

CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

6th Meeting, 2023, Session 6

23 February 2023

BBC: Impact of the Digital-first Agenda

1. The Committee agreed at its meeting on 26 January to take evidence on Radio Scotland's recently proposed schedule changes in relation to classical, jazz, and traditional music programmes, in the context of the wider question of the impact of the BBC's [digital-first agenda](#) on broadcasting output in Scotland.
2. At this meeting, the Committee will take evidence from—
 - Professor Tommy Smith OBE, Artistic Director, Scottish National Jazz Orchestra, and Head of Jazz, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland;
 - Finlay MacDonald, Director of Piping, The National Piping Centre;
 - Professor Simon McKerrell, Professor in Media and Music, Glasgow Caledonian University.
3. This session will give the Committee an opportunity to discuss both the proposed rescheduling of classical, jazz, and traditional music programmes—within the context of the impact of the digital-first agenda on broadcasting output in Scotland—and the broader question of how to support these genres and emerging musical talent, and public sector broadcasters' role in this.
4. The Committee will take evidence at its next meeting from BBC Scotland.
5. A briefing from SPICe is attached at **Annexe A**.

**CEEAC Committee Clerks
February 2023**

SPICe

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

BBC: Impact of the Digital-first Agenda

23 February 2023

Background

The Committee is taking evidence on the proposed rescheduling of some BBC Radio Scotland programmes. The Committee will be discussing these changes in the context of the wider question of the impact of the digital-first agenda on broadcasting output in Scotland.

The Committee last took evidence from the BBC in [September 2022](#) when they looked at the annual report and accounts of the organisation.

On 23 February 2023, evidence will be taken from:

- Professor Tommy Smith OBE, Artistic Director, Scottish National Jazz Orchestra, and Head of Jazz, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
- Finlay MacDonald, Director of Piping, The National Piping Centre
- Professor Simon McKerrell, Professor in Media and Music, Glasgow Caledonian University

The BBC will appear at a subsequent evidence session on 2 March 2023.

This paper covers: the recently proposed schedule changes; the BBC Charter; the BBC's Operating License; and an overview of recent BBC strategy documents.

Proposed Schedule Changes

In January 2023 it was reported that the BBC intended making changes to the BBC Radio Scotland schedule. These changes would include ending three programmes: [Classics Unwrapped](#); [Jazz Nights](#); and [Pipeline](#).

The news was met by protests from many interested parties, including several high profile figures. This has included [an open letter to the BBC](#) written by saxophonist Tommy Smith and signed by violinist Nicola Benedetti, composer Sir James MacMillan, Director of Scottish Opera Alex Reedijk and poet Kathleen Jamie among others.

Three petitions, one for each programme, have been launched on change.org which each have between 6,000 and 10,000 signatories. The concerns raised by the petitions include: promotion of new and existing Scottish artists; cultural heritage; and widening access and participation to niche musical genres.

Parliamentary question [S6W-14512](#) raises similar concerns and asks about Scottish Government action on the issue. The response states that:

“The Scottish Government recognises and shares the music sector’s concern with the decision to reduce the breadth of cultural music programming on Radio Scotland...The Scottish Government will continue to press the BBC to deliver on its commitments to commission high-quality, distinctive Scottish output, including in relation to music.”

In a recent email to the Committee discussing the proposed schedule changes, the BBC noted the following:

- “Pipe music will remain on our schedule – we’ve always said it would – in the exact same slot where *Pipeline* currently exists. We’re asking teams making pipe music programmes for Radio Scotland and Radio nan Gaidheal to collaborate much more closely to ensure we’re working most efficiently. We’ll also continue to cover live events such as the World Pipe Band Championships.”
- “Classical music also remains on the Radio Scotland schedule, but not via *Classics Unwrapped*. Currently, BBC Scotland invests £5million every year in the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, but the Orchestra’s concerts are not heard on BBC Radio Scotland. In future, they will be, ensuring classical music is part of our schedule every week.”
- “Jazz music is provided to our audiences by BBC Radio 2 and BBC Radio 3, and in future, new jazz releases and emerging Scottish artists can be covered in interviews on the *Afternoon Show*, which will also continue to cover news about jazz festivals in Scotland as it has done previously.”

The email also noted that the *Afternoon Show*’s remit has been broadened to cover all arts and culture communities in Scotland in its mainstream daytime slot on weekdays.

BBC Charter

The BBC’s mission is set out in the [Royal Charter](#) and is “to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive

output and services which inform, educate and entertain.” The Charter sets out the BBC’s five purposes. These are:

- To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them
- To support learning for people of all ages
- To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services
- 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
- To reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world.

The fourth of these, to support the creative economy across the UK by representing diverse communities is described fully under article 14 of the Charter. It states that:

“The BBC must ensure that its output and services overall provide a duly accurate and authentic portrayal and representation of the diverse communities of the whole of the United Kingdom...In complying with this article, the BBC must have particular regard to the need to reflect underrepresented communities.”

Operating License

Ofcom regulates the activities of the BBC. It also produces an annual report on the BBC following the publication of the BBC’s annual plan. The most recent was published in [November 2022](#) and referred to 2021-22 financial year.

