

*"Working for quality  
and diversity in  
British broadcasting"*

Founded in 1983 by Jocelyn Hay CBE



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**RESPONSE BY VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER  
TO THE BBC TRUST'S CONSULTATION ON  
THE GOVERNANCE OF BBC WORLD SERVICE,  
VIA AN OPERATING LICENCE**

Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) is an independent, non-profit-making association, free from political, commercial and sectarian affiliations, working for quality and diversity in British broadcasting. VLV represents the interests of listeners and viewers as citizens and consumers across the full range of broadcasting issues. VLV is concerned with the structures, regulation, funding and institutions that underpin the British broadcasting system. VLV is a charitable company limited by guarantee.

September 2013

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- VLV welcomes the opportunity to respond to this BBC Trust consultation and broadly agrees that the draft Operating Licence for the World Service describes the characteristics and other features of the World Service as they are currently provided.
- VLV endorses much of what is expressed in the accompanying BBC Trust Paper, *BBC World Service: a licence fee funded service*, especially the commitment to ‘ensure that the distinctive service offered by the World Service is protected and enhanced’.
- However, we have some comments to make about whether the current organisational structure of the BBC - and the associated financial arrangements - are appropriate to ensure that the ethos and programme standards of the World Service are maintained.
- VLV is concerned that there is not enough representation of the World Service at top management level within the BBC Executive to maximize its weight within the BBC organisational structure and to recognise its unique standing as a UK national asset in its own right.
- We make a re-drafting suggestion for World Service Objectives, Priorities and Targets [below page para.7 a)]
- Should the overall governance of the BBC change, VLV would wish to consider ensuing implications for the World Service

### 1. Background

World Service output has always been popular among VLV members. In the 1990s VLV was influential in making the case for BBC Radio 4 to broadcast World Service output during the night hours rather than broadcasting local radio stations or Radio 2. Also, the 24-hour availability, within the UK, of World Service English output through digital (where available) and online is markedly appreciated. We echo Lord Patten’s words in *BBC World Service: A licence fee funded service* (June 2013) when he said that the ‘BBC World Service is one of Britain’s greatest gifts to the world’.

Amidst the problems which have buffeted the BBC, as programme-maker and employer, during recent times, the BBC World Service has managed to stay - in reputational even if not in financial terms - away from controversy: a welcome positive point for those who, like Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV), argue for maintaining a strong and independent BBC, delivering varied and quality content, with its funding anchored in the licence fee.

Once the costs of the World Service are no longer covered by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in April 2014 and are paid for via the licence fee, VLV members, along with all licence fee payers, will have an additional, more direct interest in what the World Service delivers.

## **2. Incorporating World Service into the BBC governance and management structures**

a) In principle VLV supports the progressive integration of the World Service into the editorial and managerial structures of the domestic BBC and the BBC news operation in particular.

Therefore it seems natural for governance of the World Service by the BBC Trust to track the process which applies to the domestic services: i.e. that the services provided by the BBC World Service are defined in a specific operating licence.

These should be, and will be, subject to regular review in the terms of *Quality, Impact, Reach* and *Value for Money*: the same quartet of criteria [QIRV] as applied to evaluation of domestic output.

### **Encouraging professional skills integration**

b) The pooling of the professional skills of BBC domestic journalists and producers with the native, nuanced understanding and specialist knowledge of World Service staff - many of them born and educated in other countries, commanding other languages and familiar with other cultures - seems intrinsically sensible. We hope this will produce win-win results, enriching the way in which the BBC delivers its Public Purpose of *Bringing the UK to the World and the World to the UK*.

Beyond being anecdotally aware of more non-British born voices and faces on air, VLV has learnt of internal BBC evidence that this integration is in fact taking place to the advantage of news-gathering, reporting and production - as well as improving the career prospects of World Service staff concerned. We are told that the wrench of leaving the historic and evocative setting of Bush House has been balanced by now being located at the core of the BBC's domestic and international news operation in New Broadcasting House.

