

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the BBC, HC 382

Thursday 1 December 2022

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Julian Knight (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Dr Rupa Huq; Simon Jupp; John Nicolson; Jane Stevenson; Giles Watling.

Questions 142 - 234

Witnesses

I: Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director of Nations, BBC, and Jason Horton, Director of England, BBC.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rhodri Talfan Davies and Jason Horton.

Q142 **Chair:** This is the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and this is our hearing into the unprecedented cuts to BBC local radio. We are joined by two of the directors responsible for this area, Rhodri Talfan Davies, BBC Director of Nations, and Jason Horton, acting Director of BBC England. Mr Talfan Davies and Mr Horton, thank you very much for joining us this morning. Before we begin, some members will wish to declare interests.

Simon Jupp: I was a former BBC employee for seven years. I still receive royalties from the BBC occasionally—not much, but there is something.

Chair: I used to work for the BBC back in the mists of time.

John Nicolson: I am a former BBC reporter and news anchor.

Chair: Thank you very much. Our first questions today will come from Simon Jupp.

Q143 **Simon Jupp:** How can local radio be local when it is regional?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: It is probably worth stepping back. The basic objective of the changes that we have announced is to strengthen our online news services, and that requires a level of reprioritisation of spend within our local services in England. We have looked at the audience data on local radio and focused our spend where it makes the biggest difference to audiences.

As you will know, the proposition is that we will remain uniquely local in line with the current model of 39 stations between 6.00 am and 2.00 pm, but we will do some sharing across county boundaries at other times of the day. For example, in the south-west Devon and Cornwall will be sharing an afternoon programme.

We have plenty of good examples of where those programmes can work very successfully, and it is worth bearing in mind that we are still talking about having 18 local programmes in the afternoon. Admittedly, it is not 39 but we will still have far more local programmes in the afternoon than, for example, we have local television news programmes in England at 6.30 in the evening.

I also underline the commitment to local news bulletins across the day. Even where we are sharing across county boundaries in the afternoon, the bulletin services and live sport will continue to be local.

Q144 **Simon Jupp:** How have you set how these regional programmes will look? You mentioned Devon and Cornwall but in the south-east it will be Sussex, Surrey, Kent and London. That is a huge region. How did you



come to that conclusion?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I will bring Jason in on this as well. We look at a number of factors: audience performance; to some extent the footprint of local television, because viewers and listeners are familiar with those types of combinations; and regional identity. Look at Yorkshire, for example. Bringing Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield together in the afternoon to provide a Yorkshire programme fits with a sense—

Chair: I am sorry, but the question was much more pertinent in that Mr Jupp was referring to a very large area indeed in the south-east and not, frankly, to Yorkshire. We could see, perhaps, the case for Yorkshire, but we are talking about a huge swathe of the population here. Could you please address that point rather than trying to deflect?

Jason Horton: I think it is important to point out that for most of the output, if there is sharing across the south-east of England, there will be Kent, Sussex and Surrey. It would come to Kent, Sussex, Surrey and London only when we get to programming in the mid-evening and weekend breakfast. What is very important about the evenings in particular is that London would almost uniquely, I think, continue to have sport in the evenings, which would mean that Kent, Sussex and Surrey would continue to have local programming.

Q145 **Simon Jupp:** But not every night. If I may, how is it relevant for someone in Bognor Regis to hear that the District Line is down?

Jason Horton: The bottom line is that the programming that we will be producing in that period will not only concentrate on things such as traffic and travel news. There will be great local programming provided by fantastic broadcasters and brilliant production teams that will make that programme relevant. Some of our best programming across local radio at the moment is already across county boundaries.

Q146 **Simon Jupp:** I understand what you are saying, but of course an awful lot of the new regions you have created are based on old BBC regions, for example BBC South, so programmes on Radio Solent will be shared with Berkshire and Oxford. What has Oxford got to do with Dorset, which is also covered by Radio Solent? It is an old BBC region. It is old, outdated thinking. Oxfordshire has much more to do with Northamptonshire, for example. Why have you not thought in a bit more modern way about how these geographical networks are put together?

Jason Horton: That is a fair question, but I would push back very gently and say that you could look at a map of England and begin to talk about the fact that Oxfordshire neighbours Wiltshire but it also neighbours Berkshire. Oxfordshire and Berkshire, with the Thames Valley, have always had that fit governmentally, with police forces and the way in which civil services connect the two counties. The Thames Valley also often has and still does fit with Hampshire, for example.



These are tough choices for us and some of those regions are big. We are looking at the historical element of the regional television news programmes, where we continue to serve an audience across all of those areas, but equally we will ensure that when we are looking at the sharing, if there is a community of interest that straddles the boundaries that we have set out in our proposals, we will look to share in a different way.

Q147 Simon Jupp: One thing I am slightly confused about is that it always feels to me, and to other people, that the BBC often cuts the services closest to communities that pay for it via the licence fee, so local radio or television. It was not long ago that we were having a debate about the "Sunday Politics" programme, and we have already seen cuts to other regional TV programmes. Why is that the case? Why does it seem to be the case across the BBC that it is local stuff that is cut first when there are huge audiences for local television and for some BBC local radio stations?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I will answer that directly, because that is not the case. If you look at the overall BBC position over the last 10 years, we have lost about 30% of our income in real terms. The vast majority of divisions and departments within the BBC have lost about 30% in the real value of their spending. In local services in England, the figure is closer to 15%. I appreciate it can feel like that because changes are happening across the BBC, but compared to the big network departments within the BBC, local services have been less affected financially than those other areas.

The other point I will make—if I may refer back to the Chair's opening remarks—is that this is not a cuts story for local services. This is about a rebalancing of spend, about 10% of our local spend in England from local radio to strengthening our news coverage in every local centre in England and an investment in investigative journalism.

Q148 Simon Jupp: It is a cut to audio services, though. It is a cut to BBC local radio. I want to focus on one particular issue that I have with these changes, and that is weekend programming.

Having no local programming at the weekend—what I mean by local is county-focused local programming—outside of sport is drastic. If you look at RAJAR figures, and I am sure you have both looked at RAJAR graphs, sometimes the peak of the week for a radio station is Saturday morning between 10 and 12. Why will that be networked now? Isn't there an argument, if you have had feedback from loads of people about these changes, to reinstate local programming—at least one local programme a day at the weekend?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: The vast majority of stations, as you have already pointed out, will have live sport on Saturday and Sunday, which is fully live and stays live, and those are typically the peaks that we see in the weekend schedules. We will also maintain all our local bulletins up



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until 2 pm as we do now across all our local stations. It is also the case, if you look across the 39 stations, that our performance on Saturday and Sunday and the level of audience that we bring in is significantly lower than we see on weekdays. Again, we can debate, obviously, the particular—

Q149 Simon Jupp: Is this effectively managing decline? We know local radio audience numbers have gone down, and they are not going to go up now with these changes, are they?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: This is a strategy to have a bigger impact locally and if we continue—

Simon Jupp: Not via local radio.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: If we continue to spend 90% of our local funding on local radio and on the 6.30 local news programmes, we will inevitably, because of the shape of the marketplace, be managing decline. By investing significantly in strengthening our local online services in news, audio and sport, there is a route to driving even bigger impact with local audiences.

I understand that the framing of this Committee is around the changes to local radio. The whole thrust of the strategy that we have announced is about also connecting with a significant number of people, about 85% of the population in each local area, who are not local radio users. Our obligation is to think about all our licence fee payers in local areas, and right now 90% of our funding is pumped into local radio and the 6.30 programme.

Q150 Simon Jupp: As you well know, commercial local radio barely exists any more. We used to have loads of local radio stations up and down the country, hard-fought licences won by local authorities. They have largely all disappeared. There is a handful of small independent commercial stations left. BBC local radio is unique. It can do stuff that other commercial competitors, such as Heart, simply cannot do but you are ripping the heart out of it, essentially, by doing these changes.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I do not accept that premise. We are keeping 39 local stations across England. We are keeping local bases of at least 25 staff in each of our local bases. We are strengthening the size of our local news teams. We are investing in investigative journalism across 22 of our local bases. This is fundamentally not about a reduction of service. It is about making sure that the portfolio of local services that we deliver across television, radio and online keeps pace with the way audiences are changing.

I do not want to use a lot of data, but let me just give one piece of data. If you look at the average 65 to 75-year-old in England today, they rely on online more for news than they do on radio. That is the level of shift. It is not a market shift. It is an audience shift and we have to make sure we prioritise our money in a way that delivers maximum value to local



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audiences. I know it is incredibly difficult for colleagues, but unless we get that rebalancing right, we will drift to the margins of our community lives.

Q151 Simon Jupp: I am glad you said that it is difficult for colleagues. Morale in BBC Radio is at rock bottom right now because of the redundancy notices that have been given to lots of hardworking presenters, producers, journalists and everything else. You sound pretty set on this policy, on these changes, and I have seen the timescales for these changes. Is there any room for manoeuvre?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We have said, and we mean it, that we are listening to the feedback we are getting.

Q152 Simon Jupp: Is the feedback good?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: The feedback varies. There are those who would like to protect every hour of local radio. There are those who say they absolutely understand the need to improve online but does it have to be at the expense of radio. Then we get a lot of feedback—and we have touched on this already—about the specific pairing of stations and whether we have got it right there. We are looking at all of that. Do I think the exact model we have announced will be the model that we implement? I doubt it, because you live and you learn—

Q153 Simon Jupp: That is even more uncertainty for staff, though, isn't it?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I suspect the biggest area of change will potentially be around specific pairings. I don't think that creates more uncertainty.

