the money for a few dramas, comedies and unscripted programmes within the existing slates should be allocated to each nation for them to commission. We think this would undermine the crucial co-ordination of the slate by one person at the top, particularly as the available money shrinks. We also believe relationships between nations and network are not close enough yet for this arrangement to work.

We therefore concluded that there was a strong argument in favour of the current structure, in terms of having genre specialists with complete oversight of their slates. We turned our attention instead to where those commissioners are located.

The BBC has already made a huge commitment in moving the majority of production outside London. We now believe <u>the emphasis needs to be on senior commissioning and decision-making power and where it sits</u>. Consistent with the BBC's Across the UK project, we think that more senior editorial staff, including TV genre commissioners, should be located outside London. We believe that the BBC would represent and portray the whole of the UK better if at least half of the BBC's senior TV genre commissioners lived and worked closer to those communities across the nations and regions who are currently disengaged with its content. The genres which bear most strongly on UK portrayal and representation and have the greatest impacts on audiences would be the most appropriate to move to these locations. We also believe that Network Radio not based in Salford should move elements of its commissioning out of London over time.

We believe a small number of moves in the senior core team would be significantly more impactful to the push outside London than a large number of more junior people. There would be a strong editorial benefit in commissioners living and working in communities in other parts of the UK, understanding what resonates with those audiences and enabling authentic and surprising ideas to come forward.

Given that the TV genre head of commissioning can only have one main base, would it be any advantage to a drama producer in Scotland if the drama head of genre were based in Wales rather than London? The answer we got was overwhelmingly yes, since the real divide seems

to be between a London-centric mindset and one rooted outside the UK capital. **While everyone would like their own genre head geographically beside them, there was an understanding that, though that wouldn't be possible, it would still be an asset to be working with someone committed to the nations and regions and to developing out of London talent. The crucial factor was that they should have money to spend. This, we believe, will help the BBC reconnect with audiences, in a way that feels natural and authentic, not forced or formulaic**.

Previously, there were concerns about cross-genre co-ordination within BBC Content, but given the amount of hybrid working, this is a much weaker argument now that more meetings can be and frequently are held virtually.

> *I think you have to have different voices in the room. And technology enables us to do that. Nobody is or can be marginalised, given that wherever we are sitting, we're together… So why do the discussions have to be bound by proximity and geography? The vast majority of jobs that we have in the BBC don't need to be location specific.*
>
> [Internal]

For the move of commissioners to work, they need to be <u>rooted</u> in their out of London base, not <u>commuting</u> to it for a few days a week. Experience teaches us it's best when this can happen organically. A good example is Fiona Campbell, who comes from Belfast and works there looking after BBC Three and Youth Audiences. **This may mean that the location of the genre commissioner changes when the individual changes, but we believe the long-term advantages to the BBC and to the industry that will accrue from this change will significantly outweigh any short-term disruption**.

The push-back to this has been that the quality of genre commissioners is critical and the majority of buyers remain London-based: the point being that talented people may want to move to another employer at some point and there is less chance of career progression in the nations and regions. However, this is a self-fulfilling prophecy. **While London will always be a talent magnet, the longer it is apparent to people from nations and regions that they have to come to London to have a senior creative career, the longer this brain drain will persist. We believe it is the role of a public service broadcaster, and especially the BBC, to foster senior creative careers of all types around the UK, even if that means pushing against market forces on occasion in the interests of the UK creative economy. We also believe that by getting closer to its audiences around the country, the BBC could gain an important competitive advantage by improving its portrayal and representation across the whole of the UK**.

<u>Nations Qualifying or Creative Contribution?</u>

While the BBC does better than other television channels in having higher targets for OOL production and meeting them, *how* it meets them has been the subject of controversy. A report by Oliver & Ohlbaum Associates, commissioned by Screen Scotland and published in November 2024, showed that from 2014 to 2022, in order to reach its target of 8% network TV spend in Scotland, the BBC was mainly relying on indies with their headquarters in London. This contrasts with Channel 4's approach. '*Only 2 of the 11 suppliers mainly used by the BBC in the Top 15 'Scottish' producers, were companies formed and headquartered in Scotland, compared with three out of four that mainly supplied Channel 4. 80% of the total episodes made by the Top 15 for the BBC were commissioned from producers headquartered in London, compared to only 43% of the total episodes commissioned by Channel 4.*'

It came as a surprise to us to learn that, during this time period, Scottish-qualifying production included 1,100+ episodes of sports coverage from IMG and Sunset+Vine, which mainly consisted of snooker from the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield and bowls from Great Yarmouth. These acted as so-called 'quota sponges', meaning they were used to absorb the commitment to Scotland in a way which met the letter, but not the spirit, of the criteria for qualification. Very few jobs and therefore careers were created in Scotland and there was little economic impact there. This has understandably led to a legacy of suspicion, if not anger, among some of the nations' creative workforce.

> *The quotas were designed to create more of a level playing field in what is a competitive business… The problem now is that the quotas are just used to be gamed. It isn't about embracing the diversity of supply. It's more about, 'How can we make this qualify?'*
>
> [External]

While we've been conducting this review, there's been controversy over the status of *The Traitors*. We've praised it elsewhere in this report for its diverse casting with a range of ages, race, gender, geographical and class backgrounds. It has been particularly strong on bringing disability into the mainstream in a light touch, incidental way and, above all, it's a highly successful and popular series which is likely to run and run.

