



Communications and Digital Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: BBC impartiality and editorial standards

Tuesday 11 January 2022

4 pm

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Members present: Lord Gilbert of Panteg (The Chair); Baroness Bull; Baroness Buscombe; Viscount Colville of Culross; Baroness Featherstone; Lord Foster of Bath; Lord Lipsey; Baroness Rebuck; Baroness Stowell of Beeston; Lord Vaizey of Didcot; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 13 - 26

Witnesses

I: Tim Davie CBE, Director-General, BBC; David Jordan, Director, Editorial Policy and Standards, BBC; Sir Nicholas Serota CH, Senior Independent Director, BBC.

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Examination of witnesses

Tim Davie, David Jordan and Sir Nicholas Serota.

Q13 The Chair: Welcome to this evidence session with the BBC. I welcome Tim Davie, the director-general; David Jordan, director of editorial policy and standards; and Sir Nicholas Serota, who is a senior independent director of the BBC. We are talking today about editorial standards, impartiality and other issues at the BBC. I am very grateful to our witnesses for joining us.

Before we start, I remind our witnesses that the session will be broadcast online and a transcript will be taken. We very much look forward to hearing what you have to say to us.

Let us kick off and ask our witnesses for a few brief words of introduction. Tim, when you introduce yourself, perhaps you can give us an overview of where you think you are on issues of impartiality and editorial standards. You are a year plus into your leadership of the BBC.

Sir Nicholas, perhaps in your introductory remarks you can bring us up to date on the key findings of the Serota review, which you carried out post the Martin Bashir scandal at the BBC.

David, perhaps you can talk from your perspective about how you implement the recommendations of the Serota review editorially across the BBC. When we have done that, we will take questions from members of the Committee. Tim Davie, do you want to start?

Tim Davie: Thank you very much, Chair—and thank you, everyone, for your time this afternoon. I shall try to keep this brief, because it is always valid when we get more to discussion. I think it is clear that, on taking the leadership role at the BBC, our overall strategy has been very focused on where we are unique and bring value to licence-fee payers—on what is distinctive and a uniquely public service. I never want to forget that.

It is really important that we talk about the market and all the things that are going on, but we are a public service broadcaster that needs to do things differently. We focused on impartiality not wholly, or largely, because of political noise; it was because of our licence-fee payers and ensuring that we are relevant to everyone paying their licence fee and to households. So this is not the BBC being dragged into this, to put it bluntly; it is about what we are valued for.

In the last year, the need for us to double down on impartiality has never been greater. On the threats to balance, fair reporting, trusted news sources, since I sat with this Committee the risks have been heightened rather than decreased. We see an incredibly polarised media market. We are also seeing, in countries around the world, the defence of free media being a real and live issue.

The risks are therefore real. Last year, we did a number of things to culturally reset the BBC: training, social media guidelines, records of external engagements, and a whole host of initiatives that we can talk

about. I think we have made reasonable progress. By the way, our numbers are broadly holding flat, if not slightly improving in some metrics, on impartiality.

As we come out of the Bashir affair and Nick's review, we have recently felt, as well as my sense that we need to push again on impartiality, that we need to develop the next push, which is the so-called 10-point plan. That is what we are deploying now. I shall not put us through all 10 points in my introduction, but we can talk about the substance of that and how we intend to go about the next period trying to guarantee impartiality as we deliver the BBC's brief.

Sir Nicholas Serota: I have been a member of the BBC board since 2017, since the beginning of this charter period. I was appointed senior independent director about two years ago. You will all recall the Dyson report, which looked at what had happened in 1995 in and around the Bashir interview of Princess Diana, and you will undoubtedly recall that the report was highly critical of the BBC at that time.

Dyson pointed to six principal failings within the BBC. The first was that Bashir himself breached the standards of the BBC. The second was that, when he did so, there was no rigorous investigation into what he had done, and that although warnings were given by a number of individuals, the BBC took no account of those. When the BBC investigated, it did so slowly, and Dyson found that the investigation itself was quite seriously flawed. He pointed to a failure of communication between the executive and the board of governors at that time. He also pointed out that there was significant lack of transparency.

The review that was established, which I had the honour to lead, was an initiative that came from Richard Sharp, as chair of the board, and from the board as a whole. There was a determination that the board should grip the implications of what Dyson had uncovered, notwithstanding the fact that there were many changes and significant improvements had occurred between 1995 and 2020-21.

The review was established with three board members and two independent members, who were very important within the investigation: Caroline Daniel, a senior journalist and former editor of *FT Weekend*, and Chris Banatvala, a specialist in editorial standards who has worked for Ofcom and the BBC Trust at different times. We set out to take written submissions and invited people to come before us and, as a result, we conducted more than 60 interviews with over 100 people. The recommendations that we came up with were direct answers to the questions that had been raised by Dyson.

In particular—no doubt we will come to these in greater detail when we talk about the action plan that the BBC is now implementing—the six areas that we looked at included editorial values and culture, and whether they were understood. Is there a culture that supports those editorial values? Is there good editorial oversight—and oversight that the standards are being complied with—and is there adequate support for

journalists when they seek guidance on editorial policy? We were very concerned that the culture within the BBC had been insufficiently open to allow those who wanted to raise concerns to do so, and we have therefore made recommendations about how that might be achieved. We have also proposed greatly strengthening the whistleblowing avenues available to staff within the editorial area.

We looked at the way in which editorial standards investigations are undertaken, stressed the importance of these being independent of the content makers, and sought clarification of what happens when the director-general steps in and his intervention leads to an expedited consideration of a complaint. We looked again at governance in relation to the board, particularly in relation to the Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee, which we recommended should be strengthened by the addition of two independent members, and should also take responsibility for conducting thematic and programme reviews on particular areas of the BBC's work. Lastly, we made some recommendations about transparency.

Those recommendations came to the board, and were broadly speaking endorsed by the board, which sought clarification. It then invited the executive to respond directly to the recommendations. I think that takes us on to David Jordan as head of editorial policy to explain what actions the executive has taken. In particular, having established 10 points within the action plan, Tim has invited Peter Johnston, a senior figure within the BBC and director in Northern Ireland, to now take responsibility for an overall oversight of the implementation of the work that Tim and the executive see as being necessary in response to our recommendations. I will hand over to David Jordan, if I may.

The Chair: Thank you, Nick. David, welcome. Perhaps you would address what your team is going to do to implement these proposals, and whether you have the necessary resources. I would also be interested to know how this has gone down among senior editors at the BBC. Do they recognise the issues that the review has outlined and exposed? In particular, do they recognise the implicit issue of impartiality, which the director-general has been focused on since he took leadership?

David Jordan: Yes, they do. As you have referenced, this is not the first stage of the journey, if I can put it like that. This journey started with the first speech that the director-general made to the entire BBC in September 2020, in which he made achieving impartiality appropriately across all our output one of the four pillars, as I describe them, of his approach in the next few years to the director-generalship of the BBC.

We started immediately at that point, as you will recall, issuing new guidance on impartiality on social media, bringing in new social training called safeguarding impartiality, which at the beginning of September had already been rolled out to 11,000 people in the BBC, and updating the social media guidance and a new register of public interest, which you will have seen the results of over the past 18 months or so. That was the beginning of it.

The Serota review, combined with a new action plan from the director-general, has been combined in our impartiality and editorial standards action plan, which seeks to implement the things that Nick was talking about. As Nick referenced, Tim has asked Peter Johnston, our director of Northern Ireland, to sit across a steering group, which consists of people like me who are implementing the recommendations in relation to editorial policy and the new thematic and programme reviews that were recommended both by Serota and by the impartiality action plan. The people in the BBC Academy, who are responsible for our training arrangements and are already working on and working up a training plan for freelance reporters and staff who work for the BBC, are already rolling out a second impartiality action plan for people across the BBC who do not make programmes so that they can understand their responsibilities in obtaining our impartiality.

We are already updating and refreshing our whistleblowing policy so that our editorial whistleblowing ends, as Serota recommended, in an external arbiter rather than in me, as it currently does. I know I am independent, but I am not external to the BBC, and it was felt that we needed to be even more independent, and seen to be more independent, in our whistleblowing standards. Let us be clear: if we had had the whistleblowing standards that we have now, Bashir could probably have been avoided, and it certainly would with the whistleblowing standards that were envisaged by the Serota review. So we are already working on that.

As you know, as a consequence of the recommendations of the Serota review my own team is being strengthened with additional bodies, and we are working on plans to up our profile across the BBC. I have to say that I think the Serota review discovered that it is already pretty high, but we will do more, such as producing a more regular newsletter and all those sorts of communication devices.

We are putting considerable emphasis on this, and it is right to do so because this is a critical part in all this. This partly comes back to what you said, Chair, about the culture, particularly the culture of discussion and disagreement. Nobody should feel within an editorial team that their view somehow cannot be voiced, that the viewpoint that they voice should not be represented in our output. It is critical to the BBC that we represent all points of view and give them due weight. To take the hoary old example, flat earthers are not going to get as much space as people who believe that the earth is round, but very occasionally it might be appropriate to interview a flat earther. If a lot of people believed in flat earth, we would need to address it more than we do at present. It is very important that people across the whole of our audience think that their viewpoints are being expressed, challenged, heard and seen in output. That is a critical cultural thrust of what we are doing through editorial teams.

All this is being overseen by a sub-committee of the board known as the Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee; Nick mentioned the

governance issues in relation to the EGSC. Nick is on that committee, as is Tim, the director-general, and Sir Robbie Gibb and Ian Hargreaves. The new director of news will be a member too, and there will be one additional board member to replace Tanni Grey-Thompson, who has just left the board. They are taking the brunt of this on behalf of the board and are lending their expertise to looking at the way in which we implement what we have been asked to do.

At the last meeting of the EGSC, just before Christmas, the non-executive members of the board were impressed by the amount of progress that we have made so far. We will have another meeting later on in January and we hope to impress them further. We are taking this very seriously and trying to get all these measures implemented in the course of a few months.

I think that will probably suffice for introductory remarks.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Picking up on your last point about the progress you are making, do you have the resources that you need?

David Jordan: Yes. The director-general has made it absolutely clear that any resources that we need we shall have. I have only to ask and it will be given, and that goes for other parts of the operation too. Some of the work that we are doing does not require more resources, but some of it certainly does. It has been made absolutely clear that we will have the resources that we need to get the job done as quickly as possible.

Tim Davie: As a more general observation, we have a lot of policy. We have introduced a new policy. We have a thick set of very robust editorial guidelines that David and the team keep very alive. However, this is about what happens on the ground in editorial meetings culturally within the BBC. We have a really rigorous process of reviews and a list of recommendations. We have all the things in terms of how we manage investigations and monitor results, and the board oversees us in a very robust fashion now.

The point that David is making is critical. Without doubt, we need heavyweight support in editorial policy. We are investing more in that. Even within the constraints of the BBC's budgetary pressures and so on, which I may come on to, we will make sure that David and the team are fully resourced and that he will have more headcount. That is happening now; we are already doing it. I mentioned Peter Johnston. If anyone knows about managing impartiality, it is someone who has run the Northern Irish operations successfully. He is not director of Northern Ireland any more; he is working full time on this topic within David's team. This is proper resources.