Q154 Simon Jupp: If I once again pitch my idea of local programming at the weekend, outside of sport, because not everyone wants to listen to regional broadcasting at the weekend and there is still an audience on Saturday and Sunday mornings, is that something you would consider?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Our challenge is that there isn't any more money. If we were to look, let's say, at a weekend mid-morning programme, we would need to work through where in our local budgets that would come from, and it is a significantly smaller audience than we see on weekdays. Forgive me for going on about Devon and Cornwall, but they remain paired on weekend mornings, so it is no different from the afternoon experience on weekdays.

Q155 Simon Jupp: Going back to your point about regions, if you are looking at how these regions can double up and work together, when do you think you will have an idea of what changes you could make to make it more relevant for people who live in Northamptonshire to have a programme that sits within their local area, or that sits within what they consider to be a region?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: As you will be aware, we are currently going through a consultation with staff, and that is a process that we undertake



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jointly with the trade unions. We will need to clarify any detailed changes to the plans in the coming weeks, and then the implementation of the plan that begins in January and rolls through, because of the sheer scale—we are talking about 2,220 staff—will take about nine to 12 months to roll through.

Specifically to your point, if we were to make any adaptation to the programme share, we would need to clarify that probably in the next two or three weeks.

Q156 Simon Jupp: Would you be willing to come before the Committee again once you have come out with a different set of proposals to discuss them with us?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I am very happy to attend the Committee at any point. I don't think there will be a significant change in the proposal. I think that we are looking at some aspects of the programme shares at the moment.

Jason Horton: It is very important to point out that we are consulting with our staff at the moment and we are continuing to do that. That will continue until at least Christmas. I think Rhodri is absolutely right in saying that we need to take all of that feedback and the feedback from audiences and then we will come back in the new year. We have very active discussions going on internally about programme sharing. I don't think that we have a monopoly on the best ideas, and the people who work in the localities do. We have already started to talk about some of the areas that you have mentioned as well, and I think we can potentially make those proposals better.

Q157 Chair: What problems have you identified that lead you to potentially evolve your proposals?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: It is not problems; it is just that in developing proposals that affect people's jobs, you can only open the discussion up to a quite limited number of people before you share them fully with staff, and it is important that staff hear the proposals at an early stage. You then get significant engagement from councils and from elected representatives, and you listen. The BBC spends an awful lot of time listening to feedback. It is not that there is a problem. It may be that in developing the 18 shared programmes in the afternoon, we have not quite got those combinations right. If we have got them wrong, we will put them right.

Q158 Chair: You don't envisage any increase in the number 18, just the configuration of the sharing?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: No, I don't. I don't envisage moving beyond the 18 in the afternoon.

Q159 Chair: Remind me how much has been saved in radio.



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Rhodri Talfan Davies: In radio, the overall reduction in the audio budget of England is around £7 million. It is slightly complicated, Chair, if I can just explain. Some of the money we are spending in audio will move into areas such as podcasting and developing BBC Sounds, so it stays in audio but it is no longer pointed at live. The overall reduction in the audio budget is around £7 million out of a budget of around £78 million today.

Q160 **Chair:** There is some reallocation beyond that £7 million basically to BBC Sounds? To clarify, therefore, how much is the actual money that is being moved out of local radio? How much is that money, in the traditional sense of local radio?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: In the traditional sense of local radio, in live, it is about £11 million, and about £4 million of that is being reinvested in Sounds and podcasting.

Q161 **Chair:** You have made a big play about how you are looking to effectively boost your online offering. Is there any consideration—I think Simon Jupp touched on this to a degree—that commercial radio at the moment is not meeting the needs of individuals locally, particularly when it comes to journalism and important local matters? You will be withdrawing an element of BBC presence—£7 million net—and investing that in online offerings but the online offering is quite well catered for commercially. Why do you think you should be taking money from an area that is not catered for commercially to an area which is catered for commercially?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Can I make a couple of points, Chair? First, we are investing more money in local journalism. There is clearly some upset and concern about a reduction in live programming, but in news content—those parts that play the biggest part in our democratic role—we are increasing our funding.

Q162 **Chair:** You are increasing your funding in online.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: No; let us be clear. The investigative teams—

Chair: They all work across online and radio.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Yes, but they will benefit all our local radio stations. The investment in additional journalists in all our local bases will benefit our audio services. The whole ethos of what we are doing is that everywhere we invest money, it should enrich everything that we do locally. We have historically had an approach to current affairs, which is that we will make current affairs and we will produce half-hour programmes for BBC One, and that is our commitment to current affairs. I think that is outdated. We need investigative teams based across 22 locations in England that can deliver outstanding investigations that can sit on any platform. I could make the case that the £19 million reprioritisation will all actually benefit local radio, but if you are asking me purely where the budgets sit, what I mean by that is that the local online investment will. Does that make sense?



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- Q163 **Chair:** I fail to see how there is a benefit to local radio from cutting down programmes for half the day, basically, and merging them. However, I have your point that there is a degree of cross-fertilisation from online and that has been the case for quite a few years, and you are obviously looking to increase that.

That still does not take away from my initial question, which is: why is it that you are effectively removing resources from an area that is poorly resourced in the commercial sector to one that is well resourced in the commercial sector, as in local journalism?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We have a responsibility under our obligations of the charter to serve local communities. If those local communities are more and more turning to online services, I believe that we need to deliver a trusted news and information service online.

- Q164 **Chair:** Even if it means effectively disenfranchising a large proportion of BBC listenership by reducing the services that they receive from local radio?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: If I may, Chair, I don't accept the idea that we are disenfranchising listeners. If you look at the areas that we are protecting—39 breakfast programmes, 39 mid-morning programmes, all our live sports programming—that is output that represents about 70% to 80% of the reach of our local radio services week in, week out. We are deliberately making changes that minimise the impact on radio listeners.

We have plenty of examples. I was listening last night to the BBC Introducing programme from the East Midlands, which spans a number of local radio stations. It is an excellent programme and is done really well. There are plenty of good examples with the right presenters and the right creative teams where you can deliver rooted programming without necessarily having to stay within specific county boundaries. It is a responsibility on us to deliver it, but I believe we can do that and at the same time strengthen our online delivery.

- Q165 **Jane Stevenson:** I want to talk about impact and people who have been impacted by this. We know older people are more likely to be listeners to local radio services. How are you mitigating the loss of their service?

Jason Horton: You are absolutely right that we have always tended to cater for older and less affluent individuals with our local radio output, and to an extent in regional television news as well. We think that we will be able to continue to cater for those audiences on both local radio and in the digital space. We know from Ofcom's research just this year that 66% of the population is now accessing their news online. That is not to say that everybody will—

Jane Stevenson: 66% of what age group?

Jason Horton: 66% of the adult population is accessing news online. The reality for us is that we know that there are older audiences that



simply will not turn to digital sources of information. We know that there are those who cannot afford access to digital, and in some rural areas there are broadband issues as well. Underpinning everything we are doing is a comprehensive local radio service that will absolutely continue to serve that audience.

Companionship is so important. I have spent my entire career in BBC local broadcasting, and I understand how we got older listeners in particular, those who were separated from relatives, through the pandemic. If a pandemic were ever to happen again—let's hope that really is not the case—our services would still be there from 6 o'clock in the morning until the time that individuals go to bed. Yes, we will be creating content that goes across boundaries, but we will still be able to provide the companionship, the news, the information and the entertainment.

Q166 Jane Stevenson: To an older person who is isolated in their home—Mr Davies mentioned an average 65 to 75-year-old—if you are not the average, you are not able to go online. It is not as if you can make a different choice. If you are disconnected from the internet and that is not where you are—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: The key thing is that we are not cutting any services away. We will continue to provide local companionship from 6.00 am until 10.00 pm. The connection with the audience that you describe will still be there. The fact that some areas will be part of a larger locality does not mean that we cannot provide outstanding companionship. If you think about what we have done with Make a Difference, which is about connecting vulnerable people with people who can help in the community, if you think about our commitment to music through BBC Introducing, we can maintain all those parts of the service. The compromise—we can only be candid, there is a compromise here—if we are going to invest in online is that we need larger localities at those times of the day when we have smaller audiences.

Q167 Jane Stevenson: You are throwing older people under a bus, because online is disproportionately not going to benefit older people.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Let me again go through the numbers: 80% of our funding after these changes will continue to be directed at local radio and the local television news bulletins at 6.30 pm. This is a movement of 10% of our funding of local services in England towards online delivery. The vast majority of our funding will continue to underpin services that disproportionately service and connect with older audiences.

Q168 Jane Stevenson: Many older people—people are living longer and longer and longer—are not people who have grown up online. They are not people who are comfortable online, and they may not be able to access a lot of the services that you are now investing a lot more money in. How have you consulted older people? What are they telling you?



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Rhodri Talfan Davies: Over the last few weeks, Jason and I have had representations from all sorts of customer groups, including charities that represent older people, and the key thing that we hear consistently in those messages is companionship. Local radio plays a news and information role and that remains vital, but do not forget that companionship is a vital part of what we do. Radio 2 can do companionship. There are lots of ways of delivering companionship. I do not think the fact that we might have two or three counties sharing fundamentally alters our ability, with the right presenter, to connect and provide companionship to older audiences. The key point here is that our broadcast hours are not reducing, so our ability to be there and connected with that audience will remain unchanged.

Q169 **Jane Stevenson:** But that local news—as my colleague said, you don’t want travel news from way outside your area—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Forgive me, but let’s not forget that the vast majority of our news and information service happens during the day, and the vast majority of the listening to that happens between 6.00 am and 2.00 pm on weekdays. That is all protected. Our new bulletins will remain entirely local across the day. Our afternoon programmes and evening programmes tend to be lighter magazine formats, entertainment and music. They are not news and information-heavy. That type of service will remain. We are not taking programmes off the air. It is just that we are sharing across boundaries.

Q170 **Jane Stevenson:** It may have been in the papers, but how have you sought people’s opinions?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Two things. First, we regularly research with audiences, local audiences across England—

Jane Stevenson: Online?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: No, through market research companies. We commission research from existing local radio listeners to understand what drives their passion for local radio, and you typically get a hierarchy of what they critically want out of a local radio service. Local voices, local personalities, good company, local news and information, weather and travel all feature in that. In shaping these proposals, we have been very mindful of the priorities that audiences set when we ask them what they most value from their local service.

Q171 **Jane Stevenson:** It is of no concern to you that some older people will feel that they are losing out at the expense of internet investment?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I understand the concern. Our responsibility—what Jason and I are held accountable for—is to make sure that the changes are done in a sensitive way that means that the older, more vulnerable audiences that you have just described continue to feel that they are getting a great rooted service from the BBC.



Q172 **Jane Stevenson:** I had an older Irish community contact me because of the way a programme that they listen to was broadcast, and they could not access it in the same way. Do you have any concerns about the impact of losing certain minority channels of broadcasts?

Jason Horton: Again, that is a fair point, and we have had quite a lot of feedback from audiences across the country. What we have said about community programming, which is how we refer to it, is that we will maintain the spend that we have on those programmes, but in the same way as we need to look at how our audiences are accessing those programmes and how we can get those programmes to more people, we will have an active conversation with the programme presenters and producers and work with them on our proposals.

I would not want us to be in a situation where we were disenfranchising any of our listeners, and there will have to be a balance between our linear output and our on-demand output. Again, much like our news provision, we want to make sure that our content is available to the vast majority of people via our linear services, but we have to become more active and provide a service on demand as well.

For those community programmes, we have asked two senior people within BBC local radio to work with our community presenters and producers. We will come up with recommendations and proposals and we will work with them to look at exactly what the format of that programming and content will be in the future.

Q173 **Jane Stevenson:** When will you have the results of that?

Jason Horton: The two individuals are starting work on it next week. There is a short time until Christmas now, in business terms at least, so we will come back in January on that.

Q174 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I will be continuing on the same theme. I think that there is a myth that everyone listens in a non-linear fashion now. We had Martin Lewis in that same chair earlier this week, and he said he would always rather go for an ITV show where he can have millions of people sitting down in real time watching it than go on Netflix or something, where the audience is much more diffuse. I refute that suddenly everyone has gone non-linear and the old cathode ray tube, wireless or whatever doesn't function any more.

I want to ask you further on the point about minority audiences. Would you accept—this is in an editorial in *The Voice* newspaper today—that the corporation's proposed budget cuts disproportionately hit black and Asian audiences and journalists, because both are being effectively axed here?

Jason Horton: No.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: No, I don't think there is any evidence for that. I think we have been very clear that we want to maintain our commitment to community programming. In making the changes across local radio,



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we have commitments to quality considerations as we make those changes. I do not see any evidence whatsoever that there will be any disproportionate impact on any community group or any ethnic group.

Q175 Dr Rupa Huq: They could be seen as niche, but we have all had a lot of e-mails from people, including journalists, who do phone-in shows of an evening on the weekends and they know who the regular callers are. I have heard from people who listen to those, who love listening to whoever going on about the Clapham omnibus. You are not going to get that if 39 local shows are merged into six amorphous blob regions, as Simon Jupp was pointing out, with this huge, huge—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We are not merging into six regions. I understand why individual presenters and colleagues are reaching out to elected Members, given the nature of the proposals that are on the table. But to echo what Jason Horton said, we are committed to maintaining our community programming. That does not mean it will not change, because all programming evolves, but we are committed to maintaining it.

The biggest shift that I have seen on local radio in the last two or three years is to make sure that the diverse communities and different ethnic minority issues are reflected across our output. When I worked in local radio 15 or 20 years ago, those types of programmes sat hermetically sealed at 7 or 8 in the evening and did not—

Dr Rupa Huq: They have a huge followership. My mum used to love them. She used to keep the radio on. There was an Asian show and there was one called “Rice and Peas” for Caribbean people afterwards, and she would keep the radio on. She was getting quite into reggae, which was unusual for her demographic.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I think they are important, but I think it is equally important—

Dr Rupa Huq: They are loved by millions of people across the country. As Jane was pointing out, they may be of an older demographic, but—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Just to echo again, we do not propose to reduce our commitment to community programming.

Q176 Dr Rupa Huq: Okay, so the rumours that all these shows are going to be merged into a single programme available on BBC Sounds—can you refute that?

Jason Horton: I deny that—not only refute it, but deny it. What would be the benefit for the BBC in doing that? I cannot understand quite how that rumour developed, because how could you begin to merge all of those programmes into a single podcast?

I am not saying there will not be podcasts or on-demand content into the future, but we have to recognise that we uniquely are already connecting with audiences that other broadcasters don’t. We want to maintain that.



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What we are saying is: can we think about how we do that in a more effective way, given the fact that we are in the 21st century and people have more access to technology, yet still maintain that core linear base.

Rhodri is right about the representation of those programmes and that content across our airwaves, but what I am really proud of in the last couple of years across local radio is how people from those communities are now presenting some of our mainstream programming and they are doing a fantastic job. I listen to London, and I hear Salma on "Breakfast" or I listen to WM and I hear Rakeem on "Breakfast". These are people who were not presenting those programmes a year ago.

I think it is really important that it is not just within the community programmes that we provide at certain points of the week that those communities are represented, but that those communities are represented and portrayed across all of our output.

Q177 Dr Rupa Huq: Can you give us a cast iron guarantee that these black and Asian shows will continue in their current format and will not be shunted off to BBC Sounds?

Jason Horton: No, I didn't say that, Dr Huq. What I said was that there is going to be no single podcast reflecting all of those community programmes.

Q178 Dr Rupa Huq: How many will there be? Leicester, Lancashire, London—they all need their respective shows.

Jason Horton: Sure. That is why we are pulling together the group of presenters and producers to talk about how we can best develop that output across both linear and on-demand services, and that work starts next week.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: To be really clear, we will maintain our commitment to and investment in community programming, but what I cannot give you, because everything changes all the time, is that the exact way that we currently deliver will be maintained into the future. No broadcaster ever stands still, and programming evolves. We will talk to our programme teams and then we will make a decision as to what the right shape should be.

Q179 Dr Rupa Huq: I think people listening in will want to see more clarity about how meaningful that commitment is and what are the terms of it, because you are just saying it will be there.

Jason Horton: I think what is really important is that we talk this through with our teams first. We are going to do that, and then we will come back.

Q180 Dr Rupa Huq: There is a case for increasing these sorts of things. You mentioned talent streams of people coming through for the future. The Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity did a report last year called



"Diversity of Senior Leaders in BBC Radio News". It was a damning indictment of ethnic representation in the corporation: 6% local BBC leadership within and 8% across the entirety of news and current affairs. How are these proposed cuts going to help with that?

Jason Horton: We have much further to go with leadership at a senior leader level and at editor level, but we are making important strides in that direction. We have vacancies for 11 senior editorial jobs across BBC local services at the moment. I would very much want to see the diversity of those leaders change, and for us to be more representative around all of our leadership tables from all of the communities that we serve.

Going back to your question about communities and how we serve them and making sure that the representation is right, we have run several New Voices schemes across the last few years to make sure that we get talent from all of the communities that we serve into both on-air and off-air positions. We run a huge apprenticeship scheme across the whole of local services where, again, we are absolutely trying to attract diversity in all of its forms—ethnicity, socioeconomic and so on—and we have a good pipeline of people from a cross-section of society. We remain committed to things such as New Voices, where it is running at the moment, and also to the apprenticeship scheme.

Q181 **Dr Rupa Huq:** There is a very powerful letter by the Black Equity Organisation. I don't know if it has reached your desk yet.

Jason Horton: Yes, we have seen it.

Dr Rupa Huq: It is signed by an impressive array of people, not just the normal lords, ladies and gentlemen but international figures such as David Harewood and Adrian Lester. They point out that black people do not have a dedicated national broadcast channel as do others, like the Bengali channels and so on that you can get on satellite. That is 3.2 million people being disenfranchised.

It says in clause 14 of your own charter that you are going to reflect the diverse communities of the whole of the United Kingdom and ensure output meets the diverse communities of the UK. It feels like this butchery is not doing that at all.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Which butchery?

Dr Rupa Huq: The fact that you are going to this amorphous blob with nothing at the weekends.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: But we are not, are we?