The issue has been that, although on-screen it represents a Scottish castle and the surrounding landscape, its initial series brought little economic benefit to the nation and its creative economy. Very few of the production team and crew were based in Scotland and little of the production budget was spent there. It is commissioned from Studio Lambert which has its headquarters in London but, in spite of all this, up to now it has qualified as a Scottish production. We know that some argue that there may not currently be the expertise in Scotland to be able to appoint the showrunner and senior members of the team locally, but there was certainly an opportunity to train up local talent in these and other roles from the outset, particularly given that the series has always had the potential to be long-running. We recognise *The Traitors* now plans to expand its training scheme in future years.

The history of this show contrasted markedly with another returning series from a nation, *Game of Thrones* (HBO), in Northern Ireland. This was transformational of the nation's screen industries, growing over time a strong cadre of local crew members and developing them from series to series. **We recommend that all shows from the nations which aspire to be returning series should be required to create a long-term training plan so that the programme leaves a positive legacy of talent development**.

In our view, this issue can arise because of a flawed system for allocating a programme to a nation or region. According to the Ofcom criteria, when at least 70% of production spend (excluding on-screen talent) is incurred outside the M25 and at least 50%, by cost, of the production talent usually work outside the M25, then, under certain circumstances, the 'substantive base' can be the deciding factor. If the substantive base is in one of the nations, then that programme is allocated to that nation. In the case of *The Traitors*, this was Scotland, even though the other two criteria didn't apply to Scotland.

We believe the bar for what qualifies as a 'substantive base' is set quite low and is relatively easy to fudge. For example, Ofcom does not call at the office unannounced and the system works mainly through self-declaration.

However, we have not been asked to critique Ofcom but the BBC, which is required to meet the fourth Public Purpose which says, '*In commissioning and delivering output, the BBC should invest in the creative economies of each of the nations and contribute to their*

development.' To be fair, most currently qualifying nations' production to date does do that, but not all of it. It is evident therefore that the BBC should measure its impact on the creative economies of the nations and whether it is achieving portrayal in a genuine and meaningful way.

So, we welcome the announcement as this review was drawing to a close by the BBC's Director of Nations that, in future, a BBC programme will not qualify as coming from a nation if it meets the criteria on substantive base alone. It will need to have at least 70% of its production spend based in the nation and/or draw significantly on local programme makers and crew to make the show. This instantly takes the sting out of programmes like *The Traitors* seeming to take up the quota at the expense of nations' indies.

This announcement is a step in the right direction, because we believe that the intention should be to build up the creative economy for the long term. The BBC, with shrinking in-house resource, will have to do this through the independent production sector, over which it has some but not total control. There's always the danger that, if the broadcaster imposes too many conditions making life difficult for the indie, the latter can take the programme elsewhere. So, with the large indies in particular, there is a delicate balance of power. However, short-term thinking leads to indies popping up for a project and disappearing at the end of it, when what is required is a lasting legacy.

- Consistent with the BBC's Across the UK project and to connect better with UK audiences, more senior editorial staff, including TV genre commissioners, should be located outside London. We believe that the BBC would represent and portray the whole of the UK more successfully if at least half of the BBC's senior TV genre commissioners lived and worked closer to those communities across the nations and regions who are currently disengaged with its content, appointing where possible those who are rooted in the location, not commuting to it. The genres which bear most strongly on UK portrayal and representation and have the greatest impacts on audiences would be the most appropriate to move to these locations.

- Network Radio not based in Salford should also move elements of its commissioning out of London over time.

- Programmes aiming to become returning series should be required to create a long-term training plan to ensure they leave a lasting legacy of talent development.

Chapter 6: Outside of London – developing the talent base and authentic portrayal

Successful and authentic portrayal in the nations and regions is dependent on a broad talent base locally, both on- and off-air.

The BBC's role

It was impressed on us in our interviews that, in the interests of representing the whole of the UK, the BBC needs to think carefully about how to develop, support and sustain the indies in the nations in order to retain and grow talent. This is at a time when fewer programmes are being commissioned as part of a strategic shift towards a 'fewer, bigger, better' policy. It needs a long-term commitment to a buying model and nurturing of the supply base, rather than spot buying and hoping that an indie survives, even if it hasn't had a commission in a while. Obviously, the quality of the talent base is paramount and it needs to be possible to refresh the supply base of indies as talent enters or exits the market. But an out of London commissioning policy requires more long-term planning and supply chain strategy than is necessary in London. While the BBC doesn't have the market dominance it once held, it's still a major player which can have a pivotal role in stimulating a local creative economy and supporting the talent pool out of London to survive and thrive.

> *If you want accurate portrayal and representation, you can't ask someone in London, even if they're born and bred in Scotland, to accurately portray modern Scotland… You want people from those parts of the UK to tell their stories. To do that they have to have economically sustainable businesses. That requires investment over a period of time and, if you want the talent, it goes back to structures.*
>
> [External]

Calibre and quantity of talent

While interviewing people in genre commissioning in London and in the production sector in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we were struck by the divergence of view between the two groups on the calibre and quantity of creative talent in the nations. Some genre network commissioners were positive, others hesitant, others dismissive of their nations commissioning colleagues and the quality of the production sector in the nations overall.

Indies in the nations often felt that the problem was they weren't as well-known as London production companies. Some probably have an exaggerated view of the amount of hobnobbing between London-based commissioners and production talent, but they felt that opportunities out of London to get to know those in power were limited. Regional indies are less able to drop in for a chat with senior commissioners or bump into them at an industry event, and the effort to do so is time-consuming and logistically difficult, giving rise to the phrase 'the £500 cup of coffee', when the indie has to travel to London (and occasionally for the meeting then to be postponed).

