



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

BBC 'Delivering Quality First' Review: BBC
NI Briefing

13 September 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr David Hilditch
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Johnston BBC Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I welcome Peter Johnston, who is the director of BBC Northern Ireland. If you would like to make your statement, members will follow it up with some questions.

Mr Peter Johnston (BBC Northern Ireland): No problem; I am happy to do that. Thank you for inviting me back. I last sat in this chair during the consultation phase of the BBC's Delivering Quality First (DQF) programme, which was about how we would live within the new licence fee settlement in the period to 2016. Since then, there has been a full formal consultation process through the BBC Trust, and that has been completed and approved. The related documents, copies of which we sent to you, have been published.

In the end, not a lot changed for Northern Ireland in the overall plan. You will have been aware that there were some changes during that final period in, for example, the English regions. The out-turn for us, is, I am afraid, at the heart of this, so looking at the crude numbers first, the target is a saving of 15% over the four-year period to 2016. That is our next financial period. Based on the 25% savings that we have made over the past five years, that is obviously a tough target. However, in the context of the wider BBC, the pan-BBC average was about 20%, and for some of the non-content areas, which is the corporate centre, the target saving has been 25% and above. Obviously, it is a tough target, but, equally, it is a bit less than the targets that have been set for some other parts of the organisation.

How are we going to achieve that target? What is our progress against it? As I predicted at the time, a very small amount has been pure content cuts. The main cut, which we have implemented, has been to close Radio Ulster at midnight. The content changes are about 2.5% of the total 15%.

There are other things that we have been doing, are doing and need to look at when it comes to efficiency generally. To bring to life what that really means, I will give an example. I was here on Monday briefing members on the changes to our TV politics output. We previously had two separate TV politics teams producing 'The Politics Show', 'Stormont Today' and 'Hearts and Minds'. We have brought the two teams together to create one team but have maintained the range of the programmes. So, 'Hearts and Minds' has come to an end, but a new programme called 'The View' begins next Thursday, and that is produced by the same combined team. That is an example of an efficiency measure as we have tried to maintain the range and quality of the output and make savings some other way.

The implementation of overhead reductions, such as the removal of management layers, is an ongoing process. The BBC Trust set quite aggressive targets to reduce the number of senior managers. Very recently, we had a change to our HR function, which resulted in a reduction in the level of senior managers. So, that is also ongoing.

As I said, this plan takes us through to 2016. We are also working on longer-term plans for our property and technology so that we can look at what our options might be for longer-term savings in those kinds of things. Other parts of the BBC have used that to their advantage in Salford Quays, etc, by making savings in non-content and non-post areas. Just to bring you right up to speed, we are in phase 1 of that. We have broken it down into two phases, and we are in the first two-year period, which takes us through to 2014. We have already identified nearly half the overall number of post closures. This is a very crude way of looking at it, but I know that this is the sort of thing that, for understandable reasons, people are interested in. The targets equate to 50 to 70 posts closed over the full four-year period. Through voluntary redundancy and various initiatives, we have already identified close to half that number. We have identified roughly 20-plus through the initiatives that I highlighted. Therefore, we are working our way through that process as we speak.

Just to remind members, this plan was about the financial requirements that are needed to live within the means of the licence fee settlement. However, it was also about some other things, so I will update you on some of those. The plan had a reaffirmation of the network supply targets for Northern Ireland. We have seen good progress on the growth curve that I told you about previously and on attaining the 3% level by 2015, but there is more work to do. The drama 'The Fall' was filmed here during the summer, which is the first time for many years that a genuine BBC network drama has been set and filmed in Northern Ireland, resulting in really good benefits. We are getting really good feedback about the quality of the drama, which will be on air in January. It has also brought economic and creative benefits. So, we are very hopeful about that. Some of you may have seen a drama during the summer called 'Line of Duty' on BBC2, which was created by our head of drama. The good news is that that is going to be recommissioned and made in Northern Ireland as well. So, there is more of that.

Growth continues in current affairs. As you will know, we are making more and more 'Panorama' programmes. You will have seen Declan Lawn, Darragh MacIntyre and Mandy McAuley presenting more of that programme, and that is part of that whole plan.