Jason Horton: No.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I think we have tried to explain—

Dr Rupa Huq: You have not been clear on what is happening. It is



consulting—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I have been clear that our commitment to community programming and the investment we put into community programming—

Dr Rupa Huq: You can't say it is all going to BBC Sounds. I have tried to say—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We will continue to maintain our investment in community programming on local radio, but we have opportunities with BBC Sounds to also reach different audiences that come to our online services from black and Asian groups, and we should take those opportunities.

You are asking for very specific programme plans. We will share those with staff first, once we have made the right editorial decisions. I understand the frustration of some staff because they want specifics on particular programme proposals but clearly, when you are making a strategic change at this level, you need to set out the overarching plan first before you can get into programme-by-programme decisions on individual stations.

Q182 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I hope you can address the fact that for the second year in a row there is not a single black person employed in a leadership role in the BBC production sector.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I am sorry, but I do not understand that.

Dr Rupa Huq: It is from your own report: not a single black person employed in a leadership role in the BBC's production sector.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: That is just not true.

Dr Rupa Huq: I can give you the link.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We will look at that, but just to be clear, across the BBC today—

Q183 **Dr Rupa Huq:** On your board, how many are there?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: From black and Asian backgrounds? I will come back to you. I think there are two.

Q184 **Dr Rupa Huq:** On a board of how many?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I think 12, but let me come back to you in writing on that.

Q185 **Dr Rupa Huq:** The last thing I wanted to ask you about is your own figures of audience satisfaction. Your own figures show that only 47% of BAME audiences think the BBC is effective at reflecting people like them and 27% think the broadcaster is not representing them well. I think the other side of this—I would hope to see these figures improve massively,



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and I think by diluting these shows, it is going to go the other way.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: If you look across BBC services over the last four or five years, there has been an absolute step change in our representation of black and Asian communities across our output. In BBC drama today, go on to iPlayer and look at the breadth of that coverage and the role of black and Asian actors across that portfolio and slate; there has been a huge advance. Of course there is more to do. Tim Davie, the Director General, has been very clear on our targets on ethnicity—that 20% of our staff base in three years should come from black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds, and we are making good progress on that.

I always accept the criticism. There is always more that we could learn, but I think that the BBC is setting the pace on driving greater representation from diverse communities across our output.

Q186 **Dr Rupa Huq:** You will reply to that open letter as well? We would be curious to see it gone through point by point.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Of course. We reply to all the correspondence we get. On the specific point on production representation, if you would get that for me, because that is not the world that I experience at the BBC.

Q187 **Kevin Brennan:** To be clear and to put it on the record for Wales, what is the position regarding local radio in Wales in any of what we are discussing this morning? Does it have any impact in Wales?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: No, it does not. As you will be aware, by and large in the devolved nations we are running national stations. We do not have local radio networks.

The question of relevance across the UK is that as part of the BBC's digital first strategy, which the Director General set out in May, we are looking at how we can drive greater investment into the areas where we make the biggest difference, particularly online. We are looking at some changes across the nations. You may be aware of the changes that were announced with Radio Foyle in the last couple of days.

Kevin Brennan: I am going to come to that next.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We are making some changes that enable us to release more investment into our online services.

Q188 **Kevin Brennan:** We saw some of that when we visited the new BBC headquarters in Cardiff a few months ago, in the radio studio there.

You mentioned Radio Foyle, and of course yesterday at Prime Minister's questions, my colleague Colum Eastwood, who is the leader of the SDLP in Northern Ireland and the local MP, raised that issue of Radio Foyle with the Prime Minister, who answered that he would be raising the point with the BBC the next time he communicated with the BBC. Has he been in touch yet?



Rhodri Talfan Davies: Not that I am aware of, but I obviously heard Prime Minister's questions yesterday.

Q189 **Kevin Brennan:** The point that Mr Eastwood was making about the particular circumstances of Derry and the media concentration in Belfast in Northern Ireland—we all know the historical and cultural context of all of this—is that the proposals that have been made are particularly unwelcome. What is your response on behalf of the BBC?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: First, I recognise that. The BBC is making a range of difficult decisions at the moment. You will have seen a number of announcements regarding the World Service, the world channel and the news channel, and the reprioritisation within local radio. The decision around Radio Foyle is part of that.

There are two things going on simultaneously. One is a shift in audience behaviour, and making sure that we are keeping pace with that shift. The other is the financial climate that the BBC is operating in at the moment, because of the freeze in the licence fee. We face, by 2026-27, about a £400 million funding gap because we have a freeze going on at the same time as incredibly high inflation. The financial pressure on the BBC at the same time as we need to reprioritise towards online is significant.

Specifically in the case of Foyle, it has always been an opt-in service to Radio Ulster. If you tune into Radio Foyle today, a number of the programmes will already also be airing on Radio Ulster. We have committed to maintaining three daily programmes specifically to the local area of Foyle, a population area of just over 100,000, and that would see us maintaining a half-hour news programme and the two major afternoon strands. However, I recognise that for breakfast news, that is a difficult decision.

Q190 **Kevin Brennan:** In an area like Foyle, these are important jobs that are being lost, of that sort of quality in that sort of field, aren't they?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I accept that.

Q191 **Kevin Brennan:** It may be a small number, but it is a big percentage, isn't it?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Certainly more than Radio Wales. If you listen to Radio Ulster or Radio Foyle at the moment, the sheer amount of news and current affairs is off the scale. It is about seven to eight hours a day. In an overall population of 1.5 million in Northern Ireland, there is plenty of airtime to make sure that we are covering—

Q192 **Kevin Brennan:** There is quite a lot to talk about in Northern Ireland, isn't there?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: There is, and that is why we deliberately have been sure to protect that half-hour commitment to local news for the Derry area within the changes.



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Clearly, however, we have only just announced these changes and we are listening to feedback, as we are with local radio. It is a bit like the local radio conversation. The easiest thing in the world to do, as a manager, is to just leave everything alone.

Kevin Brennan: That is true, but knowing Colum Eastwood as I do, my advice is to listen very carefully to what he has to say on the subject. I will take it no further at this point because I suspect you cannot say too much more, but I think it is important to listen and to respond.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I appreciate your sharing that.

Q193 **Kevin Brennan:** You mentioned BBC Introducing in the context of local radio in an earlier answer to one of my colleagues. Recently, one of your employees was quoted in "Complete Music Update", the BBC Introducing head in Sussex and Devon—is it Sussex and Devon? That seems an interesting combination; I have written it down wrongly, haven't I?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: That would be radical, Kevin.

Kevin Brennan: I think I was thinking of Simon Jupp when I wrote that down. Melita Dennett, I think her name is. She was quoted as saying, "All BBC Introducing presenters and producers are on redundancy notices". Is that correct? Since you have championed BBC Introducing in front of us this morning, that sounds a little bit like a kind of clanging cymbal to me.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I will ask Jason Horton to take the specific question on BBC Introducing, and I will explain the process. We are obviously consulting with staff. In local radio across England are what we call very large job families. You have a large number of people with the same job title and job specification.

The approach we have had to take in talking to staff is to provisionally put at risk all those who are currently one of three presenter bands because—Mr Jupp will remember this from his time—every local station is slightly different. Everybody is provisionally at risk, and that is a significant cohort of people, but we want BBC Introducing to remain the mainstay of the network. I don't know if there is anything you want to add to that, Jason.

Jason Horton: BBC Introducing has been fantastic for us. We have just celebrated a significant anniversary for the service across all our local radio stations and over Christmas, you can hear that programme again. It is just brilliant, the number of acts that we have—

Kevin Brennan: It is brilliant, but I am interested in what is happening next with it.

Jason Horton: The reality is that we run successful regional versions of BBC Introducing across some of the output already. When I took on the headship of BBC Sounds about 12 years ago, I was asked to make sure that every single one of our stations had their own "Introducing"



programme. The station that Mr Jupp worked at did not have its own and we created it. The West is a regional programme, and the East Midlands is regional. We are going to move to having regional BBC Introducing programmes across England. The best of those programmes—the East Midlands and the West are two of them—have also discovered some of the biggest artists and given coverage to some of the best songwriters.

Q194 **Kevin Brennan:** I am going to accept all of that, but at the end of this process, how many of BBC Introducing workforce would you expect to be made redundant?

Jason Horton: I don't think that is a question that we can answer at the moment, because—

Q195 **Kevin Brennan:** There will be some, won't there?

Jason Horton: Yes, there will be, but we cannot answer the question at the moment because those individuals will have to decide, first, whether they want to stay and, secondly, whether they want another role within what we are doing across local radio and BBC local services. Some people will decide to leave, but in the context of 48 jobs out of the 2,200 at the end of this process, we are hopeful that a majority of members of our team at the moment will want to stay and broaden their experience and their creativity. But we will lose members of staff.

Q196 **Kevin Brennan:** I am going to move on to one other matter. I know you are aware that I have concerns about this, because when Tim Davie was in front of us—I think it was in September 2020—I asked him about the future of the Maida Vale Studios in London, where some of the greatest radio output the BBC has ever produced was recorded and broadcast from there and Cerys Matthews' fantastic programme on Sunday on BBC Radio 6 Music still is.

When I spoke to Tim Davie about this in the Committee previously, I put it to him that the BBC was in danger of losing its cultural soul over the way that it was appealing, extraordinarily, against English Heritage's decision to grant the building Grade II listed status, in order to try to maximise the return from disposing of Maida Vale Studios as an asset to build—we do not need to go into the new plans, which I welcome, in east London that are going on, I presume, as part of that particular restructure.