> *That geographic displacement is a big deal… The access to conversations which are happening on a daily basis – we don't have that – and so there's a soft tax on companies that are based outside of London. We have to factor into our business plan the cost of being seen…and that's expensive… We work hard at getting our announcements into* Broadcast *and the trade papers so that the people in positions of power remember that we exist... We just have to work that little bit harder because we're not in the room.*
>
> [External]

I think key nations people need to go south and London people need to go north. I'm there all the time and it's always a bit like, 'What news from the north, my lord?'
[External]

Genre commissioners and nations' indies

Some commissioners rarely came to the indies' part of the world and their time was strictly scheduled even if they did. Some nations' producers didn't want to be 'managed' by the assistant commissioner assigned to them, who seemed to hold them at arm's length from the real centre of power – with whom they never got to speak directly. **We think it's essential that all commissioners prioritise travelling to different parts of the UK to immerse themselves in cultures and ideas beyond their own BBC base and to form relationships with indies wherever they are located**.

Programme makers in the nations made the point that strong personal relationships are generally needed with a commissioner prior to a commission in order to build up trust. Where these exist, the commissioner is more likely to engage and co-develop the project, transforming it from a promising idea into a programme which works for their slate.

In fact, indies in any part of the UK often know where they stand in the hierarchy by how responsive commissioners are to their ideas. The biggest, most successful ones can get a meeting any time they want, even to discuss speculative thoughts and sometimes the commissioner rings **them** to ask them to develop something. BBC commissioners are in competition with other channels for their new projects and don't want to miss the chance to snap them up. Further down the list are those with some track record, who might get a meeting, but more likely a swift e-mail in response to a submitted idea. Further down still are those who will have to chase a couple of times to get their rejection. Then there are those who get a standard acknowledgment, no response or are asked to put their idea on PiCos (the online pitching and commissioning system). That's when they know they have no chance. To be fair, the BBC receives 10,000 ideas a year, so it can't possibly engage meaningfully with them all. Having extraordinary access to a story, or to star talent who only wants to work with you, can bump you up this hierarchy, but otherwise it is primarily about the indie's relationship and track record and much less about the idea itself. It can also be a vicious circle in that you don't get the commission because you haven't the track record, but that means you never build up the track record.

Commissioners' risk aversion?

We were told that commissioners are frequently risk-averse. Rather than try something or someone new which could go wrong, it may be more sensible for them, career-wise, to commission something tried and tested from a company which has already made many programmes of that type before, even if the result is unexceptional. Getting high quality programmes on-air is a constant battle and indies sometimes over-promise and under-deliver. In addition, commissioners are often insecure about their jobs and feel great pressure to deliver hits on decreasing budgets. Once you have handed over the money to a production company, trying to keep track of a large number of productions when you're not in day-to-day control is difficult, so a huge amount of trust is involved. If you have commissioned a large leading indie with an impressive track record and the result is disappointing, you're unlikely to lose your job. If you have stuck your neck out for a company and a team no one has heard of, the worry is that you might. This is about incentivisation of innovation and whether the BBC supports programmes which were bold but didn't quite work or whether that damages the commissioner's career in the wider indie market, if not in the BBC itself. To be fair, the consequences of risk are much greater at the BBC, where critics are on the lookout for what

they see as the next BBC scandal. However, **if the BBC wants more innovative programmes and to extend the range of its suppliers geographically, it will need to increase its appetite for risk (some of which may be perceived rather than real)** and take sensible mitigations where it can.

> *You could have made a dozen brilliant documentaries here, but if you haven't made a documentary for network, it doesn't have the same weight. So, if we get someone who's directed a dozen things for network, regardless of how good or bad or indifferent they are, and a person who's directed a load of things for local, this first person wins every day of the week.*
>
> [External]

> *You'll get a [network] commission but you'll have to fly everybody in from London to make it for you. A local supplier will say, 'Yes! We've got a network commission. Bully for us!' However, all the brains of the operation have to be the trusted guys and gals from London who are in this special circle of chums*.
>
> [Internal]

A skills gap?

Some nations' indies did believe that there was a way to go to develop nations' talent and that the fault wasn't entirely with the network commissioners' lack of engagement. They argued that the problem was partly that the type of show being commissioned has changed and become more high-end, and that fewer people in the nations have those skills.

> *It is very difficult to find people with high-end observational documentary shooting, directing, editing and series producing experience because there hasn't been enough of that work made here to the bar that you have to deliver at… People get away with things here and because they're not fed back to by the commissioners, because the commissioners are happy with it, they believe that they're doing a really good job, so then they're frustrated about why they can't take a step up and do streamer and network work, because nobody's ever telling them it's not good enough.*
>
> [External]

> *When we talk about not as much talent in the nations versus London, we can't divorce that from the sheer size of population. But to think that there's something different in the water in London that makes people more talented is ridiculous. Talent isn't about geography, it's about opportunity.*
>
> [External]

The primary way commissioners currently address the perceived skills gap is by relying on 'quality guarantors' – trusted, experienced talent with a proven track record who provide reassurance and give commissioners the confidence to partner with lesser-known indies from the nations. An example of a highly successful project made in this way was *Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland*, the BAFTA award-winning factual series about the conflict there. It was based on the existing format of *Once Upon a Time in Iraq* made by KEO films. The Northern Irish version was also made by KEO but in co-production with Belfast-based Walk On Air Films, which has a strong track record with BBC NI, although it had not made much previously for network television. Where this type of co-pro works well, it enables the transfer of skills from a highly successful indie to a smaller, less experienced one, helping it to secure future commissions on its own. There can also be a transfer of knowledge and understanding of the locality in the other direction, making it a two-way street. However, if this happens

repeatedly without genuine skills development for the local indie and increased confidence from the commissioner, it can feel short-term and patronising.

> *The only time our Scottishness becomes an issue whether in a positive or a negative light is when we work for the BBC… There are commissioners within the BBC whose default view – and it's an institutional thing, I think – is that outside London means less good to some degree… There's a culture change needed.*
>
> [External]

Risk mitigation can also lead to the encouragement of trusted talent to route an existing idea through a nation in such a way that it qualifies. Sometimes this leads to a gravitation of that talent out of London in a helpful and long-term way. There has got to be a way in which established companies can set up new offices in the nations for the long term. On other occasions it feels more cynical and project specific. As we've seen, there have been concerns about what is known as 'brass plating', the practice of opening an office in a nation in order to qualify as a nations' production, when in reality the office scarcely exists, except in name.

> *I would want them [the commissioners] to spend more time developing a supplier base in [this nation], getting the confidence in that supplier base that they clearly currently lack. They make moves to deliver that security of supply, like dropping quota sponges in; or whenever they find an idea that they quite like, they say, 'I like it, but can you make it in [this nation]?' and that to me is a default that needs to be really reconsidered.*
>
> [External]

There is a huge benefit for audiences in having local producers who understand in depth the nuances of portrayal in their area. However, without the BBC acting as an anchor partner for the creative sector in regions around the UK, the pull of talent to London may become too tempting. It's harder for the organisation to take on this task, given that it is not the market maker it was. **However, we see its investment in the creative economy across the four nations of the UK as one of the greatest justifications of the licence fee in the 21st century and a way of ensuring that it fully represents and portrays the whole of the UK.** Without the BBC's intervention, we would have London as a massively expensive, overblown creative centre and relatively little happening in the audio-visual world outside it.

We were given very positive examples of the BBC developing the freelance production base by moving long-running series to the nations in order to give employment and train up talent. Two series can be commissioned at a time to give added security and the ability to plan. Series such as *Murder Case*, *Murder Trial* and *Highland Cops* give on-going work – though some said that crime in Scotland is therefore massively over-represented. In part this is due to it being easier to get access to film in Scottish courts. The returning series, *Surgeons: At the Edge of Life* from Dragonfly, also presents opportunities to develop the production talent base. Sometimes there is a need to take a nationwide view of a suite of commissions across various slates which might otherwise compete with each other. The roles of Kate Phillips (at the time of the review, the Director of Unscripted and now the Chief Content Officer) and Charlotte Moore (the former Chief Content Officer), with their more senior overview, have been crucial in bringing this wider pan-nation perspective.

<u>*On-air talent*</u>

Turning from off-air to on-air talent, there is currently a lack of clarity about who is in charge of developing nations' network radio and TV talent. This responsibility appears to sit with nations' executives, but they have no power over network commissioning apart from the co-

commissioning system, in which, at least up till now, they have been the less powerful half of the partnership. **The result is that commissioners in London complain about lack of suitable talent in the nations but feel little obligation to develop that talent, in the way they have been able to do very successfully with, for example, black actors. This needs to change and we hope that, with the recently announced changes to the co-commissioning system, it will. Network genre commissioners should take more responsibility for working in collaboration with the nations to develop nations' talent, particularly once presenters are appearing on network programmes. They have the greatest influence in bringing talent through onto the network and it is simply unpersuasive to complain that out of over 10 million people living in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, sufficient talent doesn't exist**. As we've seen in the chapter on Measurement, regionality is not seen as a diversity issue in the same way as race and there was little awareness that contributors from the nations weren't represented proportionately in factual entertainment and entertainment shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* until BBC Scotland carried out some research.

With both on-air and off-air talent, we feel strongly that the commissioners need to get involved proactively to build the talent if they think there is a lack of it, rather than to complain about it as if they have no responsibility for it.

> *What I hear is we've got some great people in Belfast or some great people in Glasgow but they're not quite ready to be a commissioner or an editor for the news programme. I hear that – I hear it too much if I'm honest – and to the point where I don't believe all of it. But I think if you have that observation and that complaint, you've got to do something about it and be deliberate about doing something about it, and put in the training and development or shadowing or whatever it takes to change that perception or reality. But if you don't, then you can't complain about it.*
>
> [Internal]

This may be an area where the BBC's own structure works against it. Having a separate Nations division means that the Content division does not feel they have ownership or accountability for talent in the devolved nations in the way they do in England. On the other hand, there is a danger that, without the dedicated focus of people who feel passionately about their local area, even more power would concentrate in London and the nations could become an afterthought. **We think the best way of managing this is as far as possible to ignore structural divisions and to work collaboratively in the interests of UK-wide talent development across divisional boundaries**.

> *[Network] think that nurturing talent in the nations is just for the nations. Getting them from a nations stage to a network stage is really, really tricky. Nobody comes and asks us, 'How about your talent? Who have you got?' And perhaps traditionally the nations also wanted to hold on to their talent. So, I think that there needs to be greater dialogue, greater discussion about how we can help each other out here and ensure there are talent routes which are going to supply network with great representation, while also offering really good career paths for our most talented people.*
>
> [Internal]

In the absence of this, **we found the current system led to a lack of succession management with nations' talent. For example, when Ken Bruce left Radio 2, the Scottishness of the whole network shouldn't have left with him. There's a danger in relying on one person or one production company to represent any area of diversity. People leave and companies close, so strength in depth is required**.

In Radio, we were told of a lack of alignment in talent between the nations' style of show on their own stations, which was described as 'topicality with music' and driven by news and current affairs, versus high entertainment shows on network radio (*Jeremy Vine* apart). This mismatch seems to obstruct the talent pipeline from nations to network. In addition, there was resistance to seeing the idea of coming from a nation as a diversity characteristic and a sense that visiting different parts of the country substitutes for hearing regular presenters from the nations.