Our normal in-house factual area has 'Sunday Morning Live' and other programmes coming. In the indie sector, there is a range of entertainment and factual programmes, etc. I met with representatives from the indie sector last week, and we talked about where we have got to. We have a new phase of stability and sustainability to get to in that area, but we have seen quite a number of projects, including Green Inc's 'Ask Rhod Gilbert', which is on air at the moment, and 'Secret Fortune' from Wild Rover. Therefore, there has been some progress, but there is always more to do. So, that is always a developing story.

In these challenging times, with post closures, and so forth, it is important that we refresh for the future. We have had a good partnership with Northern Ireland Screen and some other independent companies to run a scheme called 'Aim High' through which we have had 15 production trainees in the BBC, other independent companies and elsewhere going through the system over the past number of months. The intention with that is to protect the future skills base for the industry.

The digital switchover was mentioned in the overall plan. That is coming at us very quickly. A main element in the plan for that was that money was agreed and found to launch BBC1 Northern Ireland in high definition. Therefore, we will see BBC1 Northern Ireland in high definition as part of the digital switchover.

Lastly, at the same time, there is an emphasis on quality and the range of what we do, as well as on protecting those. The challenge is to do that with all the targets. We have a very rich period ahead, with political progress to monitor and follow and with big sporting and cultural events to cover. I suspect that this has probably been our biggest year of events ever. Despite all that, 2013 will see lots of historic anniversaries, etc, for documentary output, some of which, in fact, you will see in the coming weeks.

That is the general context and a quick update and overview of where we have got to. I am happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you. You mentioned a number of positions that will close, and you referred to voluntary redundancies. Are there likely to be compulsory redundancies in that?

Mr Johnston: Given that we have gone through a series of phases of changes over at least the past five years, the stock of potential volunteers is obviously beginning to be exhausted. As we sit today, we have so far managed it pretty well. For some of the individuals involved, I must admit that it is true that, as it gets tighter, some of that choice maybe feels a bit sharper than it did for the early volunteers who wanted to do other things or whatever. So, that happens as the net closes. We still have not fully and formally hit compulsory redundancies, but I think that it is possible that they could come. It has happened in other parts of the BBC. At the moment, we cannot rule it out, but it has not happened yet. We try to avoid it, and we have been pretty good at that. We have a reasonable record of redeployment in other mechanisms to try to avoid redundancies.

The Chairperson: Obviously, the union came to speak to us, and it had concerns. Are you continuing to have conversations with the union?

Mr Johnston: We are. We have regular union meetings and dialogue, particularly with the local representatives. Periodically, we have national level meetings. We always engage the unions as we move through each phase, and we have done that in this period. Today, I have told you about where we have reached agreement with the unions so that we can go to the next stage.

The Chairperson: I am waiting for members to indicate that they want to ask a question. You talked about the network supply for Northern Ireland. Obviously, there is a greater presence there, given the dramas on BBC2. I am aware of that. There is pride when you see BBC Northern Ireland listed at the end of credits. Has a target been set in each year for what can be attained and made here?

Mr Johnston: A target has not been set in each individual year. A staging post was set for 2012, and there is another one for 2015. In fact, 2011 turned out to be above the 2012 target, but my projection is that it is likely to fall a bit again. It moves up and down. The biggest factor in its moving up and down is that dramas require such big spends. If a drama happens to fall in one calendar year rather than another, that can make those differences.

We have made rapid growth towards the first staging target, which is good. I think that the big challenge is to make sure that the next phase creates a stable base. That is what I was talking about with the indie sector. If you look at the full list of what made us reach the target for 2011-12, you will see that there is quite a spread, so we want stability in the next stage. That is what we are working on at the moment.

The Chairperson: Before you concluded your presentation, you mentioned that 2012 was a big year. Hopefully, 2013 will be just as big, with the World Police and Fire Games. I know that many members were gripped by the coverage of the Olympics. Will the BBC be in partnership with the World Police and Fire Games for coverage of the games?

Mr Johnston: We are in discussions at the moment. It is very different, but there are interesting things there. We are talking about opening ceremonies and everything else and about what we can do. We have been in dialogue. We are getting towards the point at which we will agree what we are going to do, but we have not finally got there. It will probably be a matter of weeks before we do that. We are certainly looking at covering it as best we can.

The Chairperson: It would be disappointing if it were merely mentioned in the sports highlights.

Mr Johnston: We are talking about much more than that, but, obviously, we have to agree all the details with the organising body.

The Chairperson: What about the UK City of Culture?

Mr Johnston: We are further ahead with that. We have formally commissioned quite a lot of things. The World Police and Fire Games will be more of an event at the time, if you know what I mean, whereas we can plan ahead with the City of Culture events. We have about six or seven television projects in play. Those include one of the biggest things, which is the opening concert in January. We have already committed and are working with the Culture Company about covering that and making it a big event.

I am also encouraged by most areas of the network's ideas about what is to come. I am expecting a couple of big things. I cannot give you the detail of what will come from the overall BBC network side of things, and I do not wish to tantalise you, but, hopefully, we will be able to announce that during October, when the Culture Company wants to do its next release. We are working away on it, but there is much more to do. Good dialogue is still going on.

Mr D Bradley: Good morning. The licence fee is frozen for the foreseeable future. Is there a time limit?

Mr Johnston: It is to be frozen to 2016, but it is subject to review at any time. That is the plan that we are working to.

Mr D Bradley: Can you give us the breakdown between managerial post closures and production/presentation post closures?

Mr Johnston: Do you mean across the full period?

Mr D Bradley: Phase 1 and then phase 2.

Mr Johnston: These will be estimates, because this is an evolving story. I would say that you are talking about roughly 20% of the overall post closures being at managerial grade levels. Part of the difficulty is that it depends on what you count as managerial level. There is very senior management and then the next tier of management, and I am putting both together. It is a very crude estimate, but it would be of that order. That pool represents something like 5% of the overall workforce.

To answer your question in a slightly different way, an emphasis is being put on non-direct programme-making posts for the savings. You will not be surprised to know — indeed, you would expect — that the vast majority of BBC staff are in programme-making roles. So, there is obviously the dilemma of balancing that.

Mr D Bradley: What is the figure for production/presentation?

Mr Johnston: This will be a bit of an estimate, so let me just work it out for you. As a guesstimate, I would say that you are talking about 40% or 50%. If you would like these figures, we could provide something for you so that we get it right. However, that is giving you a rough idea of the range.

Mr D Bradley: From what you said, I think that you seem to think that phase 1 has gone relatively smoothly.

Mr Johnston: To be fair, if you asked the individuals in the areas that are affected, they would say that it is difficult; I do not deny that. However, relatively speaking, I would say that it has gone smoothly.

Mr D Bradley: The unions would make the point to us that if you cut programme budgets and reduce staff, it would be almost impossible to maintain the quality of output, whether on the screen or online.

Mr Johnston: The difficulty that we have been handed is in how to maintain quality while making the savings. Over the next few years, quality will be monitored via various objective measures, including

audience research, and so forth. A commitment has been made that if it looks as though a problem is emerging, it will be reviewed. The trust requested that.

As I said, we have made 25% savings over the past five years. This year, we have had some of our highest ever quality scores and audience figures in certain areas. Therefore, it is possible. As you can imagine, technology makes a very significant difference to how you do things in this business. That can also be a difficulty for people, as they have to be trained, and so forth. I have heard directly from unions and staff about their concerns, and we always try to listen to those. To be honest, all that I can say is that it is my job to try to maintain the situation. If something goes awry, we have to respond to it.

Mr D Bradley: You mentioned the independent sector. Is that sector growing, staying the same, or reducing in relation to the BBC?

Mr Johnston: The network growth means that there is potential for growth. We have all been living within a reducing total pool of money for local programming. That will have affected the indie sector, as well as the in-house programming. However, quite a lot of the plans that we brought forward really affect in-house BBC staff rather than the indie sector per se. The challenge — or the opportunity, depending on how you look at it — for the indie sector is to convert the network growing target, and, at the same time, the neutral or slightly shrinking local market, into something productive. So far, that has worked for some and not for others. We are looking at how to keep that going.

Mr D Bradley: The posts will be "closed", as you said euphemistically.

Mr Johnston: That is a BBC term, I am afraid.

Mr D Bradley: Do you have any indication of whether those post holders will go into other broadcast areas or into the independent sector?

Mr Johnston: We have had a real mixture. Some people have left to go into academia. Some people have become freelance members of the general market and, therefore, work on a wide range of things, including non-BBC television productions such as 'Game of Thrones'. Others have changed direction completely, and one person has become a landscape gardener. So, there is a real range and mixture. To be fair, quite a few people in many skilled areas take that choice because they then work on a freelance basis and work within a wider set of employers.

Mr D Bradley: You said that, generally, the first phase has gone smoothly, but when you put one set of cuts on top of the other, it is then that they really begin to bite. Might it be the case that phase 2 will be —

Mr Johnston: I agree with that. "Smoothly" is overstating it. I do not want to make it sound as though it is particularly easy, because it is not, particularly, as you just outlined, it is coming on the back of other cuts. If you look at it one way, you will see that we have not had the same direct cut that some parts of the BBC elsewhere have had, as they have closed something, which has a direct effect and is very difficult for individual staff. You are right that the challenge will be in the next period, and we are putting a lot of our effort and energy into looking at whether we can do something more innovative with capital and property that could lead to significant savings that do not affect posts to quite the same degree and could actually improve things through new technology.

Ms McCorley: First, I want to ask more about 'The View', which is replacing 'Hearts and Minds'. I would like to know about its format, what time it will go out and whether it is live or recorded.

Secondly, it has been said, and people have felt at times, that the BBC does not adequately reflect Irish culture. The first paragraph of page 6 of the strategy exemplifies that. You have a direct statement about people who see British culture as theirs and a very convoluted reference to Irish culture and cultural identity. I do not know why you could not have used the same sentence to say that a large section of the population regards itself as Irish. The words used seem to water down the Irishness and give some credence to the view that the BBC does not regard people who have Irish culture and Irish identity equal to people who regard their culture as British.

Mr Johnston: I will start with the second point. If that is the impact of the way that the sentence is written, it is certainly not the intention. The document was collated centrally in London from a lot of

sources. Some of the phrasing is perhaps clumsy, but that was certainly not the intention. Our duty is to reflect the wide range of interests of everyone in Northern Ireland.

I hope that you agree that there are many examples of our reflecting Irish culture, through, for example, Irish-language programming, coverage of GAA and a wide range of documentaries on historical events and other things. You will not be surprised to know that a constant challenge to me, particularly here, comes from the range of and balance in that. I hear complaints from all sides and all points of view about what we could or should be doing in a limited pool. We have to prioritise and balance things. So, our intention is to make sure that we reflect everyone's cultural identities and interests as best we can in the range of what we do. If the reference to Irish culture was written clumsily, that was not the intention.

'The View' starts next Thursday. It will be live on BBC1 at 10.35 pm and will be presented by Mark Carruthers. It will have a similar range of content to 'Hearts and Minds'. The point is that 'Hearts and Minds' was a very successful programme, and it was created at a very different political time. So, we want to maintain some of the core values of 'Hearts and Minds', such as interviewing and analysis. There will also still be some satire, which some of you will be pleased to hear but others might not be. The intention is to have a similar format. Clearly, it was a chance to change things around a bit for a new era. Obviously, I will be interested to hear the feedback as it comes over time, and we will see what the audience response is. It is arguably in a better slot and has been promoted in those terms.

Ms McCorley: Will it be completely live?

Mr Johnston: Yes. We can pre-record items if we need to, but we would prefer it to be live if possible.

The Chairperson: The point about Irish could also be made about the amount of broadcast time that is given to programming for Ulster-Scots culture.

Mr Johnston: Yes. I have heard that point from both sides, and that is the challenge that we face.

Mr Irwin: What do you believe will be the impact for Northern Ireland viewers and listeners as a result of efficiency savings in the wider BBC outside BBC Northern Ireland?

Mr Johnston: In the bigger picture, certain genres were prioritised — drama, for example. Therefore, the story in drama could turn out to be more positive, because it is being protected at the same time as we are being encouraged to make more here. Hopefully, there will be good interest. Generally, there are quite good audiences for drama here.

Sport has been much discussed. In the end, we protected our sports range as best we could, but you will have seen that there are significant changes with Formula 1 and other sports. For sports fans, there will be some impact, although, again, we have just come off the back of amazing figures for the Olympic Games, and there was a great response to the coverage.

Individual elements of individual shows have been cut. People have particularly liked those shows, and it is hard to track through that. For example, the decision by Radio 1 to stop doing what was called the 'Session in the Nations' through which individual programmes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland fed into the network. Those have been ended, but it is trying to use some of the talent and presenters from those programmes in other ways. In fact, Philly Taggart, who presented our version, has been used on Radio 1 more since then in other ways. That has definitely been a difficult one.

I do not think that there are any other impacts that particularly disadvantage here. There is always a big debate on the range between drama and factual programming and entertainment. The audience figures tell you that there is a big appetite for entertainment programming here, so there could be something in that regard that might have an impact. In the end, the plan is to try to maintain a range as best we can within the targets set. I guess that there will be concerns about quality and other things, and we will have to monitor that.

The Chairperson: Was the fact that there was no live coverage of the BBC Proms from Northern Ireland an impact of the cuts, or was that based on a different decision?

Mr Johnston: That was more about technical problems in London than anything else. Scotland and Wales also had problems. They will revisit that to see why that was the case. It is more to do with the format of the show; for example, the conductor getting his timings completely wrong and talking for ever. As far as I am aware, it was more because of those kinds of things. We will do a proper debrief to find out about that. The resourcing of Proms in the Park was as ambitious as ever, and probably more so.

The Chairperson: I ask that given the interest: 52,000 people had applied for tickets. There is a need for that type of entertainment.

Mr Johnston: Indeed, very much so. The problems came on the night in the live link-ups, such as they were. There is other programming. Tomorrow night, a special BBC4 programme will reflect more of the Proms elsewhere than ever before, so there is more output.

Mr Ó hOisín: I will take up what Rosaleen was saying earlier. The fact remains, and has been for some time, that Irish-language broadcasting consists of half an hour a week.

Mr Johnston: On television? Are you including radio?

Mr Ó hOisín: On television. The perception is also that GAA coverage has gone down.

Mr Johnston: I do not know why that is the perception because it has not. We have exactly the same rights that we have always had to cover all Ulster teams as and when they progress.

Mr Ó hOisín: Have you any intention of re-examining those issues, particularly that of Irish-language broadcasting? In my view, there is a serious lack of parity. In the report, you have consolidated Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle. Is there a disparity there, and has there been any fall away from Radio Foyle? I have noticed a reduction in the broadcasting of material from Radio Foyle.

Mr Johnston: I will take your question on the Irish language first. As I said previously, we had no plan to change the level. There were no plans for cuts, particularly when we were looking across the piece. That is reviewed formally, periodically. We are working under an approved plan from the BBC Trust, and that gets reviewed every few years. That is the point at which that issue would be looked at. As you know, we had roughly doubled the amount of television output in Irish over a period to get to an almost weekly presence, as you say. I appreciate that some want more and some want less; that is the dilemma. That will get reviewed at some point, but not yet. It is not part of this process.

By the way, GAA coverage is absolutely as it was. We have been providing live coverage for all the matches that we can cover, based on our agreements regarding rights. In fact, this year, we will do a bit more than last year, because Donegal is in the final, and we will be able to show it. I think that you said to me last year that we were not able to cover the final. We can provide the final this year because there is an Ulster team in it. The coverage has not changed apart from that.

A few years ago, we made changes in Foyle; we made savings, as you know. I told the unions that we had decided that, due to those changes, we were not going to make cuts in Radio Foyle in the period that we are talking about now. We have not, therefore, made any further changes. We continue to monitor the impact of the previous changes, which is probably what you are referring to, but that preceded this exercise. We have not made any additional changes to Foyle in this period.

Mr Swann: Thank you, Peter. I want to talk about balance. I have met you with other individuals twice to criticise the BBC about inadequacies in portraying the unionist and loyalist perspective. Mr Ó hOisín said that the BBC gives half an hour a week to the Irish language. We are critical that the 12 July celebrations are still getting only half an hour to three quarters of an hour of coverage once a year. There is a perception. You talked about an increase in the live coverage of GAA, and that is one of the things that we had raised. You are increasing that because Donegal has got through to the Ulster final.