I have spoken about this with the local Member for Westminster North, Karen Buck, who is a great champion of music and the creative industries. We have now reached the stage, as I understand it, where bids are being accepted to take over the building. The BBC failed in its attempt to overturn, on appeal, the Grade II listed status of Maida Vale Studios, which gives the opportunity for cultural and creative industry bidder-led bids to perhaps acquire them and keep the building going, with its incredible history and heritage, as a going concern in the creative industries. That depends on the BBC remembering its cultural soul and not simply selling it off to the highest bidder who might want to put in a



few luxury flats and put a bit of cultural lipstick on that consortium proposal.

I want to ask you this morning: will the BBC, in considering this decision, remember its cultural soul and not simply give in to the bean counters, no matter how difficult? We know finances are difficult; you do not have to tell us that. We know that some of the decisions about that emanate from this building, and you have my full support on all of that, but if the BBC were to allow that to happen when viable, good bids are there to continue this incredible cultural asset, which is part of our cultural history, that would be, in my view, a betrayal of its central purpose. How do you respond to that?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: My first response is that I am not a world expert in this, but my understanding of the question around the BBC's opposition to listing was that it was about particular aspects of the listing proposal. There were particular considerations that we thought were too onerous. Clearly, our view was not the final decision taken and it now has Grade II listed status. That criterion now sits with English Heritage. Although I am not part of the sale process, we would expect any bid to be compliant with that listing.

As for what criteria the BBC will use, clearly we have balancing criteria here. We are very well aware of the heritage of the building, but we also have an obligation to licence fee payers to ensure that we secure best value for the properties that we hold across the UK. I am happy to share that concern with the team responsible for the sale, but I cannot get into the detail of how we approach the sale process, because that is commercially confidential right now.

Kevin Brennan: All I would say, Chair, is: what does it avail a man to gain a fortune and lose his soul?

Q197 **Clive Efford:** A colleague of ours has been contacted by somebody who hosts a late-night show, who says that very little has been made of the loss of late-night shows in going across to this national, all-England single programme. The point that that person has made is that this puts vulnerable listeners in particular at risk—there is a very close association, because of the localised nature of the programmes, between the presenter and regular listeners—and it produces very little in savings, because these shows are quite often just the presenter and somebody who handles the calls. Relative to the savings you are looking to make and the loss of this local service, it makes little sense. What is your response to that?

Jason Horton: Those programmes have been incredibly valuable to us for many, many years. I think of those presenters—I can think of them up and down the country—who I think some listeners feel are friends, or family, even, and it is really difficult. But those presenters are also the presenters that I think help us to understand that the connection with the listener, that very personal connection that you get through local radio, is



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about the quality of the presenter and the quality of the production team behind them. I have been very lucky to work with a number of those presenters in the east over time, when I was editor in Cambridge, and in the south, where I was head of region.

We are having to make a difficult choice, but I think that the best of our presenters will be able to connect with an audience that they know fundamentally. They know what is going on in those individuals' lives and the pressures they are facing, and they know what makes them laugh. I think that we can do that really well across regions, as we are already doing, and with an all-England programme late in the evening and at weekends.

Again, this is an uncomfortable truth for us and a trade-off. The majority of our audience is still between 6 am and 2 pm, and for our sports programming as well, but I do not deny the fact that there is a huge connection between those presenters and their audiences. We want to be able to replicate that, but on a national scale when we have to.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I will add that one of the priorities that Jason set as we were developing these proposals is that where we share programmes, whether the Devon-Cornwall association or more regional, our spend on those individual programmes should increase so that while we are making a saving because we have fewer programmes, the spend per programme should be increased and the production quality of our afternoon programmes should improve through greater investment.

There is no denying that there is a compromise here if we are going to get that online investment right, and if we are going to improve the quality of our journalism across England. There are parts of the schedule that have far fewer local programmes, but I assure you that we will prioritise more investment into the programmes that remain at those times of day.

Q198 **Clive Efford:** Okay, but what do you say to the point that these programmes cost very little? There is a presenter and just one person who handles the phone calls.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I recognise that, Mr Efford.

Clive Efford: What is the saving? Why do it?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: If you look at the savings in local radio, one of the challenges that we have is that already the vast majority of our investment is in our news teams on the local radio station, the sports teams on the local radio station or the breakfast and mid-morning programmes. The programming that sits beyond that is much more lightly resourced. To be able to reprioritise money to online—it is only a 10% reprioritisation, but it affects far more programmes than 10% of the output. That is the reality of the fact that we are already skewing our



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money and our investment to those parts of the schedule that have the greatest impact.

- Q199 **Clive Efford:** However, on the cost of those programmes and their impact that you have just described, surely if what you are saying is true—that you value those programmes and you recognise the value of them to those listeners—and the relative cost of them is very low, what are they contributing to in savings?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Two things here. The relative cost individually is very low, but clearly you are doing 12, 15, 18, 25 or 39 versions of them, so everything in local multiplies quite quickly in the overall cost. To the point about value—

- Q200 **Clive Efford:** To come back at you, you are saying that the all-England programme that will take place from 10 pm weekdays and 2 pm on Sundays will be a significant saving in comparison to the cost of those regional late-night programmes.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Correct, but the saving comes from the multiple versions that we are doing of them rather than—if you take the individual who has contacted you, the cost of his or her programme will be relatively modest, but because you are duplicating it across the whole of England, you get to a significant number.

- Q201 **Clive Efford:** Do you also accept that the nature of the programmes that you will be putting out after 10 pm and after 2 pm on Sundays will be completely different from—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I do not think that they will be. The absolute heart of the late-night programming is about companionship. As Jason said, the fundamental of that is the quality of the presenter. There are plenty of good network examples, pan-UK examples, including Radio 2, that deliver outstanding companionship because they make the right presenter choice.

Why do we not maintain them? This is hard stuff. As I said earlier to Mr Brennan, the easiest thing in the world for us would be to leave things as they are, but we have to make some hard trade-offs here, really hard trade-offs. I have been around the BBC long enough that I remember, when we launched online news for the first time in the mid-1990s, the howls of anger from radio and television audiences that we were putting money into online. Then if I think back to 2008 when we launched iPlayer, I remember the howls of anger because we were moving money from BBC One into iPlayer development.

For me the acid test for us is whether in three to five years' time are we touching the lives of more people in our local communities than we are today. The assessment that we have made is that by making some careful, measured reductions in the number of local programmes that we deliver outside of peak and investing significantly in the quality of our journalism and the quality of our local online services in 43 different



areas, the net effect will be to have a bigger impact locally than we do today.

If we lock our money into the existing model of local radio and the existing model of the 6.30 pm local programmes, we will slowly decline. Today maybe we reach 40% of the population across local radio and regional television. That will fall inexorably towards 35%, 30%. The only way that we can build our impact locally is by taking a measured approach to reprioritising into online delivery, not because we are ideological about it but because that is the shift that we are seeing with our audiences.

Q202 Clive Efford: I did 12 years in local government before I came into Parliament, and I have been here for nearly 26 years now. Whenever cuts are around, I have always heard the arguments about getting more for less and I have never seen it achieved, but good luck.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: This is not less. I keep hearing the words “cuts” and “less”. We are not reducing our spend on local services. We are rebalancing between television, radio and online. I know it feels like semantics, but the idea that these plans are about the BBC backing out of local areas simply is not true. It is about making sure that the people who look to online feel that they get as good a service from us as those who currently use local radio and local television.

Q203 Clive Efford: You have used that word “local” twice in that last sentence. Are we not stretching the word “local”? Will people be confused when they are told that they are listening to something local but what they are hearing is not local at all?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: When we ask audiences what they get at 6.30 pm on BBC One, they tell us that they get their local news. We can get into definitions here. “Local” is a slightly elastic quality. When I used to live in Newcastle, I was a big Newcastle fan but I also had a real sense of a north-east regional identity or local identity, whatever you want to call it. These things are fluid.

I have had letters from Cornish listeners telling me that they have absolutely no interest in receiving anything from Devon. I say that “Spotlight”, which is the local television programme that serves Cornwall and Devon, is the most popular news programme in the UK bar none. This sense that identity is rooted entirely within county boundaries does not reflect reality.

Q204 Clive Efford: No, I accept that local county boundaries are arbitrary lines on a map and that if you are close to one of those boundaries, news from your next county is probably going to be more relevant. However, for me in London—I am in south-east London, which gets very little coverage with news content, in my opinion—I watch the 6 pm news and I get a story that is supposed to be local news coming from Luton. Good grief, that is over the river. It is not local, is it? It is just not local.



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Rhodri Talfan Davies: As a former producer of what was then called “Newsroom Southeast”, I share some of that. London is a particular challenge. It is the sheer population size. It has always been a compromise in London, particularly for local television. I recognise that there are challenges.

Q205 **Clive Efford:** To ask about your consultation, you are holding up a fait accompli but you say that you are listening. It does not sound like there is going to be much scope for change at all. Who are you listening to?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We have had, as you would imagine, a significant response from staff, particularly from local radio staff. We have had a significant response from local radio listeners and, as I said, a lot of specific feedback on, “If you are going to share, why don’t you consider this, or why don’t you consider that?” As we indicated earlier, we are looking hard at that.