> *There are a variety of voices there, but I don't go about it by saying, 'I have to have a person from Wales and a person from Scotland and a person from Northern Ireland'… Why is the nation cut more important than, say, under-represented dense populations? You know, the Liverpudlian accent, you rarely hear that on the BBC. Why the nation cut? Is that just because of how the BBC is organised, that we are over-indexing on nation?*
>
> [Internal]

There seemed to be little consideration given to the problem of hearing voices disproportionately from only one of the UK's four nations. The evidence suggests the opposite of the view above – **that the BBC is under-indexing on nations' talent and we don't believe that addressing this has to have any effect on the number of Liverpudlian accents on-air.**

Accents

Accents can often be a valuable indicator of geographical origins as well as socio-economic background and are, of course, particularly important in radio. Frequently, a strong regional accent will be taken as an indicator of being working class, while a mild Scottish, Irish or Welsh accent may make the person hard to situate in socio-economic terms to an English ear.

In recent years, there has been a welcome increase in regional accents heard across the board on BBC radio networks and digital services. It's always been a strength of Radio 5 Live, where the large number of phone-ins means that the geographical spread of the UK is well represented, at least in certain categories.

> *5 Live sets itself up as the voice of Britain because obviously a lot of its airtime is handed over to the audience to come in and express opinions on football or politics or whatever is the subject of the moment. In some ways it organises itself around the audience that seeks it out which is obviously a sport-loving audience or a news-loving audience. It does a good job, I think, by tipping us in terms of class to C2DE a bit more. I think it's probably a bit blokey and it struggles a little bit with ethnic diversity.*
>
> [Internal]

Radio 3 has moved its *Breakfast* show to Salford and deployed Tom McKinney, who grew up in Stoke-on-Trent, as its regular presenter, which helps to enhance the range of accents heard and makes it feel more inclusive.

Radio 2, which still feels the loss of Ken Bruce, is certainly representing Bolton well with four presenters from there – Vernon Kay, Sarah Cox, Paddy McGuinness and Mark Radcliffe. It also has Welshman, Owain Wyn Evans, on the early breakfast show, Gary Davies compèring *Sounds of the 80s* and Shaun Keaveny fronting *The Rock Show*, so does not come across as London-centric in accents.

Radio 4 is still the home of received pronunciation, but less so than previously. We think that differentiation among stations is a sensible strategy and that it should not risk losing its core audience in search of others which it might never get. However, centring on the middle class, university-educated audience, doesn't have to mean that it mainly represents the home counties, so we would encourage it to challenge itself further to represent accents from the whole of the UK.

> *My basic view on [on-air] talent is it's way, way too southern. I think you see it across News, Radio and Television. If you look at our stable of frontline presenters, they're overwhelmingly southern.*
>
> [Internal]

Commissioning with Nations (co-commissions)

The streamers have changed the nature of the competition for viewers and, as a result, broadcasters now need to operate at scale with high impact, high tariff programmes to be noticed and attract audiences. The BBC has shrinking budgets so has decided that, rather than spread itself ever thinner, it needs to put more money behind fewer programmes. Ofcom reports that 2024 saw a fall in the number of new BBC TV series from the previous year. In 2023, 201 new series were broadcast, as against 311 in 2022 and 276 in 2021. First run originated hours of new series were 1,146 in 2020 and 626 in 2023. 64 new production companies were used in 2023/4 compared with 68 the previous year. **Clearly, far fewer new projects are getting off the ground, while there is a slight increase in the number of returning series. This is consistent with the 'fewer, bigger, better' policy, but makes it ever harder to develop a talent ladder in the nations which leads from lower risk projects to high budget, high profile ones. We mustn't forget that some big shows start small, famously *The Office*, but also a raft of BBC Three hits which started with relatively small budgets – *Being Human*, *Fleabag*, *Normal People*, *This Country* and *Gavin and Stacey*.**

The change in commissioning policy is particularly acute because for many years the nations have been commissioning and making relatively cheaper programmes reflecting their parts of the UK on non-network TV. The barrier to entry was low and start-up indies could dip a toe in the water with small budgets and low risk projects. In an iPlayer world, where there is no schedule, you can get everything no matter where you sit in the country and all programmes are available all the time. Now, the nations need to make programmes which can compete with the best and highest budget programmes from anywhere. The answer to this raising of the bar has been to develop a co-commissioning strategy. This means that nations and network pool some of their money to create high budget shows which portray the nation and can work on a UK or international scale, with a consequent reduction in local opt-out shows. The aim is both to increase authentic portrayal from these parts of the UK and to scale up production from and about the nations to network level budgets.

The drama, *Blue Lights*, is an exceptional example of a co-commission, authentically representing Northern Ireland in a way which has been so popular with audiences that it has become a returning series, recommissioned for several future years. However, the fact this one title was quoted so often to us demonstrates that there is not yet a long list of hits to mention. We noted that, in our review year, while there were two drama series visibly set in Northern Ireland – *Blue Lights* and *Hope Street* – there were more dramas visibly set in the Republic of Ireland: the originations – *Woman in the Wall* and *The Tourist 2*, plus the acquisitions – *Clean Sweep* and two series of *Kin*. The reasons for this interesting disparity were not clear to us.

Co-commissioning between the TV network centre and the nations has grown to around £30-40 million annually. It's a way of getting nations portrayal to a wider UK audience and, adds to the money available for network TV, providing a strong incentive to partner together, given the downward pressure on budgets.