Ofcom’s report found that overall the performed well in 21-22. It did however have some concerns about the BBC ensuring that reaches the breadth of the population of the UK. It stated—

“A particular issue we raise this year is that we have found audiences in lower socio-economic groups, and disabled audiences, continue to be less satisfied with the BBC. This has been the case for a number of years, and we have also previously highlighted issues with audiences in Scotland and Northern Ireland being less satisfied. Those classified as falling within lower socio-economic groups, in particular those referred to as the D and E groups, represent almost a quarter of the UK population. These audiences consume less BBC content and have consistently rated the BBC lower than other audience groups. We think it is important to understand these audiences better, given the persistent trend we have observed with their satisfaction of the BBC, and the fact that they make up a significant proportion of the UK population. As such, next year, we will launch a thematic review to better understand these audiences, how they consume media and how the BBC connects with them.”

The BBC's operating licence, which came into effect on 1 January 2018, includes regulatory conditions specific to Scotland. This includes:

- distributing its production resources to make sure that it supports the creative industries in the nations and regions
- ensuring that the programming for the nations and regions creates content of interest and of relevance to the people living in that area. This includes incorporating "a wide range of genres."

Among other things, this operating licence also states that in each financial year the BBC must ensure that in respect of BBC Radio Scotland:

- speech content must average at least 60% in core hours, and 100% at the breakfast peak
- there must be at least 50 hours a week of news and current affairs programming
- it has to provide several regional opt-outs each weekday, offering news, sport and information, and some regional opt-out community programming in the evenings
- it must provide content and music of particular relevance to Scotland.

In 2022, an [Ofcom report on the consumption of media in Scotland](#) stated that 18% of adults listened to BBC Radio Scotland each week. This compared to the same data showing that 87% of all adults in Scotland listen to some form of radio each week.

Ofcom [consulted on updating the BBC Operating License last summer](#). This included a proposal to require the "BBC to make important content, including content for the nations and regions and at-risk programming, available for online audiences and make that content easily discoverable". Ofcom also proposed introducing a requirement for "the BBC to set out each year with its Annual Plan the steps it plans to take to provide content of interest and relevance to audiences in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of England."

Ofcom's next steps following this consultation have not yet been set out. The [intention was to for Ofcom to issue](#) its "final decision and updated Licence in early 2023, in time for the new Licence to take effect on 1 April 2023."

BBC Strategy

The [BBC's most recent annual report and accounts](#) cover the year 2021/22 and were published in August 2022.

Annual plan

The annual report looks back to the previous financial year. The BBC also produces an [Annual Plan](#) which sets out the challenges and plans for current year and beyond.

The strategic priorities for the current year are:

- Strengthening impartiality
- Creating more distinctive, high-impact content
- Transforming our digital offer and capability
- Accelerating commercial and global growth
- Delivering reform of the BBC, getting closer to audiences across the UK, and managing the impact of the first year of the new licence fee settlement.

The plan highlights the transition of viewers and listeners from broadcast media to digital media. It notes that while a high proportion of audio listeners still report listening to broadcast radio weekly, time spent streaming music and listening to podcasts is growing rapidly.

The section detailing the planned response to this audience shift to digital highlights the commitment to:

“Continuing to improve BBC Sounds with more effective personalisation, curation and search functionality. We will also trial making some BBC radio programme podcasts available for on-demand listening first on BBC Sounds.”

Digital First Announcement

In May 2022, part way through the current annual plan, Director-General Tim Davie [made a speech to staff](#) that announced the need to build a digital-first BBC in order to keep the organisation relevant and to meet the audience needs of an on-demand age.

He set out a series of intended steps to bring this to fruition including: “reallocating money towards content that works in the on-demand world, making tough choices on traditional distribution, investing more in online services.”

When it comes to radio broadcasts, he stated the following:

“In audio, we will accelerate digital growth, moving more of the 34 million people who listen weekly to linear radio stations to become habitual users of BBC Sounds. We want Sounds to remain one of the top two digital audio services in the UK. To make this happen, we are reorganising all our network radio commissioning to work better as speech and music portfolios, bringing broadcast and on-demand content together. We will simplify some schedules and cancel some shows where linear and on-demand performance is not delivering.”

The announcement also committed to fully delivering the BBC's 'Across The UK' plans and continuing to invest in local and regional programming, but doing so in a way that reshapes these services to be fit for a digital world.

The BBC Across the UK

In March 2021, the BBC published [The BBC Across the UK](#). This set the BBC's plans to move more of its services and output away from London and the South East. It said—

“Our ‘Across the UK’ plan will transform the BBC by making a decisive shift in its footprint. Over the next six years we will recreate the BBC as a genuinely UK-wide organisation with a much stronger presence across the length and breadth of the country. This shift will move the creative and journalistic centre of the BBC away from London to a much more distributed model that moves not just people, but power and decision-making to the UK's Nations and regions. . . . Taken together, these proposals mean the BBC will cumulatively spend at least an extra £700m outside London by 2027/28, generating an additional economic benefit to those parts of the UK of around £850m.”

In Scotland, the BBC has made a range of commitments to improve representation and investment, and to develop new talent.

- The BBC will increase its operations in Glasgow, physically expanding its BBC Studios bases as well as moving the Technology reporting team there.
- The BBC will double the number of nations' co-commissions, including those from Scotland, which appear on UK-wide channels.
- Over the next three years more than a hundred drama and comedy titles will reflect the lives and communities of audiences outside London, of which at least 20 will portray Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.
- As well as renewing its partnership with Screen Scotland the BBC has committed to modernising the BBC/MG ALBA partnership and developing BBC ALBA and BBC Radio nan Gàidheal services to increase their digital impact.

Laura Haley
SPICe Research
20 February 2023

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot