

## Committee Briefing - BBC Radio Foyle efficiency savings

On the 22 October 2009 BBC Northern Ireland announced the 'second phase' of its saving and investment programme to be implemented out throughout 2010/11, involving the 'closure' of approximately 25 to 30 post across the business.

These proposals, which form part of a five-year efficiency savings plan, will include what the BBC refer to as deriving "**greater benefits from a stronger partnership between BBC Radio Foyle and BBC Radio Ulster**", as well as:

- refocusing of drama priorities to secure more productions within Northern Ireland;
- localising of news production by relocating newsgathering to local communities outside of Belfast; and
- taking advantage of new broadcast technology.

To date, the efficiency programme has achieved a total annualised saving of £5.8m. A further £4.8m saving target is to be achieved between now and 2012/13.<sup>i</sup>

The announcement regarding the future of BBC Radio Foyle has been subject to speculation in the local press. The Derry Journal, for example, reported:

*"More than half of BBC Radio Foyle's programmes could be axed and jobs lost under a major cost-cutting drive by BBC Northern Ireland, the 'Journal' has learned. The station's flagship 'News at Once' slot and the popular Sean Coyle and Mark Patterson programmes will be replaced by existing shows on Radio Ulster – if proposals by management in Belfast get the green light".<sup>ii</sup>*

The report adds that up to four jobs could be lost at the station, which could also lose its Saturday Sports and Saturday Club programmes.

The report continues:

*"Under current plans – which follow a two month review of BBC's operation in the North – Radio Foyle will still have two-and-a-half hours of broadcasting in the morning but it's unclear what format those programmes will take. There are also plans for a new hour long evening programme at 6p.m. – traditionally a time when most people are watching the early evening news on television".<sup>iii</sup>*

The review mentioned in the above quote does not appear to be in the public domain at this time, the BBC have been contacted about this but have been unable to reply within the required timeframe.

The Londonderry Sentinel also carried the story, directly quoting a BBC spokesperson, who stated:

*"We're currently talking to staff and unions about the details and potential impact of these proposals. Until we have arrived at an agreed plan we are unable to release any further information".<sup>iv</sup>*

In the same report an NUJ spokesperson was quoted as saying:

*“These proposals are still the subject of negotiations. The NUJ is opposed to any cuts to jobs or to the service provided to the licence fee payers of Derry”.<sup>v</sup>*

Justifying the wider efficiency programme BBC Northern Ireland stated:

*“Like any other business – financial constraints have impacted on the BBC and we are again challenged to deliver value for money while remaining focused on delivering quality content to audiences. Inevitably that will bring additional challenges and some difficult choices but we remain committed to a programme of retraining and redeploying our staff where we can.”<sup>vi</sup>*

The planned efficiencies and accompanying press coverage has occurred at approximately the same time as other press has reports announcing that *“more listeners [are] tuning in to local radio”*.<sup>vii</sup> The press referred to the latest Radio Joint Audience Research (RAJAR) quarterly report (September 2009) which notes a combined<sup>viii</sup> BBC Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle listenership of 554,000 per week.<sup>ix</sup> The commercial stations Downtown and U105 had 250,000 and 142,000 listeners per week respectively.<sup>x</sup> The Newsletter, which carried a story on the figures, reported that Radio Foyle had around 28,800 weekly listeners in the same period.<sup>xi</sup> RAJAR have questioned the accuracy and publication of this figure.<sup>xii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> BBC – Press Office *BBC Northern Ireland announces second phase efficiency and reinvestment proposals* 22 October 2009 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/category/northern\\_ireland\\_index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/category/northern_ireland_index.shtml) (accessed 03/11/09)

<sup>ii</sup> The Derry Journal *Axe hangs over BBC Radio Foyle* 03 October 2009 <http://www.derryjournal.com/journal/Axe-hangs-over-BBC-Radio.5781799.jp> (accessed 03/11/09)

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> The Londonderry Sentinel *Fears grow over BBC cuts* 30 October 2009 <http://www.londonderrysentinel.co.uk/news/Fears-grow-over-BBC-cuts.5782365.jp> (accessed 03/11/09)

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>vi</sup> BBC – Press Office *BBC Northern Ireland announces second phase efficiency and reinvestment proposals* 22 October 2009 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/category/northern\\_ireland\\_index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/category/northern_ireland_index.shtml) (accessed 03/11/09)

<sup>vii</sup> The Newsletter *More listener tuning to local radio* 30 October 2009 <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/business/More-listeners-tuning-in-to.5781228.jp> (accessed 03/11/09)

<sup>viii</sup> Specific figures for Radio Foyle are not recorded as the station is defined as an ‘opt-out’ service

<sup>ix</sup> Radio Joint Audience *Research Listening Figures - Quarterly Listening* September 2009 [http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly\\_listening.php](http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly_listening.php) (accessed 04/11/09)

<sup>x</sup> Radio Joint Audience *Research Listening Figures - Quarterly Listening* September 2009 [http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly\\_listening.php](http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly_listening.php) (accessed 04/11/09)

<sup>xi</sup> The Newsletter *More listener tuning to local radio* 3 November 2009 <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/business/More-listeners-tuning-in-to.5781228.jp> (accessed 03/11/09)

<sup>xii</sup> Communication with RAJAR 4 November 2009