> *There's a lot of resentment at BBC Scotland that network people are going, 'Oh my God! There's a kilt in this, let's get half the money from Scotland!'*
>
> [External]

Talking to both BBC staff and indies in the nations, they raised various issues with how the co-commissioning system has worked up till now. We were told that the amount a nation was represented could vary hugely form year to year, and that it was harder to achieve collaboration on ideas generated by the nations than those suggested by the network. Indies felt that the objectives of the two commissioners (nation and network) were often not aligned and so they ended up mediating between them. In this relationship, the nations' commissioner was often seen as the junior partner and not treated as their editorial equal by the network commissioner. This led to irritation from the nations' commissioners that the network did not appreciate their deep understanding of their local audiences, while the network commissioners felt themselves to be having more in-depth and challenging conversations with indie suppliers, hence raising the quality bar and meaning they get higher quality programmes and better targeted ideas.

As this report was in its final stages, a new system for co-commissioning accompanied by a buying model was announced to address these issues. We very much hope that it succeeds. In order for it to do so, network commissioners will need to recognise that they may have a knowledge deficit about parts of the UK in which their nations counterpart is expert. Meanwhile, commissioners in the nations and regions need the self-belief to step up and contribute what they know.

> *We have to be more confident, and ambitious about our creative offer to the wider group... Our nations and regions have to develop a swagger among our commissioners which attracts confidence in our aims to work with the best ideas and the brightest talent in the industry – and enjoy it a little more when we hit the mark.*
>
> [Internal]

It's clear that co-commissioning is becoming the expected model for getting a nations' show with portrayal onto network and therefore making these commissioning partnerships work is going to be ever more important. **We believe that the most crucial element in any amended system is to create an equal partnership between nations and network, bringing together the network specialist expertise in their genre with the nations' specialist expertise in the portrayal of their country**. Only when there is mutual respect will the partnership be able to tap into the best of both worlds for the benefit of the audience.

Restricted to representation?

Consistent portrayal is an important aim. But, in our visits to the nations, we heard about another unintended and problematic aspect of co-commissioning. Several nations' independent producers, who were previously able to make programmes about any subject in the world, told us they are increasingly confined to making programmes depicting their nation. Given shrinking budgets, it felt to them as if the nations' target acts as a ceiling not a floor. The result, they said, was that their non-nations ideas were less likely to get commissioned, reducing their field of operation. On the other side, the nations' commissioners understandably

only want to put their money into programmes which depict their nation. BBC Content argues that nations' indies are not restricted in this way, and it is certainly true that shows from nations indies on topics other than their own nation do exist. However, many of our interviewees in the nations believed the pressure to narrow their sights to local issues was real and increasing.

> *Representation is a trap. It forces you into a limited area of programming. It has to be representative, otherwise it can't come from this part of the world and I think that flows through into nations and network. So, are London producers limited to making programmes that represent London? Clearly not. It's limited the commercial viability of the programmes that come from Scotland and it's also restricted their horizons.*
>
> [External]

> *Things have to scale up, but if you have to scale up and have a Northern Irish story in it, we've only got the Troubles and the Titanic and after that we're done. London producers are not told, you've got to have a Pearly King and Queen in it. So, there's something about the portrayal agenda which has weird consequences.*
>
> [Internal]

This is, of course, partly a consequence of the BBC trying to do the right and authentic thing of having a nations company involved when the subject matter involves that nation or, if one is more cynical, network tapping into nations' money which won't be forthcoming unless there is nations' portrayal and some work for a nation's indie. However, given that there is a fairly consistent annual percentage from each nation to meet their network targets (8% Scotland, 5% Wales, 3% Northern Ireland in money and hours) but not varying much from year-to-year or going far beyond them, there is clearly a degree of pre-planning in operation. It guarantees nations' production, which is welcome, but the indies' fear is that it also caps and narrows it.

> *When you compare our company's slate five or six years ago compared to now…now almost exclusively we only make programmes about Scotland for the BBC. You don't look at the website and think this is a leading UK factual indie. You look at our website and you think we're a Scottish indie… It impacts our reputation pitching to other broadcasters. It impacts our distribution because everything is very Scottish.*
>
> [External]

We believe that people's views from out of London should not only be of relevance when applied to their local area. Programme makers based up and down the UK, often in rural and less well-off areas, bring unique perspectives to bear on stories and issues in the rest of the country and throughout the world. These are just as valid as those from London and may be more in touch with the wider and more working class audience. If the only people allowed to tell the bigger, international stories are those based in London, that narrows the BBC's perspective and makes it more likely to be urban and middle class and familiar.

Digital availability

As the BBC adopts a 'Digital First' policy, the importance of iPlayer and Sounds, *vis-à-vis* the linear schedule, increases with every year that passes. It's beyond the scope of this review to examine all the complex issues around the future of these platforms, so we've confined ourselves to some of the implications for portrayal and representation.

All programme makers would agree that there is little point in the BBC producing content which certain communities would enjoy, if they are unaware of it and don't know where to

find it. This is particularly the case as the BBC gravitates to an iPlayer and Sounds world in which it competes head-on with well-funded streamers and podcasters. The BBC understands this and has put in much work to develop and improve its digital offerings.

The growth of iPlayer brings particular challenges for nations and regions, but the issues go wider to include all genres and with implications for portrayal and representation in both the thumb nail photos used to signify the programmes and wider navigability. There is evidence that the audience uses iPlayer differently from, say, Netflix. We've been told that, whereas people go to Netflix and other streamers to browse, they still use iPlayer as a catch-up service.