Having said that, Nick and the others looked at this very widely, and I really believe this: that editorial policy plays a critical advisory and oversight role, but it cannot be a substitute for editorial discussion, on the ground in programmes, that is properly robust in that it has open

discussion, diversity points, open challenge. The 10th recommendation was about culture, and we are working very hard to ensure that confidence levels are such that those discussions can happen in those teams.

Q14 **The Chair:** I will pick up on two things before I hand over to other members of the committee. I want to talk a bit about the timetable for thematic and programme reviews. It seems to me that resources are critical to delivering that at any meaningful pace. Then I want to talk a bit about newsrooms and the representation of different viewpoints. You may have seen that we discussed that with a collection of previous BBC editors at a committee meeting just before Christmas.

Shall we start with the thematic and programme reviews? Are you going to get on with these? I think you have announced the first of the thematic reviews. Could you tell us a bit about the programme reviews? Will you at some stage in the near future look, for example, at concerns about impartiality at "Newsnight"? Is that the form that these programme reviews will take? Will they be triggered by external criticism of the BBC, external concerns raised about impartiality, or will they be triggered internally? What form will they take, and how many do you envisage being carried out in a year?

Tim Davie: David, you might want to add a bit to what I am about to say. I confirm that the first thematic review will be on UK public spending and taxation, and we are actively recruiting an external chair for it. We will get going very soon, within weeks, and we hope to report. These are big things, because you go to external stakeholders and really get into a broad area of territory, and that will be under way with urgency. We intend to complete that by summer. I know "summer" is quite a broad descriptor, but we will confirm exact timings as soon as we appoint the chair, but with some urgency. On the internal reviews, we are doing a bit of work on how we flow that. We are hoping that we can get under way in March and get cracking.

As a forecast, as a guidance, I would say three or four a year, something of that nature. The truth is that these are executive-led, and we have our own views on areas where we think we need to take a look at an area of output. That could be something like "Newsnight", but it could also be how we are handling a specific issue. By the way, it is not just about news; it could be about how we are handling a particular rural affairs issue or an area of output.

In answer to your question, we are beasts of the wider world. If we sense that there is genuine concern about an area—if there are genuine questions or we are getting more complaints or interest about it—that will help to inform us to decide where we want to focus our internal reviews. As a senior team we will also be engaging with the board, because of course we have the non-executive board members and all their views about the types of area that we want to look at. I think we are pretty clear about some of the areas that people would like us to focus on.

Q15 **The Chair:** Okay, so as we get into the new year we will expect to see progress in this area.

Tell me about the role of your big new hire, your new CEO of news, Deborah Turness from ITN. She is clearly a very senior and widely experienced journalist. I have just one thought: when I have private conversations with people in various editorial policy roles at the BBC—senior journalists and producers, very senior management at the BBC—they all are very critical of “Channel 4 News”. They all say, “‘Channel 4 News’ is not something that would be tolerated on the BBC. We don’t know how they get away with it”. It is an example, in the view of the significant number of very senior BBC people, that breaches any sort of reasonable definition of impartiality. I think your new news CEO has been editorially responsible for “Channel 4 News”. Do you share that view of it?

Tim Davie: First, I will delicately sidestep any evaluation of “Channel 4 News”, because I think it is for others to make that assessment. By the way, the BBC has more rigorous editorial guidelines than even the Ofcom code, and my job is really to focus on that. My second point is that if I had any doubt at all that a candidate for director of news could not flawlessly and actively deploy our impartiality brief, with deep understanding, I would not have hired them. I think Deborah Turness will be outstanding at delivering on this brief.

Q16 **The Chair:** You have all spoken passionately about the culture of openness in newsrooms. Tim, you said that it is really important that the BBC is relevant to everyone and that all points of view are heard. You have talked to us in the past about what you are doing to improve diversity in newsrooms in terms of people from ethnic minority backgrounds. You have a very substantial programme in place to improve diversity and get more women into senior roles, and you are demonstrating clearly that you are making progress in that regard.

Underlying what you were talking about, it seems to me that you recognise the need for much greater diversity of thought. David, when he previously gave evidence to this committee, and Roger Mosey, Sarah Sands and Richard Sambrook, when they gave us evidence before Christmas, recognised that there was an issue with narrowness of diversity of opinion in the newsrooms. Do you take it as seriously?

Tim Davie: Very seriously. I think it is essential. My opening remarks were important. We see this as essential to the BBC. It is not just about responding to external pressure. It is about getting the licence fee payer absolutely understanding that the BBC is for them. In a world where this is much deeper now than just alliance to political parties—it is often issue-led, as you guys know—it is often more difficult.

There are both mechanical and cultural things to do here. Mechanically—sorry, that may not be the best word—in terms of our targets, you can see us moving in the right direction on BAME and gender diversity. I am interested in socioeconomic diversity. We cannot recruit to that, but we can measure it, and I want to see progress in that area. All of that helps.

The other mechanical thing that we can do, which I think is fundamental, is to locate story teams and big areas of the newsroom outside London. Remember that we have relocated our environmental unit, which is now based in Cardiff, and technology is in Glasgow. This really helps. It infuses a different type of lens in how we look at issues, and I am a big believer in that.

You can do all that but, regardless of people's background and where they come from, you also have to ask: what is the quality of the conversation? What kind of insights are they getting? Are they sticking to the same old Rolodex or going out to different types of guests, doing the right due diligence and getting out of London? I think you can see some of the signs that we are doing that, but we could do more.

The Chair: If you have a problem with diversity of viewpoint, with a series of widely held societal viewpoints that are significantly underrepresented in the newsroom, are you saying that you do not tackle that directly by understanding what viewpoints are missing, but you tackle it indirectly by broadening your recruitment and where you recruit from?