*We strongly endorse the integrated operation combining the knowledge and talents of all news staff.*

### **General factors around the changed FCO-BBC Relationship**

c) We accept the need for agreement between the BBC Trust and the Foreign Secretary on objectives, priorities, targets, performance measurements and

broadcast languages [Annex 1]. However, the removal of Foreign & Commonwealth Office's responsibility to fund the World Service inevitably diminishes the FCO's locus in the World Service and moves the balance towards the interests of licence payers.

We recognise that this is not the moment to enter into questions about the range of language services or the relevant investment in each. Although these issues may come up for debate in future, they are not intrinsic to this initial consultation about the fundamental adequacy the BBC Trust's operating licence for the World Service.

Though financing through the licence fee has distinct and important advantages we do not accept the notion that the cessation of FCO funding significantly reduces World Service's exposure to the charge of playing to a British government tune. FCO funding over nearly eight decades has not impeded the World Service's unmatched credibility among international broadcasters and information providers; the idea that the likes of those few - governments or otherwise - who have impugned its independence will now refrain from doing so because of the altered funding arrangements is somewhat fanciful.

It is a concern of VLV that distancing the World Service from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, a powerful and influential ministry, may lead to the World Service being more vulnerable to cuts and a diminution of its status in future [see point 4, below].

We perceive a strong, continuing (although altered) relationship with the FCO to be crucial in securing the future of the World Service, as well as being advantageous to the FCO itself.

### **3. The World Service Remit**

d) We believe that the remit for the World Service, as laid out in the draft operating licence, is adequate. We understand the 'global gap' in news provision to refer to countries where there is an inadequate supply of high quality, impartial and accurate news.

We agree that the primary audience of the World Service should be outside the UK. We note references in the BBC Trust document *BBC World Service: A licence fee funded service* (June 2013) which imply that more will be done to provide access to language services within the UK.<sup>1</sup> We consider this as a laudable secondary aim but would not wish to see any core budgets for World Service output diverted to increase the reach of the services within the UK.

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<sup>1</sup> In time we will be going more to make these services more easily accessible. Pg 4.

## **Scope of the BBC World Service**

We believe the scope of the BBC World Service as laid out in the draft operating licence accurately reflects current output.

### **4. Resourcing the World Service**

a) The BBC Trust, in its position paper (p.10), confirms it is fulfilling the promise made in autumn 2011, at the time of the agreement on switch of funding responsibilities, to increase, on taking over, the amount of licence fee funds invested in World Service. We understand that the Trust has confirmed an increase from £238.5 million in 2013/14 to £245 million in 2014/5. While VLV naturally welcomes this increase, it has to be seen against the background of the 16% cut in World Service funding - requiring 20% cash savings and around 500 job losses over three years (2011-2014) - which formed part of the total (and some might say 'under duress') settlement between the Government and the BBC in October 2011. The extra funds make a very small dent in the deficit which Peter Horrocks, the BBC's Global News Director, described two years ago as "a painful day for the BBC World Service and the 180 million people around the world who rely on the BBC's global news services every week". More generally, these factors raise serious concerns about the overall adequacy of BBC funding and its ability to provide a full range of quality services going forward.

### **Additional Funding Sources**

b) We support World Service initiatives which generate local partnerships to rebroadcast BBC content, whether in foreign languages or in English, provided the terms of such partnerships are consistent with the BBC quality brand. We particularly applaud the fact that these partnerships, when they earn money, can contribute to World Service resources, and would urge that this income be formally ring-fenced for use by the World Service.

Equally, we urge that commercial revenue from BBC World Television News - located alongside World Service within the Global News Division - be deployed, wherever practical within competition and subsidy rules, to strengthen the World Service's operations.

c) VLV notes positively the fact that the Department for International Development [DfID] is giving £90 million over five years to BBC Media Action (formerly the World Service Trust) for in-country programmes, complementing the core news and other programme activity of the World Service.

## **World Service within BBC Funding Environment**

d) Whilst the 2011 settlement and the associated funding cuts are 'water under the bridge', future decisions taken under the new governance arrangements and the continually constrained financial climate are very much of concern to VLV. There is a risk under the new funding system that World Service funding could be squeezed to accommodate budget bids from any other part of the BBC's operations; or, alternatively, extra budget cuts may have to be made within the World Service to fund investment if an unforeseen foreign policy situation arises, either at the FCO's instigation or on the World Service's own initiative.

e) In order for World Service budget claims to be given optimal weight, when competing with those from other internal BBC bidders, advocacy for the World Service needs to be in the hands of those with organisational seniority. In past years the World Service (previously External Services) was represented at BBC's board level by figures such as Gerry Mansell, Sir Robert Phillis and Mark Byford - all with Deputy Director-General rank - or by respected and articulate managing directors such as Oliver Whitley and Sir John Tusa.

VLV questions whether the needs of the World Service will be adequately supported without a World Service Executive on the top management team of the BBC. Sincere and well-meant assurances that World Service's interests will not be neglected are (as history shows) no substitute for focused personal stakeholder representation.

f) An additional question which arises is the amount of detailed knowledge about, or attention to, World Service interests within the BBC Trust 'secretariat'. We urge Lord Williams, the Trustee with responsibility for international content which includes the World Service, to ensure personally that the World Service is adequately supported by the BBC Trust and the BBC Executive at the most senior level.

*We ask the BBC Trust to address these concerns through discussing with the BBC Executive the question of guaranteeing a specifically World Service/Global voice at the top decision-making level - not just to argue its financial case but to be a strong force in defining and defending the World Service's ethos and values.*

## **5. Contribution to the Promotion of the BBC's Public Purposes**

a) VLV welcomes the section 4.1 where the World Service's contribution to one of the BBC's global public purposes is articulated. As stated above, we hope that the integration of World Service staff will bring an added dimension also to domestic BBC News output, providing a deeper, more international perspective to the news broadcast in the UK.

We welcome the fact that World Service global material will be made available to UK audiences online, promoting the BBC's public purpose of *bringing the world to the UK and the UK to the world*.

b) Additionally we note that the availability of digital broadcasting and the reach of the internet has enabled the World Service's foreign language services to become more available to diaspora communities in the UK which we regard as contributing to a significant even if not a primary World Service objective.

c) We welcome the ambition to support debate and involve audiences in line with the BBC's public purpose of *sustaining citizenship and civil society*.

*VLV acknowledges and welcomes the contribution the World Service will make to UK society whilst considering that the primary purpose of the World Service should be for delivering content to audiences outside the UK. Any benefits to UK audiences, direct or indirect, should be secondary to this primary purpose.*

## **6. Annex 1: Objectives, priorities and targets agreed between the BBC Trust and the UK Foreign Secretary**

a) In the Objectives, Priorities and Targets of the Draft Licence (as specified on pages 8 and 9 of the Draft) the reputation and trust of the World Service feature as the first-listed objectives, priorities and targets: preceding the delivery of quality content in the news and other areas.

To VLV it seems that the fundamental aim should be to create and deliver the content from which flow the reputation and credibility. Public perception *per se* in our view should not be the primary aim.

*We would therefore propose that the text of the operating licence should be amended to incorporate what seems a more logical balance of emphasis.*

b) Audience targets are set out (page 8) for reach across all platforms "including its core radio service" - 200 million; for weekly viewers to television services - 60 million and for weekly users of online content - 25 million. No target, however, appears to be set for specifically for the radio services. VLV queries this.

VLV realises that current transmission and delivery methods make audiences vulnerable in areas subject to government interference (e.g. China, Iran, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Sri Lanka); and that this raises a dilemma, especially for foreign language services, whether to set a high target which may be missed for reasons beyond the BBC's control or a lower one which looks un-enterprising and unduly cautious. We hope, nevertheless, that realism will not depress high aspirations for

BBC services - whether radio, television or online - or for the resources needed to achieve them.

*We raise the matter of whether the BBC Trust might be better advised to acknowledge openly the absence of a specific target figure for radio , along with the reasons why.*

Voice of the Listener & Viewer  
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