At present, very little information is gathered about the viewer at sign-in other than a user's email and postcode. Personalisation can be important to create a more tailored service that could offer a more sophisticated suggestion system based on previous viewing, but also provide programmes likely to appeal to the user. The BBC acknowledges this and is exploring ways to promote its content better and specifically target the user with suggestions that are likely to appeal.

Some argue that greater personalisation can reduce serendipity – the chance of discovering unexpected but enjoyable content. But it doesn't have to be all or nothing. We've been told that the BBC is developing recommendation approaches designed not only to recommend content which people will like based on their previous viewing behaviour, but also to introduce users to new and unfamiliar content (for instance, through recent improvements to the algorithm for the top rail). **We think it's important that the BBC ensures its content representing the UK's diverse communities is promoted to and reaches its audience in the digital world**.

In the view of some with whom we spoke, iPlayer can still be seen to promote shows which are already well-known and need little additional help, like *Strictly Come Dancing* or *EastEnders*, rather than demonstrating the range and breadth of the BBC's offering. Users do expect to find big shows easily (and especially those less familiar with iPlayer and Sounds), but some we spoke to said people who wanted to find hit programmes already knew they're available and where to find them. This only serves to reinforce iPlayer as a catch-up service. **With the exception of one slot for the nations and regions, the iPlayer rails are also not adapted to the viewer by geography, unlike on BBC Sounds – where there are bespoke rails for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English Regions. There is work underway to explore more nuanced and engaging approaches to achieve better geographic relevance**.

> *Whoever is in charge of scheduling the front page of iPlayer should not only be responsible for making it as attractive as possible for all audiences, but be responsible for speaking to everybody whose service is on those rails about their priorities. Your area of responsibility isn't just BBC One. It is speaking to people that are leading S4C, that are leading CBBC. Your contract of employment is on behalf of the BBC. Whoever is running iPlayer should make sure that investment in all the BBC services sings and is as impactful as possible, even if that's just one moment a year or one priority a year.*
> [Internal]

Of course, there's a careful balance to be struck between providing a breadth of content and relevance for the user.

There has also been a philosophical issue for the BBC, with its requirement for universality, to decide whether the opening page on bbc.co.uk should be the same for everyone or differentiated by geography and interests. **We think there is a strong case for allowing**

people to personalise the page to make it more relevant to them. We are in a world where people can gravitate to the BBC's competitors if they can't easily find what they want. People are notoriously impatient in the digital world and will go elsewhere quickly if they can't find what they're looking for right away.

News and Out of London

News should be commended for the efforts it has made to move its teams round the UK to reflect the whole country back to itself more successfully. Specialists and non-specialists have moved, and there are now senior health, education and science journalists out of London including technology reporters in Glasgow. The *One* has moved to Salford, joining *Breakfast*, 5 Live and significant long form audio output (including podcasts). 'Your Voice' is a new way for the audience to engage with the BBC and lets them influence the agenda. It resulted in stories during the 2024 General Election campaign about rural bus services, pylons in Wales and domestic carers, which might not have otherwise been covered.

Programmes that move out of London are more likely to take advantage of their new surroundings to affect the agenda of the programme and give a more authentic portrayal of the UK.

> *When* Breakfast *got behind the motor neurone campaign of Rob Burrow, he was a massive figure in the north of England because rugby league is such a big driver of sports engagement with all users in the north. That was a massively important bit of connectivity with the audience and really brought to light something which is a deeply serious issue but was personified by someone who was very connected with that audience*.
>
> [Internal]

For News, building hubs in Salford and Glasgow has been successful because they are of sufficient size to support a career ladder, rather than implanting relatively small teams in lots of centres round the UK. Critical mass is important in retaining key talent on- and off-air.

However, news is all about telling stories across the UK (and elsewhere) and that can't fully be done by interviews with correspondents and experts. Budget cuts and evolving audience habits have led to a focus on digital and on live output and a reduction in television and radio packages. The focus is shifting towards a more 'live and dynamic' news experience. On top of that, the commissioning of stories and packages has become more centralised with the aim of less duplication. We were told this means the stories that are run 'work harder' and get to a range of different audiences across platforms. But it also means some programmes now have less scope to commission their own content. **There is obviously a balance to be struck between making sure your biggest stories are seen by as many people as possible, but also ensuring that the BBC covers the whole of the UK and under-served audiences are not left behind. BBC network news should ensure that it doesn't simply leave the nations and local news to cover stories which could well be important for everyone in the UK to know about**.

BBC outlets all covering the same stories wouldn't be helpful to the wider requirements of portrayal and representation. But with fewer packages and a centralised approach, there's a risk of losing some of the depth and diversity in how the UK is portrayed.

> *I think the lack of packages reduces storytelling. I think it reduces the voices you hear talking with expertise, with different accents and from different places. And anyway,*

the bigger question is: what is the BBC for? We are throwing away our USP incrementally because we are the best and most trusted story-tellers in the world.

[Internal]

In May 2024, *Newsnight*'s format changed too, becoming completely studio-based in London with no packages. Inevitably, this means that we see less out and about in the UK and hear more from London-based interviewees. We're told that the BBC listened to its *Newsnight* audience who wanted more consequential conversation at the end of the day and that its viewership has risen. But there are consequences of it now being a sofa-based show – looking, being and feeling very London-centric for the UK audience.

It means that you're only going to get people who are in the London area to come and sit on the sofa. People down-the-line, America, they'll take. They're less likely to take someone from Salford or Belfast because they want the conversation on the sofa. So, it kind of shrinks an already small contact book. You don't have the person who would have been in a film which would have really made its mark, delivering two minutes from St Andrews, who's bloody brilliant on what's happening in Lebanon, because it's a bit more difficult.