Tim Davie: I was trying to tackle both. When I say "mechanical", I am talking about recruitment—you change the nature of the BBC itself, which is important. However, that will not get us all the way. We also have to do the other bit that you are talking about. I know it sounds basic, but at the end of every top leadership meeting we hear directly from different groups of audience members. You have to expose yourself to different viewpoints, getting face to face with audiences and taking programmes out on the road. The latter can be seen as tokenistic, but actually relocating programmes in different parts of the country makes a difference, and that is what we have to do. It is not just about getting different types of people in the building; it is also about behaving differently, regardless of who we have in the building.

The Chair: Do you agree that you need to properly understand and monitor the fact that—obviously this is quite a difficult thing to do—on some of these quite big issues there is a diversity of thought and perspective in the newsroom and that people with, for example, non-metropolitan views are represented?

Tim Davie: Totally right.

The Chair: So it is not just about looking for a proxy.

Tim Davie: They need to be represented in the newsroom, but we have to be careful. No one is pushing harder than I am to make it more reflective of modern society, as it were, but you will never get to a perfect truth within the newsroom. You also need to have flawless research, really good understanding and open minds. We have a really good set of data now on who feels that the news connects with them and what stories do that. It is also a question of using our local networks more actively. Often it is about local radio and our local reporters. The

biggest television show in the UK at the moment, which I tell everyone if I get a chance to, is the 6.30 pm news. So we have that intelligence in the BBC as well and we need to use that.

The Chair: Lord Lipsey has a different perspective on impartiality.

Q17 **Lord Lipsey:** I have a different question from the one I was originally going to ask, because I was thinking about staff networks. Personally, I do not think that the BBC has a great deal to answer for on impartiality—you very rarely find things that are awful—but I am slightly concerned about the staff network point. It seems rather a good idea to have a staff network of people from racial minorities to put forward their things.

On the other hand, although I do not suppose this exists, let us suppose that you had a staff network of trans people. We know that trans people are now in a state where the two sides, the gender recognition side and the self-labelling side, are not just not on speaking terms but actually want the other lot silenced, which happened recently in the Sussex University case. I wonder, therefore, what your strategy is for trying to keep these things on tap but not on top.

Tim Davie: As part of the review, Nick looked at this very issue, which was very well articulated there. David may also want to observe from the front line how we deal with this issue.

Sir Nicholas Serota: This issue indeed came up during the review, and we talked to a number of senior journalists and to some representatives of some of the very staff groups that you describe. I think there is a general recognition that these groups play a significant and important part in the way the BBC conducts itself and connects with its audiences. Tony Hall, but particularly Tim Davie, wished to see the staff more integrated into the way in which the BBC itself operates.

The fact remains that editorial decisions have to be made independently of that kind of engagement. There needs to be discussion and an opportunity for people to put their views forward, but fundamentally editors have to edit. The review made it very clear that, although the staff network groups have a role to play, editorial standards have to be paramount, and it is those editorial considerations that should rule the day.

David Jordan: Identity is the hard edge of impartiality in current circumstances. Whether you are talking about gender identity, racial identity or whatever identity you are talking about, there is undoubtedly an issue about whether people regard impartiality as trumping identity or the other way around. We have seen manifestations of this all across the world media, including sometimes in places like the *New York Times*, where they have to come to some decisions that personally I would not agree with.

We are trying to ensure that, at the BBC, the principles that we have outlined before—namely, that all viewpoints need to be heard on particular issues—should obtain for issues of identity as well as for any

other issue. That goes to the matter that you raise. Recent things that have been done and have happened at the BBC indicate that we are very committed to making sure that viewpoints are heard from all different sorts of perspectives, and that we do not subscribe to the cancel culture that some groups would put forward.

Tim wrote a very important article, which I commend to you, in the *Telegraph* a couple of months ago about freedom of expression, where he made the point very clearly about what the BBC is committed to. We are committed to freedom of expression and to reflecting all viewpoints. That is our job, and whether some members of our staff like it or not is not the point. The point is that they have to adhere to that too, and they leave their prejudices at the door when they arrive. They need to be prepared to hear viewpoints that perhaps personally they do not agree with. They might disagree with them strongly. But it is our job to get those viewpoints proportionately aired on the BBC—given due weight, but proportionately aired—as part of our commitment to impartiality, which is a commitment to hearing all voices as well as to making sure, in the old-fashioned term, things are balanced.

Q18 **Baroness Rebuck:** Before I get on to the specific questions about restructuring and cost cutting, I want to ask something slightly more general. If modernising the news is to be whole-story led, more centralised and feeding multiple programmes across the corporation—you have already talked about the central policy oversight teams increasing in size—how concerned are you about the danger of increasing bureaucracy?

In the Serota review, there was a reference to a perception by some staff that senior folk were spending increasing time managing and less on editorial oversight. I wonder how these stronger, centralised editorial procedures will, to quote the review, “empower rather than restrict ambition”. Sarah Sands at one of our sessions pre-Christmas referenced the obvious efficiency of centralisation—less duplication—but she also talked about the creative tension occasionally of different editors fighting for the same story. To what extent is some creative tension necessary for ambition?

Tim Davie: That is a debate that is alive and well in the BBC. The changes are inevitable, if you look around the global news environment; there is the idea of staffing a wholly health team for online—you can see the tensions that we have there—versus having a health editor on every programme.

In some senses, I have a sentimental view of the wonderful differences between “PM”, the “Six O’Clock News” and “The World Tonight”. Being slightly provocative, though, that means having lovely different shades but within quite a narrow spectrum. The issue for us is that we deliver those editorial shades perfectly, and the wonder of them, but in terms of really engaging a broader audience and keeping ourselves relevant we have missed the biggest thing, which is having non-linear, great stories online.