The challenge—I have just said this—is that whenever you change anything connected with BBC broadcast services, there is a response. One of the difficulties for us here is balancing the needs of our existing local radio audience with the information and news needs of the rest of the local community. As I say, about 85% of the local community does not come into local radio. Local radio does a great job, but the majority of people do not tune into it.

I do not accept that those individuals have no interest in their local communities and have no interest in local news. Right now, I do not think that our local online services are where they need to be. They need to be more consistent and more investigative; they need to draw on our specialists and on the local democracy reporter scheme that we run. We need to deliver a trusted, seven-day-a-week local online news service, and that is not where we are right now.

Q206 **Clive Efford:** In the last question you used the figure of 67% of adults accessing news online. That is not accessing news online exclusively, presumably.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: No, that is right. Ofcom has some interesting data on this. At the moment, as you say, a lot of the audience uses a number of the services. Ofcom has looked at the importance that audiences ascribe to the different platforms, and it changes by age. As I said earlier, slightly more 65 to 75-year-olds will turn online than will turn to radio. Once you get to over-75s, more turn to radio than turn to online. There is a generational difference.

However, the direction of travel is utterly clear. If you look at television on-demand subscriptions—Disney, Amazon, Prime—the biggest area of growth is among over-55s. If you look at the growth in online news consumption over the last three years, the biggest area of growth is over-55s. You can debate the timing and the phasing of that shift, but the shift in audience consumption to a largely on-demand, online



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environment is happening around us. Our concern is to make sure that our local services keep pace with that change.

Clive Efford: Thank you.

Q207 **Julie Elliott:** I have changed entirely what I want to ask you, having listened and heard many inconsistencies in what you are saying. I am more confused now than I was at the beginning about what exactly is going on here. I want to go back to something that Clive Efford said about local. In my area, BBC Newcastle is not local, it is regional. I am in Sunderland and Newcastle is not local to me; it is a regional place. Therefore, the descriptors are very confusing because sometimes you are talking about quite small areas and then other times you are talking about huge swathes. It is quite confusing trying to work out what you are talking about with the different points that you are talking about.

I am very concerned about how the staff are being treated in this. The day after these announcements, everybody was sent letters saying that this could lead to redundancy. Absolutely you have to go into formal consultation. However, formal consultation has to be meaningful, yet today you have said that there will be no significant change. Those two things do not tally. What is the reality of what is being proposed and where we actually are?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Could we take both in turn? To be clear on the north-east, what you are identifying here, as we touched on, is what is local. Radio Newcastle and Radio Tees will remain uniquely local, or at the smallest level of—okay, you are defining Sunderland as not local to Newcastle. This is all very personal with our own sense of identity. Radio Newcastle, which serves Newcastle and Sunderland, will remain entirely focused on those two areas from 6 am until 2 pm, and Radio Tees similarly further south. However, those two stations come together in the afternoon. Obviously, they both serve a smaller area than “Look North” in the television footprint. You are dealing with three layers of localness.

It is worth bearing in mind that the listener, if they are in Heaton, will continue to feel that they are hearing Radio Newcastle. It will be branded Radio Newcastle; it is just that some of the programmes will be shared with Tees listeners.

Q208 **Julie Elliott:** If you are talking about something in Yarm, somebody in Heaton could quite likely not even know where that is, never mind have any interest in it.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Again, I would challenge that, because the vast majority, almost all local radio listeners, are also consumers of the 6.30 regional news programme “Look North”. There is already a very established understanding. That is true of the old Tyne Tees as well. Tyne Tees and the “Look North” patch have always covered those areas. Therefore, I do not think that listeners will find that coverage alien.

Q209 **Julie Elliott:** People say to me quite frequently that the local news on TV



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is not the local news any more, depending on where a main story has been that day. This is the same whether it is BBC or ITV, to be honest. Wherever the main story has been that day, you will find that every little subsequent story is very nearby. If it has been in North Yorkshire, everything will be in North Yorkshire and there will be very little in the rest of the region. That is a perception and the reality.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I accept that. I remember when I was working in Wales being told by a research group in Merthyr that they did not consider Aberdare to be local, and it was six miles away. These notions of localness do change.

Julie Elliott: I understand that—the same street. It was a comment on what you are doing. It is confusing.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: On your point about staff, let's be clear about two different things. One is editorial decision-making, and how we deliver our programmes and services. Clearly the BBC, as an independent broadcaster, takes a view about how it delivers its programmes and services. How that impacts on staff is subject to consultation with staff. There is a difference between how we shape our services and how the audience receives their services, and how we manage the staff base internally and our teams in delivering those services. The consultation with our staff is about that internal organisation and the approach we take to staffing. It is not a consultation with staff about seeking their permission to make programme changes.

Q210 **Julie Elliott:** You do not need the permission, but you have a legal obligation to be meaningful. If you have said that there will be no significant change, I suggest that that is not meaningful consultation. I think that what you should have done is consulted staff before you got to the point of publishing what are in fact fait accompli suggestions, with minor changes possible. The people who understand this more than anybody are the people who work in it and understand the areas that they cover. To say that there will be no significant change is a concrete proposal, but it is for the trade unions to challenge this. If you can come out with a statement like that, you are not in meaningful consultation, and that worries me from a staff point of view.

It also seems that you have presented people with a fait accompli. Nobody is saying on this Committee that you do not need to upgrade your digital offer, because that is absolutely a given. Nobody is challenging that the trend is to digital, but that does not mean that there are not significant numbers of people who get their substantive news feed from local regional radio and TV. That is still a large number of people, and people rely on that.

I take news online all the time, but I do my listening on radio and TV. I am in an age demographic who probably fits that, but this seems to have appeared as, "This is what is happening" and there does not seem to have been any real discussion, consultation or whatever you want to call



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it with people who are working in your organisation. That is what I have been told, and not just from my region. I have never experienced as many e-mails from around the country as from BBC staff who knew that you were coming in here today to talk about it. That is the feeling among staff.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I understand that. Let me make a couple of points, then Jason can come in. The conversation that we have had was strategically with the executive committee of the BBC. There was a conversation that extensively involved Jason and the senior team in England and also a conversation with our local radio editors across England. It is not possible, when you are dealing with potential closures of programmes and services that staff are passionate about and committed to, to ruminate about possible closures here and possible closures there. You have to be clear with teams what you are proposing so that they can respond to it.

To the point about meaningful conversation, Jason and I have had hundreds of conversations over the last three or four weeks with individual presenters, individual members of staff and teams about the detail of the proposals. We are talking to them about that, but the consultation with staff is about very significant potential numbers of people individually at risk and how we implement changes. That is a meaningful discussion that we are having with staff. However, I do not think that it is practical to ruminate about changes.

We were clear when we published the BBC's digital first proposals back in May that we would be reducing the range of local radio programming outside of peak time. It is a conversation that I have had with a number of Members of Parliament over recent months, and it is a conversation we had with all our staff back in May when we made those announcements. These announcements did not come from nowhere.

The truth—and I do not blame anyone for this—is that if you ask a local radio team whether they would like to keep all their local radio programmes, of course they do. They are passionate about it, they are committed to their local area and they love working in radio. I absolutely get that, but we have to make some difficult decisions and I do not think that any proposals of this nature were going to be warmly received by local radio teams.

Q211 **Julie Elliott:** You have talked about bringing in investigative teams and investigative journalists. I have to say that on this Committee I find that quite unbelievable when only a couple of years ago we had to argue about losing the investigative journalist TV programmes, award-winning TV programmes, to be replaced by an all-singing and dancing new product that was taken off air after three programmes because it was such a disaster. You have slashed and burned investigative journalists and then suddenly you tell us that you are going to bring in all these investigative journalists. I find that quite amazing.



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Jason Horton: Let's go back to what you have just said, that we took off "We are England" after three programmes. That is entirely untrue. We are in the second series of "We are England" at the moment, which runs until the end of this year, depending on World Cup fixtures, and will continue into the beginning of January.

Q212 **Chair:** I am sorry, Mr Horton, but "We are England" was recognised as a complete disaster at the outset. It may have been on and you put someone in to bring it through, but the BBC was taking programmes off air because the journalism was so poor. The tone of voice that you have used there with Julie, saying it is completely untrue—Julie's point is very, very prescient.

Julie Elliott: And you removed every single investigative journalist. There was not a single investigative journalist on that programme when it emerged. There may be now, but there was not. It is interesting. You might give each other funny looks, but it is interesting, sitting here.

Jason Horton: Please may I go back to the point that I just made? Forgive me. We did not take "We are England" off air. If anything, I took on the leadership of BBC England and we have developed a second series that is there now. We had a successful run in the latter half of the first series and the teams are winning awards. It is important to recognise the efforts that those teams have put in to telling some fantastic stories across all of your constituencies in a way that we would never have told those stories before.

We have made a decision about the future of "We are England" because we want to reinvest in investigative storytelling across all of our services. It is massively important that we recognise that, yes, "Inside Out" was a popular programme. I completely agree with you. I was responsible for "Inside Out" in the south when it broke the story of the Horizon computer scandal at the post office. I was hauled into the post office and told to stop reporting on it, with the editor at the time. Therefore, I value what "Inside Out" did.

However, "Inside Out" was a programme that was not delivering across all of our platforms consistently and, over a period of time, had lost audience. We took a decision two years ago to end "Inside Out" and to launch "We are England". I am not saying that there were not issues with the beginning of "We are England", Chair.