[Internal]

On 13 February 2025, across its news output the BBC ran its NHS day. It was based at the Royal Free Hospital in London, while *Newsnight* featured a special report from King's Hospital, London. We were told that these were hospitals that granted access and BBC News has throughout the year visited many hospitals across the UK. Overall, BBC News does make the effort to get out of London and the south-east of England. But, given the importance of the NHS across the whole the UK, NHS day did feel very London-focused. Fairly or unfairly, the suspicion remains, amongst some of our interviewees, that England – and specifically London – is still the default location for the examination of many UK-wide issues.

It's worth recalling that, in June 2008, the BBC Trust published an influential report by Professor Anthony King into BBC News and Current Affairs' coverage of the four nations.

The headline would be that England was very much the default nation for the UK. If something was happening in England, it got coverage and the reports often forgot to tell you that it was only talking about England and not actually about the other nations.

[External]

The report had a major impact and the BBC significantly improved its coverage in this respect as a result. However, there have been signs that it may have slipped back a little, now that the King report is no longer fresh in the mind.

I do find myself listening to the radio or whatever it is and just saying out loud, "In England, in England!" when the report comes on, because it's so often <u>not</u> said and England becomes the default for London-based journalists. They just forget.

[External]

On a similar note, we have heard criticism that politicians from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not heard on UK-wide or international issues, but only on topics related to their nation and that there is a default to Westminster. Only ever hearing from the major parties on issues of concern across the UK can be alienating to those in the devolved nations.

You would not hear someone like Kate Forbes, the SNP Deputy First Minister of Scotland, asked for her opinion on something other than devolution or independence.

She is not there just as someone elected on a single issue. She's elected as part of the Scottish administration which is running all sorts of things in the country.

[External]

There are other clues that a London-centric mindset still persists in the seemingly innocuous phrases used by reporters, who are sometimes mystified by the annoyance that they can cause. For example, all the good the *Today* programme does by broadcasting from different parts of the UK can be wiped out when they say they are going 'into deepest Wiltshire', as if it were the tropical rain forests. Another phrase which has lasted long in the memory goes back to when a different programme, coming from the Western Isles, welcomed its viewers to 'the back of beyond'.

We talk about 'going out to' as if where we are is the centre of power, thought, decision-making, everything… We really need to break the notion that we are 'going out to get an opinion', that there's something that isn't reflected in our own thought and in our own processes and there's something different that we haven't thought of 'out there' somewhere. And that's because the people that are making these decisions don't reflect 'out there'.

[Internal]

But there are many serious and successful efforts made by the BBC to reflect the UK as a whole including *Your Voice, Your BBC*, 5 Live's *Nicky Campbell, Naga Munchetty* and *Stephen Nolan*, long-running programmes like *Question Time*, as well as, outside News, *You and Yours*, *Any Questions?* and *Jeremy Vine* (Radio 2).

It should be acknowledged that, despite devolution, many key decisions, decision makers and centres of power remain in London – *e.g.*, the UK Parliament, the Bank of England, the financial markets and the UK Supreme Court. To that extent, BBC News and other outlets will inevitably and rightly reflect this reality. However, audiences across the UK have interests and concerns arising from their own areas, which they want the wider network audience to be aware of, rather than only seeing them covered in local news. Getting this balance right between the rest of the UK and the importance of London is one of the many challenges facing BBC News.

- The BBC should ensure that co-commissioning does not limit nations-based indies to making programmes only about their own nation.
- The BBC should support the sustainability of indies that have substantial bases in the devolved nations and in England outside London and the south-east. This would enable them to develop and retain local programme makers who are closer to the communities around the UK.
- BBC iPlayer should give greater prominence to programmes with settings and themes geographically relevant to the viewer as part of greater personalisation.
- Network commissioners should share responsibility and accountability with Nations' commissioners for developing on- and off-air talent from the nations.

Conclusion

This review has identified areas where the BBC is still – but has the potential to become even more – distinctive. Audience research and stakeholder interviews, together with the range of content that we have watched, listened to and read, have made clear that a pressing priority for the BBC in terms of portrayal and representation is geography. Relocating editorial decision-makers and key areas of power beyond London and into the devolved nations and English regions would undoubtedly strengthen the BBC's connection with its diverse audiences and enrich and enhance the creative economy of the UK in a way which only it can do.

It's clear that progress has been made in many areas. But our review shows that important work remains – particularly in engaging working class audiences, improving gender balance (especially representation of older women) and broader representation of non-metropolitan audiences, people of Asian backgrounds and those with disabilities.

Our research and analysis show that a key to more authentic portrayal lies in a deeper understanding of the UK - not only in terms of the country's demographic make-up but also ensuring that portrayal appears genuine and not tokenistic or forced. Audiences stress that representation is not only about who appears on air, but also about how stories are told and by whom. This highlights the role of greater diversity in creative and editorial decision-making, ensuring that a wide range of perspectives continues to contribute to more accurate and relatable portrayal across BBC output. Audiences from all communities want to see themselves as part of everyday British life – as normal rather than different or 'other'.

It is now more than a century since the BBC was established and through the rise of television, commercial competition, satellite and cable networks to the shift toward digital and on-demand delivery, it has consistently demonstrated its ability to adapt successfully. Today, it faces new pressures from cash-rich global streaming platforms and intensifying international competition. To secure its future, the BBC must embrace the challenges and continue to deliver uniquely British content that resonates with the UK's diverse audiences (and the world). By taking account of the issues identified in this report, and the associated findings about them, we think the BBC will be well-positioned to do so.