On top of that—this is a point that I am sure we will come to—is the risk of losing expertise. The BBC has—and forgive me for banging the drum—lost 31% of its funding in 10 years, and you cannot escape that. We have not had the luxury of simultaneously building out programme teams while making sure, with the health team or the technology team, that when you get a story or when Ros Atkins does something it can go on iPlayer or on a bulletin.

All I would say is that the risks that you raise are real, and we believe they are manageable, but we are watching them like a hawk. We are talking to editors all the time. That creative tension does not disappear. If you talk to Owenna Griffiths, who runs the “Today” programme, she still has quite a lot of power in the system. The story teams do not suddenly lead to some mad central bureaucracy whereby they do not have some flexibility.

To be blunt, I know that some people historically will look back and say, “Well in my day I could run everything”. It is slightly different. It is tense, but I do not think that you lose the flavour of those programmes, and if we get to that we are in the wrong place. That is what I would play. But we are watching it. It is a difficult balance. That is the answer.

Q19 **Baroness Rebuck:** I shall move on, because all of you will probably have a contribution to make on my other questions. Staying with what I see as the slight paradox of increasing centralisation, you have talked about the need to embed expertise in different parts of the country to bring in a plurality of views, but at the same time you have had to be cost cutting in the regions. Several of your flagship news programmes, presumably, will continue to be London based, as they are at the moment. So how will this new centralised move ensure that you grow, as you have already talked about, your 6.30 pm growing and successful regional slots?

Another question that came up in our last piece of evidence is that, if a story emanates from one of the regions and becomes national, when it comes to modernising the news centrality who is in charge and in control? Will it be where the story emanated, the centre of excellence, which might be outside the central news core? How will that operate in practice?

Tim Davie: There are a number of strands to that. First, in some ways it is a different structure. Historically, we have been very centralised. If you talk to people in the local regions, as I am sure you do, they will often say that we parachute someone in from the network. They would say that the situation is centralised, and this is a different form of centralisation; rather than this being some mad centralisation, I actually think that it has been centralised. Pushing out true network resources into regions from a career perspective, if you are a career journalist in Cardiff, is transformational. You could be working on science and environmental affairs for a “network” based in Cardiff without uprooting your family. So I think this is decentralisation, to a point; it is co-ordination of the environmental storytelling across the BBC.

Within that, we go to another couple of strands within the question, which is that there is an opportunity for us to use our local and regional expertise more and to take a bit more of a risk. As you know, we have done it in international reporting, where we use a bit more of the outstanding local presenter or reporter to deliver our network. If you are in the environmental team, you need to know across the UK, regardless of the divisional structure, all the resources of smart people you have who can understand the environmental story. I think you have more focus on being able to trust that person who works in Plymouth to deliver that story, because you know them, and I am hoping that you will see more rather than less.

Lastly, yes, we have had to make savings, but we have kept our 6.30 pm footprint across the UK. We want the regional news to keep growing. That is critical. Yes, we have had to make some savings, but we have not cut back on hours of output and all that we want to do. That is not to say that we do not have some strain, where we are a bit thin in places, but we are constantly monitoring that.

Q20 **Baroness Rebuck:** I direct my last question at Nick, to start with. In your review, you were concerned about the possible amplification of mistakes from centralisation. I looked at an issue such as the Alan Dershowitz interview. That may be under investigation, so you may not be able to tell us specifically about that. However, whether it was a lack of resource in newsrooms because of Christmas, Covid or whatever, would centralisation help to avoid such a situation occurring in future, assuming that there is a view within the BBC that there was an element of misjudgment with regard to an unqualified Alan Dershowitz interviewer, or could it be amplified? Do you have any other concerns about this balance of centralisation and cost cutting on judgment and accuracy?

Sir Nicholas Serota: I think Tim can speak for the Dershowitz position. I think the BBC has admitted that clearly a mistake was made, but Tim can speak to that.

More generally, you have been talking about the potential risks and difficulties that grow from decentralisation of the story teams across the country, but I would see some real advantages as well. Impartiality depends very much on the BBC's journalism having authority and depth, and I see these story groups as enormously contributing to the depth of the stories that the BBC is able to bring to network. Rather than having the duplication that has occurred on a number of occasions in the past, we have a group of people who are talking to each other, on a daily and hourly basis, developing stories that can then be picked up by editors and taken across the country. Obviously, this has to be tested, but I think this is a very positive move, and it harnesses the extraordinary expertise that the BBC has.

Something that is very striking to me is that we have lost or are losing a particular generation of editors, but they are being replaced by really brilliant people in their 30s and 40s who I think will become the stars of

the next decade. That is one of the things that the BBC does extraordinarily well.

Baroness Rebuck: I do not disagree. I suppose what I am struggling with—and Tim may want to comment on this—is that the Maxwell trial would presumably be a centralised story. It was big enough, and we all knew that it was happening. So does this centralisation, if unfortunately something like this happens, amplify the issue, or does it militate against it? That is really the question that I am asking.

Tim Davie: You could argue it both ways, but it was not the issue in this case. On Dershowitz, under my tenure we are trying to be very fast, and sometimes we get criticised for this. Within hours, although I do not know how quick it was, we looked at what happened. But there is no investigation. We admitted immediately that it was in breach of editorial guidelines and said straightaway that it was a mistake. Then you get to why it was a mistake. You can argue a bit about the amount of seniority and cover that we had during Christmas and during Covid, but I do not think it is about centralisation.

I still think that, in the future model, if you are in news you will still be able to book a guest into news. Not everything gets centralised. That is just standard business of the day, in some ways. With the oversight of the story, you may get a bit more oversight of what guests are bringing forward. This was simply about the amount of due diligence that was done by the planner and the knowledge level of the person putting the person on air. It was not about a lack of bodies; it was just about their pick-up of this. We do not make many mistakes of that nature, but, just to repeat, if we make a mistake, we will say so very quickly.

I think the system still works, regardless of any centralised story team. The question is whether you have the right seniority of editor in charge, flying the plane, and whether you have the right notes and due diligence on the planning log. Those are the two questions in this case. There is no investigation, by the way, because we know what happened, which is that both those things were not where they should have been. It was a notable miss versus the other thousand things that we do in the day. But, yes, I take the point.

Q21 **Lord Vaizey of Didcot:** I do not want to stray too far from the core of this very interesting discussion, but I think that Richard Sambrook did a review of the role of Twitter and journalists tweeting. I wonder if Tim could give an update on the BBC's current thinking on journalists and their social media, and how that impacts on impartiality.

Tim Davie: I might ask David, because he is also in the thick of this. We have a clear policy when it comes to journalists—and beyond, although beyond is often more difficult, because if they are not journalists they have a bit more latitude in the policy.

Lord Vaizey of Didcot: I totally understand that it should be limited to journalists.

Tim Davie: It is very straightforward, in that we believe that the number of issues that we have had from journalists over this year is very limited. If we see those issues, we take action, and we have taken action. We do not talk about individual cases, but we will take action when someone has breached our social media policy in journalism. Those issues among journalists are, mercifully, very low now. If you have examples, we act on them. Obviously, we are monitoring them. We cannot look at everything across every social media account, but if we hear about anything we are straight at it. David, do you want to add anything? It is about deploying a policy, is it not?

Lord Vaizey of Didcot: David may want to come in, but it will make it more holistic if I follow up on that point. Are you going to be transparent about this? Say that 17 journalists were disciplined—although that is a slightly odd word to use, I guess—would there be an annual report, as it were?

Tim Davie: I do not think so, but let me go away and check that. I cannot talk about any individual, and I do not know whether we can give some guidance on that. I shall take that away. David, do you want to say anything about the deployment of the policy?

David Jordan: As you know, the policy was deployed last October, and both Tim and I think that it has made a discernible difference to the social media presence of our journalists and other staff of the BBC, and freelance people working for the BBC. It has not stopped every example of people breaching the guidance but, as Tim says, we respond to any suggestion that people have breached it and we keep an eye on what is going on across the whole of the BBC on a regular basis.

I chair a meeting of the sub-committee of the executive, at which we take a report monthly on that issue to try to make sure of two things: first, that we are aware of anything that has happened and, secondly, that we are applying a consistent yardstick to the different things that happen across the whole of the BBC, because, remember, we are talking about all our nations, the whole of England, about news and about people outside journalism altogether who also have responsibilities under the social media policy.

We think it has made a difference. We think there has been a decrease in the number of breaches of our impartiality and the bringing of the BBC into disrepute. Where we get something that is really egregious we will take significant action, but obviously we cannot reveal individual names, because these are disciplinary processes.

Lord Vaizey of Didcot: I totally understand that. Do you share some people's concerns that, because the Ofcom content board is staffed with ex-BBC journalists you get too easy a ride from Ofcom?

David Jordan: I do not personally. I have to deal with Ofcom. I do not think I get an easy ride, but Tim may have a different view.

Tim Davie: That question is a good one, but it is not one for us. We can make a lot of decisions. One thing we cannot do is choose who is on the Ofcom content board, and quite rightly. So I will leave that question to others.

The Chair: Thank you. Just to wrap up on that, Tim, I think you said that you would come back to us on how you are going to report on the social media policy in the future.

Tim Davie: If we are going to report—because I want to take advice; I cannot commit to that. I want to be clear about that. In some ways, we get judged by what appears and what comes through to the public. Then we have our HR processes. I will ask the questions and come back to you, but I am not committing to anything at this stage.

The Chair: That is all we are asking for: that you should come back to us one way or the other. That would be great.

Q22 **The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** I thank the three witnesses for being with us this afternoon. I am a glass half full sort of person—God willing, full of Christian hope rather than naive optimism—so I want to begin on a positive note and crave the indulgence of my colleagues on the committee by quoting again what the Archbishop of Canterbury said in his debate in the Lords in December when he talked about the intermediary institutions of society: “One of the most important ... is the BBC, in both its domestic and World Service versions. Of course it gets things wrong, but its continual history of being banned by tyrants, which goes on to this day, demonstrates the fear that impartial reporting—true freedom of speech—generates in those who seek to stifle all liberty. The BBC usually speaks both frankly, but also fittingly”.

I pay tribute to what the BBC does. It is easy for us to take it for granted. Of course awful things happen, such as the Bashir affair, but I do not think that most people, when thinking about the BBC, will tend to focus on them. They will focus on other things.

I want to ask you about how public confidence in BBC impartiality can be enhanced. We might have a view as to what impartiality is, but of course the public view of it will perhaps be very different. I was interested to note that in 2019 Ofcom found that those who were most critical of the BBC's impartiality also tended to hold the strongest political views. I suppose that in a society that we are told is becoming more polarised, getting it right will be increasingly difficult for you as you seek to remain—to use Tim's term—relevant to all licence fee payers. So can I ask you about public confidence in BBC impartiality as compared with what we might deem to be impartiality?

Tim Davie: Thank you, Lord Bishop, and thank you for your kind words. By the way, since we last talked—I said this at the top, but I am sure I have people's support for this—around the world, Sarah Rainsford has been expelled from Russia and John Sudworth is no longer working in China. Regardless of our various views within the beltway of the UK debates, some of the things affecting our ability to report freely are

disturbing. Within so-called democracies, the amount of abuse that journalists are getting, the amount of pressure that we are seeing, is pretty disturbing. We have never seen anything like it, so I think we will keep coming back to this subject.

This question about public confidence that we are debating is a very good one. There is something very profound in opponents of any institution like ours constantly wanting to ascribe an agenda to us. It is interesting; with any type of political past that any of us in the BBC had decades ago, you can see people trying to fix you in or exaggerate your position. I think we are seeing that. I am not looking for sympathy, but it is not an easy course that we have chosen here: to focus absolutely on impartiality.