Mr Johnston: No. To be clear, we have not changed our approach to GAA coverage. We have the rights from the GAA, and in an agreement with RTE particularly, to show any Ulster teams at any stage. We have the whole Ulster championship and, after that, we have the right to show only Ulster teams. That is what we do. That is the agreement that we have with the GAA.

Mr Swann: BBC Northern Ireland will portray more GAA because Donegal is in the final.

Mr Johnston: If Tyrone had reached the final we would do the same; it is not an intentional choice. We do not predict who will win matches; we cover what we are entitled to. That is the formality of our rights. GAA is organised on an all-Ireland basis. We cover the Ulster counties as and when they make progress in the all-Ireland stages. We are not allowed to show any other. That is the nature of the agreement.

Mr Swann: I realise that you are not allowed to show any other but are you under any sort of licence that states that you must show them compulsorily?

Mr Johnston: I suppose that, technically, we could not show it, but it would be a perverse thing to do when we have the rights. It does not cost us, except for some production costs, obviously. The commitment that we make and the clarity that we give to the sports fans who want to watch it is that we will do it. That in itself is complicated, because it is just the Ulster teams. That is how we approach it. It is not, as your question implies, an editorial choice; it is purely a sporting, structural thing.

Mr Swann: I move now to delivering quality. This might fall into what Mr Bradley was saying with regard to the quality of BBC NI's output. You said that you work off your general impression figure.

Mr Johnston: It is one of the figures; there are several.

Mr Swann: You said that it is the highest that you have had since 2004.

Mr Johnston: I was not referring to that one, but, yes, to be clear, the general impression figure is the overall score for the whole BBC. I am talking particularly about BBC Northern Ireland's output in that regard.

Mr Swann: It is just that in the 'Delivering Quality First in Northern Ireland' document, we have general impression figures for BBC Northern Ireland and the BBC as a whole.

Mr Johnston: It is not for BBC Northern Ireland; that is the point. It is for Northern Ireland audiences looking at the whole BBC service, including all the network output.

Mr Swann: There is a significant difference there, in that the general impression of the BBC's quality is much lower.

Mr Johnston: That is right. Basically, in very general terms, that happens the further north you go, as in Scotland, here and the north of England. The BBC tends to be most approved at the total level in the south of England, Wales, etc, where the scores are fairly good. What I am referring to are the specific quality scores for the BBC Northern Ireland programmes, where we hit some of those high points. Actually — I may have mentioned this in the report as well — at the start of this year, 10 of the top 20 most-watched BBC programmes in Northern Ireland were local programmes. The reason for the lower approval scores is because the broader range of the BBC portfolio tends to be less popular and less approved than the UK norm. There are still high scores, but they are slightly lower in Northern Ireland and Scotland than in the whole of the UK. That is the general portfolio. The network supply strategy is partly about trying to address that by having more programmes of interest set here in the wider portfolio of network output.

Mr Swann: However, if you restrict the output of BBC Northern Ireland by having less local production due to the cutbacks, will that score and that general impression not get lower?

Mr Johnston: That is a good question. That is partly why our target was a bit lower than the norm. It was recognised that there was an audience impact and a separate audience demand. That is something that the BBC Trust, for example, monitors regularly and in much more detail than is shown in that overall score. That is partly why we had a slightly lower level of a cut, although I appreciate that you could argue that it could be lower still, but that is the out-turn that came.

Mr McMullan: I want to ask you about the digital switchover. There are still pockets in rural areas that will not see it, and it has been known for quite some time that that is the case. Nothing has been done to try to change that or help the situation. What are you doing about it?

Mr Johnston: I heard you speaking on 'Good Morning Ulster' on that subject this week. I know that you are referring to the glens of Antrim in particular, but there are other areas as well, to be fair.

Mr McMullan: There are indeed.

Mr Johnston: The fundamentals are, in one way, straightforward. Obviously, the topography — the hills and everything else — in the areas that we are talking about has primarily been the difficulty in receiving terrestrial signals. That has always been a problem with analogue signals as well. It should not become particularly worse after the digital switchover. Obviously, many more people should be able to get satellite, and quite a few people do get satellite in some of those areas. There are options, like Freesat or digital satellite. There might still be a few places where even that is difficult, I suspect, for a few individual homes.