Julie Elliott: Programmes were taken off air.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: There were two specific editorial issues.

Chair: Just the two?

Jason Horton: Yes.

Q213 **Chair:** Julie's point is very simple. At the same time as you are potentially demoralising local radio and their staff, they look at the



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disaster that was “We are England” at the outset and ask, “Do these guys actually know what they are doing?”

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Can I come in on this? The bottom line is that we think that it is vital that across England we have teams of investigative reporters who can deliver freely across television, radio and online. When I came into this role less than two years ago, one of my major concerns in England was that while we had a lot of journalists and we were delivering successfully on local radio and local television, we did not have individuals who could come off rota and dig into investigative stories.

In fairness to the “We are England” team, that was not their remit. They were making interesting, first-person documentaries, which have won awards. You are absolutely right that we had two significant editorial issues, but their remit was to focus on the production of programmes for BBC One. Our view, discussing it, was that we needed investigative reporters, 70 of them, right across England who can deliver maybe to local, maybe to the regional TV programmes, maybe to network, but who could dig into the big stories. That is why, in making these changes—

Q214 **Julie Elliott:** I think that you need to read the transcript of the Committee when we first looked at this, when we were told that those programmes were going to be investigative journalistic programmes and I had to tell the Director General that there were going to be no investigative journalists employed on those programmes. What you have said reflects what was supposed to be going on. It is an absolute mess around investigative journalism. If you think about the morale of your staff around the country, working in local and regional programming, whether it is on TV, on radio, the mess around investigative journalism, when today you have said that we are going to have these investigative teams—which I welcome; I want investigative journalism—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We are trying to get this right now.

Julie Elliott: I think that you need to stand back and have a think about the morale of your staff, of people who have left the organisation and of people who might be potentially looking to work in the organisation, because this is a mess and it is a shambles. It really is. It is absolutely dreadful.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Your point about “We are England” and “Inside Out” is noted. This is a very clear plan that I know has been warmly welcomed by many staff and many colleagues in our regional and local newsrooms across England, which is to get behind deep investigative journalism. This is a 40% increase in our spend in current affairs and a network of investigative journalists that will span 22 of our local bases. I absolutely accept that there have been mistakes along the way, but this is a very clear plan to get this right across our local centres.

Q215 **Julie Elliott:** Can I come back to one of the things that I am very confused about again, which is the basis of decisions about which bits of



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programming are going and which are staying? You have talked about audiences and the most listened to are staying. The least listened to seem to be going; is that right?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: It is not that crude. For example, you could argue that a programme like BBC Introducing on local radio does not attract a huge audience. That is partly where it is scheduled, but we think that it is very valuable in the BBC's cultural remit. Therefore, it is not as crude as the big stuff stays and the low stuff goes, but it is true to say that we are prioritising the majority of our investment into those parts of the schedule that deliver the greatest value.

Q216 **Julie Elliott:** Tim Davie said that the BBC needed to cut shows at times when fewer listeners tuned in. Is that what you are doing overall?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: If you are asking me whether Jason and I think that we need 39 afternoon local radio programmes, we do not.

Q217 **Julie Elliott:** I find that a very confusing situation when the last time the Director General was in here, they were about to take off one of the most successful national radio programmes, "Steve Wright in the Afternoon", with millions of listeners. They have replaced it with something else and the listening numbers have dropped. They are doing one thing on the one hand, and you are doing something else on the other hand. I am very worried about the overall plans here for radio in this country, whether it is national or local or regional or whatever you want to call it, because it seems that there is no consistency in what is happening.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Could you explain "inconsistency" to me? I am not clear.

Julie Elliott: On some things, programmes are being changed because people say that they have to move with the times and listening figures are irrelevant. In other cases, the opposite is being said. I think that it is missing the point of particularly the place that radio has in people's lives in this country. You have talked about some of the social things that are hugely important. We have had lots of e-mails from people who are really worried about this. That can be at a national level, but it can also be at this smaller level. I think that the inconsistency in the BBC at the minute about how decisions are taken on all of this is worrying. Sometimes you need to stand back and think how this looks to people who pay their licence fee, are supportive of the organisation and are getting these changes that make no sense. I am going to leave it at that.

Q218 **John Nicolson:** Good afternoon gentlemen. The discussion hitherto has been a little bit Anglocentric, or Welsh-centric. I realise that it is not your remit, but I am a Scottish MP. A lot of people ask me why there are not Scottish local radio stations apart from in the Islands. Radio Scotland is a curious hybrid. You can tune in sometimes and find people phoning in—it is always the same people every day, pretty much; they phone into a call-in programme—or suddenly you will be hit by a bit of heavy metal, unexpectedly, followed by a gentle rendition of the bagpipes. You never



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know what you are going to get with the channel. Maybe we need local radio in Scotland.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Thank you for the question. As you say, we have the particular services in Orkney and Shetland. Across Scotland we provide localised news bulletins, but the programming is delivered on a national basis with the exception of the Isles. When I look across the portfolio of national stations within the nations division, Radio Scotland is a particular success. While you might characterise that diversity as a little eclectic in your question, it brings in very different audiences at different parts of the day. It has a terrific reputation.

Q219 **John Nicolson:** Indeed. Heavy metal people know when to tune in for heavy metal and the phone-in people know when to tune in. It is a curious hybrid. Can you imagine having a Radio England where you would have that kind of mix with no local provision at all?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: There is local provision, as I say. The news bulletins are localised, apart from programming. You will be more aware than me that Radio Scotland has evolved significantly over the last 10 years. It is proving particularly successful at sustaining its audience. In the breadth of its output, it has demonstrated that difference can work. A lot of the standard thinking on radio is that everything needs to be consistent, habitual and feel very consistent across the day. Radio Scotland has demonstrated that you can appeal to very different audiences at different times of the day. There are no plans to deliver local programming beyond the news bulletins that we have at the moment.

Q220 **John Nicolson:** A lot of people at the time when the Government forced the BBC to take responsibility for licences for the over-75s—you and I both know it is a social service provision, and nothing to do with broadcasting. Tony Hall said that it was wildly popular with the BBC staff, and that they absolutely loved it.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I do not recall that.

John Nicolson: Yes, he said that it was a very popular settlement that he managed to win. I thought that he was not talking to the same people that I was talking to, and it would lead to huge cuts. That has transpired. For the sake of accuracy, I am slightly exaggerating. He did not use the words “wildly popular”, but he said that it was supported by the staff, when he appeared before this Committee. Would you date many of your travails financially to that moment—the cuts that the NUJ predicted, I predicted, other members of the Committee predicted and many BBC staff predicted? It all stemmed from that point, did it not?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: It is certainly true that if you take a 10-year to 12-year span, which would fit with your interpretation, the financial challenges faced in the BBC have ramped significantly. It is well known that in real terms that is a 20% deficit. Inflation freezes are difficult for the BBC in any scenario. In normal inflationary times we would be facing



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a £250 million to £280 million deficit by 2026-27. That is probably looking in the order of £400 million to £450 million.

Q221 **John Nicolson:** Huge cuts. Looking back, do you think that you were wrong to sign up for it? Is that what the historians will say when they write the history of the BBC—that you were bullied by the Government and you should not have signed up for it?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: It was a very difficult deal for us, and we have seen since then the level of efficiency that we have to drive, and we have seen the impact on—

John Nicolson: It is not an efficiency task.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: It has been a mix. We have, without a doubt, become a leaner, slimmer, smaller operation, and that has not all been to the detriment of our programmes and services. However, when we look at the scale of financial challenge that we face over the next three or four years, there is no way that you can get to those sorts of numbers purely through efficiency. We have to be straightforward about that. In the context of this conversation, I remind the Committee that the proposals for England are not driven by reducing our spend.

Q222 **John Nicolson:** Mr Talfan Davies, I have lots of contacts in the BBC, people write to me from the BBC—lots of staff in the BBC—and I know presenters in the BBC, not so many senior managers because most of my pals in the BBC were far too naughty to ever get to a senior management role. What a lot of people say is that they look at the salaries of the managers and they think that the level of management salaries is shocking. Last September, half of the BBC's top executives took pay rises of up to 40%. Your own salary—I hope you do not mind me mentioning it, because it is public—is, as I understand it, in the realms of about £260,000. Many of the BBC journalists who we are talking about in local radio are trying to scrape by on barely £25,000 a year. You are earning more than 10 times what some of your local journalists are earning. When you said earlier that there is no more money, a lot of your staff are going to give a bit of a hollow laugh.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: I am not going to get into the specifics of my salary. Over the last five years we have significantly reduced senior management pay. If you go back to the BBC annual reports five or six years ago and compare the salary ranges of senior executives of the BBC from that period, you will see that there have been some significant reductions. If we look across senior management in the BBC, we have driven those costs down by between 20% and 30% over the last six years. These are big reductions.

I do not deny that those numbers are significant, and I do not deny that there is a significant difference between that and the average journalist working in the BBC. However, many of my colleagues on the senior



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executive team would earn far, far, far more outside the BBC. They choose not to.

Q223 John Nicolson: That has always been the argument. However, you work in the BBC because you are proud to work in the BBC. Some people can earn more outside. I have always encouraged the BBC to publish the salaries that folk get when they leave the BBC, because we are always told that, "Outside the BBC, if I was to move, I would get squillions and squillions", but the people I know who have left the BBC often do not earn that much more in the independent sector, and sometimes less. However, I know that this is the narrative that is always pushed by BBC managers.