Having said that, there are a number of things that we can do to build confidence that we are trying to do. The first is to deliver. I know that is obvious, but comms can only go so far. The key thing is whether voices are being heard on our programmes. Are we getting a wide range of views or not? In some ways, I have always been a fan of delivery. That is the first thing. We have to be flawless in that.

Secondly, I think there are opportunities for us vocally as a corporation—you will see a bit of this in our centenary year—to remind people of our intent, what we are here to do and our unique value. I do not mean pure sales speak here. I mean what our values are and what we are achieving. It is interesting that there were questions about how you make natural history. I hope everyone saw "The Green Planet". If you have not, it is a must watch. One of the most popular moments is the 10 minutes at the end where we explain what we do.

I think we will have to be even more transparent about how the BBC operates, how it has these conversations. I come from the strange point of view that if everyone actually sat in on an editorial meeting at the BBC or got close to the BBC, they would be impressed by the quality of debate, the thinking that goes into some of the storytelling and the real values that we are trying to deploy in our thinking on impartiality. We have to think about, and we are debating internally, how we can bring the audience closer to that so that they can see that, because I agree with you: we have an ongoing job to do to build that confidence.

Sir Nicholas Serota: I would like to build on what Tim has said about the admiration that I think members of the Serota review team found themselves developing for the seriousness, the expertise and the commitment of journalists who they met in the course of the review. I mentioned that we conducted more than 60 interviews with more than 100 people. We had expected a much smaller submission, but people in very senior positions as journalists within the BBC wanted to talk not about their own position but about the importance of training young people to uphold the standards of the BBC in relation to impartiality, for instance. They sought ways in which those coming into the BBC could be inducted in a fashion that would ensure that some of the standards that we regard as being paramount in the 100 years of the BBC should be

maintained. It is that kind of commitment, and that commitment also to journalism in depth, that will give people confidence in the BBC in future.

It is interesting that in moments of crisis we all know that people turn to the BBC. If you look at the way in which people regarded the BBC during the early months of the pandemic, I think we all know that the BBC at that particular moment had never been held in higher regard.

The lead that Tim is giving in insisting on openness and commitments to standards will, over time, change people's views of the BBC, in my view. The board is there to hold Tim and the executive to account. One of the recommendations that we made in the review was that the board should be even more active in those terms, and indeed that our agreement with government for the operation of the BBC should include a new commitment on the part of the board to ensure that these editorial standards are upheld. We think it was there already, and it is implicit that we felt that it should be made explicit in the agreement that we have with government.

David Jordan: I will add just one thing about the context. We are doing what we are doing against perhaps the most polarised political background that we have ever had in this country, and you alluded to that. We have been through a series of very polarising political events, including elections and referendums, which are extremely difficult in polarising opinion. My own view is that it is therefore even more important that the BBC can be a bastion of accurate and impartial information. In my view, it is very important that the ecosystem of impartiality, if I can call it that, British public service broadcasting, is retained as a bulwark against the kind of polarisation that we have seen developing in the United States, for example, where not only are politicians and electorate very divided but the media is very divided. The broadcast media are very divided, in a way that just enhances those divisions rather than seeks to address them.

Q23 The Lord Bishop of Worcester: There may be occasions when it would be good to be more partial. I hope you will forgive me for asking this, but I will quote a tweet from a fellow clergyman, who tweeted last night: "I'd like to invert the order on tonight's BBC news. Lead story: 'Last seven years the hottest the world has ever known—this cannot go on'. Closing story: 'Unvaccinated man doesn't think the rules apply to him because he's rich and famous'". Do you agree?

David Jordan: I would not like to second-guess that.

Tim Davie: All I would say is that we do have an opinion on the running order. I would not call it partial, as such, but that is an area where opinion counts. We have editorial judgments, and I shall pass on that feedback along with the regular feedback that I get on our running order. I do not think there is any issue with us having a very strong opinion and being clear about choosing a running order, but I have got the point. People mainly want us to put something happy at the top of the news, by the way. That is the email that I get most at the moment.

The Lord Bishop of Worcester: I am not sure that global warming is happy.

Tim Davie: No, that does not meet my brief, unfortunately.

Q24 **Baroness Stowell of Beeston:** I should just declare that I am a former colleague—some time ago now—of Mr Davie and Mr Jordan.

I have two questions under the heading of how the BBC can build public confidence. First, there has been quite a lot of mention already of the polarisation of views. I am sure that, in a place like a newsroom, there are a lot of highly opinionated people. Tim, you have talked about the importance of understanding all your audience. A good number of licence-fee payers are not strongly opinionated on some of the very contentious topics that people who work in news will find themselves debating. In your quest to be more transparent in how you operate in the BBC, what more do you think you could do to show that you understand parts of the audience that are looking for that awareness from an organisation like the BBC in order for them to have confidence when they are listening to reports on topics that are quite contentious or highly opinionated?

If I may, I shall ask my second question now, to save time. My second question is about the complaints process. It has also been interesting, in Sir Nicholas's review and in the response from Tim, that you focused quite heavily on accuracy, impartiality, fairness and integrity—on those editorial standards as being that from which everything derives. How much emphasis is the complaints process putting on those standards when they first assess a complaint coming in, particularly those that are quite high profile and get escalated within the organisation, and do the non-executive directors have any role in that?

Tim Davie: I shall take the first question. Then David might want to take the complaints, and then Nick might want to come in on the non-executive question. I am conscious of time, so I shall be quick.