There is only one proper solution: build other relay transmitters. However, that is not within the gift of the BBC; it is a governmental issue, through Ofcom and everybody else. What they decided to do in the end, clearly because of finances and the complexity of it, I guess, was to replicate, broadly speaking, the analogue pattern in the digital signal. Therefore, of those holes that existed, some will actually improve, for various other technical reasons, but there are certain areas, such as those that you are referring to, where geography is an issue. It is not something that the BBC can do anything about; we no longer run the transmitters. It is down to governmental agreement, or perhaps local agreements could be struck. I do not know whether there are ways of addressing it in that way. Otherwise, the only real solution for most people is to get satellite — Freesat or Sky.

Mr McMullan: There are areas that cannot even get a signal for satellite.

Mr Johnston: Could they not point towards Scotland to get some signal?

Mr McMullan: The problem is that the transmitters there are different; otherwise that could have worked. The emergency services used to use that signal, but now that has changed. This is for financial profit, but can there not be a programme to upgrade the transmitters instead of putting a series of relay stations in? Lately, there has been talk of using communities to access funding for transmitters. Can the BBC not use its influence along with Ofcom and whoever else to look at that to bring something forward that communities could go for? Perhaps it could be an INTERREG programme to work in partnership with Ofcom and the BBC. I appreciate what you said about the complexity of the policy, but that policy would need to be brought forward to here.

Mr Johnston: The BBC would kick in if and when a decision was made. For example, some of our engineers might be required. However, that would require instruction from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Ofcom or whatever route it comes from. It would require specific local agreement and the engagement of those wider bodies to make something such as that happen. We cannot do anything about it; it is not in our gift.

Mr McMullan: Who would kick-start that process? It cannot be something that the community can do, because we do not have the expertise, knowledge and wherewithal.

Mr Johnston: I would have thought that the starting point to talk about that has to be Ofcom, and I am sure that you have done that. I suspect that it would require an initiative from local politicians to make the case to the appropriate bodies. However, it is not something that we can do anything about, I am afraid.

Mr McMullan: Can you not take it to Ofcom?

Mr Johnston: No, because it is not our responsibility. We could be required to help to fix it if it were agreed. However, we do not have the budget to roll that out.

Mr McMullan: Can you use your influence as a broadcasting authority to relay those fears and problems?

Mr Johnston: I can pass on the difficulty at the next chance I have with Ofcom and DCMS, and I am happy to do so. I understand the difficulty very well. We sent someone to talk to you to get a better handle on the issue. You are not alone. In Wales, for example, there are similar problems.

Mr McMullan: With all due respect, we are not in Wales.

Mr Johnston: I appreciate that.

Mr McMullan: We cannot wait for the off chance of the likes of you having a meeting with Ofcom. Can we not get a clear commitment today that you will speak to Ofcom?

Mr Johnston: I am happy to do that informally. However, it is not, as I say, my responsibility, and I cannot do anything about it. Nevertheless, I can certainly ask the question.

Mr McMullan: That is fine. Thank you.

The Chairperson: I remind you that Ofcom is coming to the Committee on 2 October. You will be able to relay that concern to it directly again.

Mr McMullan: The gentleman is here, and we have to get this all out. I am not saying that everyone is disjointed, but everyone has a specific role. However, they are all part of the problem and all part of the solution.

Mrs Hale: Good morning, Peter. I will touch on issues that my colleagues raised earlier in the meeting. Given that funding for the Ulster Scots broadcast fund is considerably less than funding for the Irish language and that there are concerns that it is not being utilised fully, will that fund be vulnerable to internal economies and perhaps reduced at a later stage in an effort to drive down spending?

Mr Johnston: That fund is outside our control. We have been availing ourselves of it; in fact, several projects have come to air. A programme on the Ulster covenant is being launched tonight, and it has been part-financed by that fund. We are continuing to work in partnership with the fund, and there is no change to that.

Mrs Hale: Are you able to spend the budget?

Mr Johnston: Yes, there is no change to that in the plan. We continue as we are in that regard.

Mrs Hale: Given that we are coming up to the hundredth anniversary of the First World War, I am aware that several regimental associations from Northern Ireland will do battlefield walks through Ypres and elsewhere. Have they approached you or have you approached them to start talks about doing documentaries on that?

