

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL AUDIENCE COUNCIL
MINUTES**

Wednesday 6th January 2010

Due to the adverse weather conditions the meeting was replaced with a telephone conference call. The agenda was shortened to cover the Programme and service review, Burning Issues and Any Other Business.

Present: Belinda Channer – Chair and ACE Member
 Robin Jones Rob Skelton
 Dan Willetts Zubeda Limbada
 Christina Orford-Hall Linda Connor
 Paul Tabberner Ken Pugh
 Bonnie Harris

Carol Webster Public Accountability Manager, England

Apologies: Kollette Super
 Bev Tomkins
 Sin Ong
 Meena Bose
 Betty Foster

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed members to the conference call and thanked them for joining. She reminded members that the agenda had been changed to cover the Programme and Service reviews, Burning Issues and Any Other Business. The other agenda items would be deferred to the March meeting. She also outlined some rules she asked members to observe during the call.

2. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising: Deferred.

3. Programme & service review

3.1 Local Radio

The Chair explained that this was to be an ongoing discussion at ACE as there were concerns regarding the continued decline in local radio audiences over the past 7 years. She referred members to the discussion minuted in the ACE papers and invited the link members to start the discussion.

In general members felt that there was a place for Local Radio, saying that it was ‘very much at the heart of the community’ and was particularly relevant at times such as those that were being experienced at the time. Although some saw BBC Local Radio as an ‘emergency’ service, this was not at the heart of what Local Radio did. Some members felt that the role of Local Radio was to keep communities together and to keep communities informed. One member from a rural community said that his Local Radio station was ‘like a member of the family’. ‘The presenters are known; they go out into the community giving on the spot and up to date reports’. A listener to Radio Shropshire commented on the recent explosion in Shrewsbury, saying that having the local reporter on the national news was good. Members felt that Local Radio did a good job at giving national stories a local interpretation. They felt that emergency situations should not be the main focus/ remit of Local Radio, but felt that it could help to raise the profile and perhaps increase audiences.

Some members said they didn’t understand why Local Radio was aimed at the over 50’s; they felt that Local Radio could have a wider remit and appeal to more people.

At least one member commented that BBC Local Radio does not have a brand identity and that the general public were unaware of the difference between the BBC Local Radio and the commercial stations.

One member suggested that Local Radio should use mediums such as Facebook to engage and interact with a new audience and referred to the Asian Network who used this regularly. CW said that most Local Radio stations had blogs and some used Twitter.

Is Local Radio distinctive?

Being speech based distinguished BBC Local Radio from their commercial rivals. Those members who listened to Local Radio (around 50%) felt that Local Radio offered good journalism. They applauded the drive to have a political reporter based in each radio station. They felt that the reporting of local sport was very strong and appealed to all age groups.

Being local was also a distinctive feature. Members liked knowing the presenters and that they knew the area and region.

It was felt that personalities on the radio were very important and possibly had an impact on listening numbers. Members recognised the distinction between urban city stations and those covering the more rural counties, the latter often achieving a better reach, WM having to serve a more diverse community which presents additional challenges. One member felt that the music policy should be reviewed; commercial stations Smooth Radio, Heart, and Magic are examples whose playlists may have appeal to our target audience, with our audiences switching to them for music content.

Would members miss Local Radio if it wasn't there?

Most of the younger council members said they would not miss Local Radio if it wasn't there as it offered little to them, although they turned to it in times of emergency. It was felt that for a certain generation there was a community value, but to survive it needed to change. One member listened to news on his iPod, and said he would listen to Local Radio if it was downloadable and like Radio One.

Another who worked in a school, said she only listened to Local Radio to 'see if I'm at work or not'.

One said that although she didn't listen on a regular basis ('I would have to listen around the BBC's schedule rather than mine. I use Facebook for updates on weather conditions.') she would miss not having it there, saying it's 'almost like Woolworths.' She felt it should be on demand to use as and when it was needed.

A majority of members in the Local Radio age group said they would miss BBC Local Radio if it wasn't there although one member said that Local Radio had little appeal to her and that the remit needed to be revised to widen the community appeal. She said that there were no programmes that appealed to the African or Caribbean communities; and no station as with the Asian Network. She said that BBC Local Radio failed the African and Caribbean communities who were turning to other commercial community radio stations that addressed their specific issues. She felt that the service was 'marginal, middle-aged and middle-class'. For those reasons she would not miss BBC Local Radio if it wasn't there. Others felt that Local Radio was an important part of the community, encouraging community cohesion and keeping communities informed and together.

General comments:

Members still had issues with the promotion of Radio WM and Joanne Malin. They felt that this was 'anti-competitive' to commercial radio.

3.2 Weekend Bulletins

Members felt that the Weekend Bulletins were good, and didn't appear 'a second class service'. They liked the fact that there was a variety of presenters including the main presenters. It seemed as though it had always been there, was very natural and seamless. They liked that the news was new and fresh, which showed that someone had worked hard to make this happen.

3.3 Christmas/ New Year Programmes

Initially the discussion started on a negative note, with one member saying that on Christmas Day he had noted over 23 hours of repeats on BBC 1, 2 and 4. Members variously said that it was the 'traditional flat BBC diet at Christmas (they probably think people are too drunk to notice.)'; 'absolute waste of time' 'most boring ever.' However, members then started to highlight programmes they had enjoyed (*My Family*, *The Royle Family*, *A Childs Christmas in Wales*, Victoria Wood, Catherine Tate, *Cranford*, *Dr Who* [particularly the New Years day episode], *The Gruffalo*, *The Day of The Triffids*) and agreed that they may have been perhaps a bit harsh. It was agreed that there had been some good entertainment programmes over the period.

4. **Reports:** Deferred

5. **Trust business & feedback:** Deferred

6. **Outreach:** Deferred

7. **Burning issues:**

1. A member expressed concerns regarding editorial control for *Question Time*. He said that the remit for QT was to discuss issues of the week over a range of topics, and he felt they were departing from this remit and moving into ratings chasing territory, by allowing single but contentious issues to dominate the programme on occasions.

Another member wanted to echo the Burning issue from the East RAC recorded in the ACE minutes on how the BBC should deal with minority parties such as the BNP in the future particularly leading up to the General Election and would welcome some kind of written policy.

8. **Any other business**

1. A member thanked CW for forwarding the information on the Drama Village. The Chair told members that it was hoped that a future RAC meeting could take place there. CW agreed to explore this, and asked if members would consider a meeting earlier in the day if this was the only option.

Action: CW

2. One member had representation from people in her network regarding the quality of classical music on digital radio which was not as good as on analogue FM. The Deputy Chair explained that the BBC policy on Radio 3 had been to keep digital bit rates higher than other BBC stations in order to give a better audio quality. He suggested that the best digital audio quality could be received by listening on Freeview rather than on a digital radio. Another member reminded the meeting that listening to Radio 3 on FM was still available.

3. Another member wanted to raise issues from the ACE minutes. She agreed to forward these by email.

9. **Date of next meeting:**

Wednesday 17th March 2010

Endnote

[We aim to make as much of the minutes available as possible. However, there will be times when sections of the minutes will be withheld from publication. These will be kept to a minimum and clearly marked.]