That is a shocking figure, is it not, that half of the BBC's top executives took pay rises of up to 40%? You must realise the way that this looks to your staff.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Forgive me, but I am trying to understand the question. Are you saying that the senior executive committee of the BBC took a 40% pay rise?

John Nicolson: As reported by *Press Gazette*, last September half of the BBC's top executives took pay rises. Some of the pay rises were up to 40%. A 40% pay rise in this climate, when you were laying off staff, when you are cutting back and when staff are so badly paid—some of your staff are terribly badly paid—that offends—

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Mr Nicolson, let me be clear, and I can write to you after this Committee hearing if that is helpful. I believe that if anyone received a 40% pay rise in the period that you are discussing, that would have been the result of either a promotion or a significant extension of responsibilities. I do not know of anybody who was on the executive committee year on year that would have seen anything like that increase. I will write to you specifically on that.

Q224 John Nicolson: When I started at the BBC there were not huge gulfs between producers and the senior management. That huge leap in BBC pay happened under John Birt, taking BBC executives into the stratosphere. People would sometimes go from quite modest salaries to earning hundreds of thousands of pounds within a year or two because they had entered the management. It is pretty indefensible, is it not, for executives? I know that the Prime Minister's salary is often quoted, but it is a pretty good benchmark. It is pretty indefensible for BBC executives to earn double and treble the Prime Minister of the country.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: If you look at the trajectory of senior management pay in the BBC, you would see very clear downward pressure. You are right that there was a period in the BBC's history, if we go back a few years, where salaries were significantly higher. If you look at the salary of the BBC's Director General and benchmark that against the chief executive of Channel 4 or ITV, you will see the scale of



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difference when you look at salaries in the commercial sector versus the BBC.

- Q225 Giles Watling:** You will be delighted to know that I want to go back to local and what we were talking about earlier. To cover something briefly before I go to my main question, locally in Essex we have a programme—I understand from one of your proposals that on Saturday and Sunday mornings there will be 10 local programmes, but I question the word “local” again on that, because we are talking regional—on BBC Essex called “Essex Quest”. You might be aware of it. Essex journalists go out and about between 10 am and 2 pm and we have to find the surprise at the end of the day. I know from my constituents that this is incredibly popular. I have an older demography in Clacton, and they are not all digitally aware, and I know that this is incredibly popular. When else could you do a programme like this? This is a Sunday morning ritual; this is what people live with. You are effectively taking that away. When else can that happen?

Jason Horton: “Essex Quest” is a variation of a number of these programmes, based on “Treasure Quest”, which we have launched over the last few years across the local radio network. One of those programmes in the eastern region works across two local radio station areas, Radio Northampton and Three Counties Radio.

I have been asked on several occasions by MPs and also by our staff about those programmes. Again, I go back to the point that we are talking to our teams about the programmes that we will have into the future on weekend mornings. I cannot give you a guarantee here and now that “Essex Quest” will remain. I know that it is popular in the same way that James Wild told me the programme in Norfolk was popular as well. We have a distinctive programme on air at the moment and we should take all of that feedback on board.

- Q226 Giles Watling:** You have mentioned all morning about the importance of community and community radio. I would argue that when you talk about Essex and Essex people, they understand that county. It is homogenous, largely. We understand who we are, and that sense of identity is very much based in that kind of programming. I suggest that you are pulling the rug from under that by going towards more regional broadcasting. In the east the televisual geographic area includes Cambridge. That has relatively little to do with Essex.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Can I make a broader point first? Forgive me if I am being repetitive. A lot of this debate is framed by how local radio is changing, and I understand that. However, do not underestimate the importance that you will see in the local online news provision. I know from speaking to many members of this Committee and many Members of Parliament that there are concerns about the quality and the consistency of the BBC’s online news offer locally. These plans go to the heart of driving a higher standard. We are doing some good stuff and there are some great people working on it, but it is not of the consistency



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that we would expect to see week around. I understand your specific concerns about local radio, but let's not forget that this is a shift to driving higher quality for hundreds—

Q227 Giles Watling: You made that point very effectively earlier to Jane Stevenson. When you look at a constituency such as mine with the older demographic, who are digitally resistant, as I say, are you not in danger of isolating those who are already isolated?

Jason Horton: That is a fair point for us to consider; of course it is. I go back to the point that BBC Essex will still be on air, and that we will have news bulletins and all of the information that people need to live their lives in that part of the world.

I will give you an example of where I think BBC Essex, working with BBC London, came into their own just yesterday. There is the story of Thurrock Council, which I am sure members will be aware of, and the financial difficulty that it is in. The political reporter Simon Dedman worked with colleagues across BBC Essex, BBC "Look East" and BBC London. It was the top story on BBC London news last night because of the issue around audience going from one region to the next and our transmitter patterns not reflecting where people live and how things have grown up.

That story for council taxpayers in Thurrock, whether they were watching BBC London or BBC East, they were listening to BBC Essex or they were accessing the story online, was well covered because of the way in which we collaborated in the journalism across those services. When you are sitting down and you are holding to account the people making decisions at Thurrock Council, we will be able to do that, but we will be able to do that even more effectively because of the effort that we are putting into our journalism.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: There is an important point here, which is sometimes overlooked. As part of these proposals, with the exception of Oxford and Cambridge, which lose their local television services, with those two exceptions every one of our local bases sees a strengthening of its news teams. You are absolutely right, and we would expect a challenge around the reduction in the number of local programmes outside peak, but let's not confuse that with commitment to news, because each of the bases, including Essex, will see its news base strengthened.

Q228 Giles Watling: I take yours and Mr Horton's views on the news. I take that absolutely. I was talking about local programming to local people of the older demographic on a Sunday morning, which you seem clear that you are going to remove.

Jason Horton: The proposals are very clear that it will become regional programming on a Sunday morning. However, I gently point out to you, Mr Watling, that we are in a place where BBC Essex will maintain, under



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our proposals, three programmes every weekday just for Essex, from 6 am until 6 pm. Part of that is because of the uniqueness of Essex in and of itself—not quite in East Anglia, not quite in London, not quite in Hertfordshire—and because it has a very strong audience already. We are trying our best to make these decisions based on audience performance that we have at the moment and the unique set of situations that we would find in each broadcast area as well. However, when it comes to the proposals for weekends, you are absolutely right.

Q229 Giles Watling: Thank you. I will not argue with that. We are not quite in Suffolk either.

You were talking earlier to Julie about consultation with staff, and I have one quick final question. Why did you not consult with the Government? The Government were surprised. The Minister for Media, Julia Lopez, said that they were disappointed. Why did you not consult with the Government?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: We notified DCMS officials of the proposals in advance of the formal public announcement. As the Minister has recognised, operational programming changes are rightly a matter for the BBC as an independent broadcaster. However, you would not be surprised to know that we have an ongoing dialogue with those Ministers about that.

Giles Watling: You are editorially independent, so you have nothing to fear by consulting with the Government, I would imagine.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: That is why we notified them of the changes. Did we sit down in advance and walk the Ministers through? No, we did not. Maybe with hindsight that would have been beneficial. They have nothing to fear from us.

Q230 Giles Watling: Consultation is always a positive thing, in my view. Having said that, there was a meeting in early November, I understand, with the Director General on these proposals. What feedback did you get on that meeting?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: It was an exploration of the plans. I was not in the meeting. I think that the Minister wanted to understand the nature of the proposals and discuss what the editorial impact would be in different parts of the UK. However, I was not party to the conversation.

Giles Watling: We will have to ask that question elsewhere. Thank you very much.

Q231 Simon Jupp: Briefly, I heard you mention strengthening news teams. Can I clarify something? When we go to a regional drivetime programme, will those news bulletins still be coming from the same station? For example, if you are listening to BBC Radio Stoke, will the news bulletins for Radio Stoke be from Radio Stoke?



Rhodri Talfan Davies: We will continue with 39 separate local radio bulletins through until 6.00 pm. One of the things that we are going to look at with the automation that we have is whether a news producer can oversee two bulletins across two areas. However, Cornwall will get a separate bulletin from Devon, if that is the question, through until 6.00 pm.

Q232 **Simon Jupp:** You said that potentially in certain places you might, for example, see a journalist in Bristol do a bulletin for BBC Somerset.

Rhodri Talfan Davies: Yes, you might. The same news producer might produce two separate bulletins for those two different stations.

Q233 **Simon Jupp:** Finally, how will you monitor the success of this digital first strategy? If you do not get more clicks, more usage online and more people signing up and using BBC Sounds, but you see a decline in BBC local radio services because it is no longer what it says on the tin, how will you reflect on that?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: A couple of things. First, our goal very simply is to touch more lives in more local communities. The ambition that we have discussed is that we would want at least half of every local community to have a meaningful engagement with our services, whether it is local radio, local television or local online, in any given week. We are going to look at our overall portfolio of services in each area and look at how many lives that touches.

Q234 **Simon Jupp:** When will you review that? In six months or 12 months?

Rhodri Talfan Davies: The plan with the changes is that they will be rolled out region by region because there is complexity to it. Realistically, if we get to autumn or December next year fully implemented, we can see how we are performing quarterly thereafter.

Chair: That concludes our session. Thank you very much for giving evidence today, Jason Horton and Rhodri Talfan Davies.