Mr Johnston: I am not sure about direct contacts with the people you are talking about, although I am happy to look at that if you want to send me details. However, we have already commissioned programmes to mark the First World War. There will be a great deal of programming on that across the network and locally.

Mr McGimpsey: I will be very brief, Peter, as many of the points have been covered. The first issue relates to where we started with all of this: the fact that your money is much more constrained than it used to be. Coming from a business background, I am well aware that if the money is there, the activity is there; if the money goes up, the activity can go up, and if the money goes down, the activity goes down. Your activity has to go down to match the resources being made available. Everybody is putting a brave face on it, and we will have to wait to see how it pans out, but it is hard to see how you can maintain a quality of service similar to what you have done in the past if you have fewer people to provide it and have less money to fund it.

Secondly, it appears that the weight of local productions is around news and current affairs, which is where the audience appears to be. The task is getting the non-news and current affairs activity up, which would be useful. We are well aware that interest in politics in Northern Ireland appears to be

crashing. I have been told by folk from your organisation and similar organisations that as soon as 'The Politics Show' comes on, people switch over. You are showing a product, and we are producing part of the product, but we are not getting the audience that we anticipate. The issue is how that will pan out. However, you cannot base everything, or most of it, on current affairs and politics as you did once upon a time.

Finally, I heard Irish culture being mentioned. Irish culture is not just Gaelic or the Irish language.

Mr Johnston: Indeed.

Mr McGimpsey: There are more than one million people living in the north-east of Ireland who can be described as Irish men and women and hold themselves to be British, for whom the Gaelic language is not part of their culture and for whom Gaelic games have been a cold house. When you are showing or reflecting Irish culture, as other colleagues have said, Ulster Scots can be part of that, the Ulster covenant celebration can be part of that and the Orange tradition can be very much part of that. There is no contradiction in political terms in being Irish and British, Scottish and British, English and British and Welsh and British. That is the thing that some folks have huge difficulty in grasping. It is making the point that your coverage of Irish culture cannot show only Gaelic games and Irish-language programmes.

Mr Johnston: There are a few points there. My intention was not to oversimplify. One of the more positive things for programme makers in the BBC and the independent companies is that there is no doubt that we have a very rich range of topics, interests and cultures to work with. Therefore, we try to do documentaries on other things. One of the frustrations that I sometimes find is that people who have a passionate interest in a certain issue will often miss the particular programme, portfolio, series or whatever that was for them. However, with regard to rural life, which reflects all sorts of backgrounds, at the moment we have an entertaining programme called 'The Farm Fixer' with Nick Hewer. Part of the idea behind that was to showcase rural life.

News and current affairs programmes are often very popular, and news programmes remain very popular. In the last month for which full figures were reported to my management team, the most watched programme on BBC1 in Northern Ireland was the 'Spotlight' programme on Sean Quinn. That beat 'Eastenders', so current affairs programme on a range of topics are heavily watched in Northern Ireland. You are right that, relatively, figures for pure politics TV shows will often be lower than drama or entertainment shows. However, in Northern Ireland, they are usually more popular than they are in the rest of the UK. Therefore, the switch-off that you describe happens a bit less here. Politics on TV is an important part of our public service remit, and we must recognise that. The challenge for us is to make sure that we make the programmes as accessible, interesting and wide-ranging as we can and occasionally back that up with other documentaries and other approaches. In a couple of weeks, you will see a documentary showing George Mitchell bringing his son back here. We followed that process to see the changes that have happened here through his eyes and his experience of bringing his son here. That brings an interesting and different angle to the bigger story. We need to make programmes like that as well to supplement the pure politics shows.

On the point about activity levels, you are right: if the spend goes up, we can do more, and that is always a preferable position to be in. Therefore, part of the trick is looking at whether, in the network area where there is growth, we can convert the non-news and current affairs aspects into other programming. I do not know how many of you saw the programme with Dan Snow where he found the Spitfire. That was an example of a programme that went out throughout the network as well as locally and which was of local and wider interest. That sort of thing could be a good way to do it.

The Chairperson: Everything has been well covered. Thank you very much.

Mr Johnston: Thank you.