Very simply, we have a raft of data that tells you a lot about who trusts the BBC and about the level of trust in the BBC across nations and regions. I think we have more data than before in history with our tracking systems and our monthly board evaluation pack. I am not sure about understanding, but we also have the qualitative stuff that we get underneath that, and the work there. We may want to have a conversation beyond this about what dataset or publication would help, but we have quite a rich dataset on the trust in us, and how we are perceived among different groups. I do not want to be defensive about it, but we have quite a lot of this.

The other thing, by the way, is the sheer usage and how many people we are we talking about. Our reach numbers are holding up. We know where our numbers are, but people fall away if they do not feel connected to the BBC.

Baroness Stowell of Beeston: It is not so much about numbers, Tim. It is more about how the BBC reflects back to its audiences; that it knows

that people are no longer as clearly left/right as they might have been in the past, and that the broadcaster they look to for their news and information really gets them.

Tim Davie: I have to say that on the thematic reviews, and in the process whereby we look at issues in the round, whether it is on tax and spending or rural affairs, that is how people are often looking at the BBC now, as opposed to it being about Labour or Conservative. Nick's work has pushed that, and it will help quite a lot in looking in the round. There may be discussions outside this to see what we could do to bring that alive. It is a good challenge. David, do you want to talk about complaints?

Sir Nicholas Serota: I shall just make one point, Tim, further to yours, before we come on to the complaints issue. The BBC Reality Check over the past two to three years has made a really big difference to people's understanding of the role of the BBC in looking at the headlines that are presented on a daily basis and seeing where the truth lies. It is about building up that sense of the BBC informing and educating that can help to bring people back to the BBC as a reliable source of information.

David Jordan: On the complaints process, as Tina knows the BBC gets a huge number of contacts every year, and of those a significant proportion are editorial complaints, which can range from the very inconsequential—"I didn't like the colour of somebody's tie when they presented the 'Ten O'Clock News'", through to the very consequential and reputationally important. At the initial stage of those, we would get 250,000 of them in a normal year. In abnormal years, as was the year before this and the one before that, we had 460,000 and over 320,000 respectively. So we can get a huge number.

I think you will understand that in those contexts the initial responses tend to be what I would call industrial: that is, they are very generalised responses by and large, other than to some complaints, which we identify as being urgent. They may be urgent for reputational reasons or because they indicate to our programme and content makers how we are going to approach something or should not approach something. Dershowitz would be a good example of that. We need to deal with it quickly, because we do not want people making the same mistake across the organisation. There are other issues that are reputational, which we want to deal with quickly, because if it lingers and keeps going on it will do ask damage as an institution and affect the trust levels in the institution.

Most complaints, as you know, go through a three-stage process. The first stage is the BBC dealing with them, which is industrial. The second stage is more bespoke. The third stage is the ECU—the Executive Complaints Unit—which is independent of all programme or content makers. Ultimately, it then goes to Ofcom if it fits into its category of relevant complaints.

So the stages differ in the level of sophistication and nuance that we can apply. The initial stage is not as nuanced and sophisticated, but by the

time we have been through the process we have resolved in one way or another, either by upholding or in some other way, the vast majority of the complaints that the BBC receives, to the satisfaction of the complainant.

Q25 Viscount Colville of Culross: The Serota review suggests that editorial policy should be responsible for consolidating data on editorial risks and other issues. Clearly, as a result of the action plan, editorial policy is much further embedded in all areas of content production across the BBC. There is a fear among my former colleagues in news and other areas of content that this is making people much more risk averse—that it is making themselves self-censor, to a degree. How can you ensure that this adherence to what are quite rightly high BBC editorial standards, systems and all the things suggested in the action plan will not make the content risk averse?

Tim Davie: That is a very good question. I will let David say something, but first I want to say something about this as the editor-in-chief. We have been very clear, direct and open with everyone that editorial policy does not lead the output. It has to be the editor. I want people to take appropriate risk in their programming and journalistic risk, but editorial policy is there as advisory. With the best will in the world, however many resources we give David, we cannot have editorial policy sitting across every element of the BBC. We can make sure that it is there to build capability, deal swiftly and help with more demanding sets of choices or whatever, but it is advisory.

Your point is well made. If we are at a point where that risk is being washed out and people feel that unless they have editorial policy all over this they cannot progress, we have a problem. That is something that we are watching. All I would say is that we recognise it as a real risk. Our vision at the top of the BBC is not to have someone from editorial policy sitting beside every editorial decision, thereby washing risk from the editors and their ability to do their work.

Within that, by the way, we have to build confidence. It is such a public job, working at the BBC or editing “Woman’s Hour” or whatever, and it is tough because this environment is really demanding, but we need to build people’s confidence that we will act fairly. We want people to act on policy, but we will also be supportive of strong journalism. That is where I am. David, do you have anything to add? I know you and I have talked about this many times.

David Jordan: I completely agree with what Tim has just said. We have discussed this issue on many occasions. Once upon a time, before I took over the running of editorial policy, it was known in many parts of the BBC as “the thought police”.

Viscount Colville of Culross: I remember that.

David Jordan: You will probably remember that.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Yes, I do.

David Jordan: One of the tasks that I set myself in doing this job was to change us from being thought of as the thought police to being an enabling organisation. I have spent a lot of my time giving people the confidence to do the journalism, the programme making or the content making that they want to do, not the other way around. I think my colleagues do exactly the same thing: that is, we support journalists. We offer them ways of doing things within our editorial guidelines, within our standards and values, but help them to do the jobs that they want to do rather than the other way around.

So I hope you will go back to your many contacts at the BBC and tell them that this is something we are very aware of and do not want to happen, and that people should have the confidence to make the programme that they want, provided that it falls within the structure of our values and standards.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Thanks. I will pass that on.

Sir Nicholas Serota: A theme that ran right through the interviews that we did with journalists and editors during the review was that, much as they welcomed the advice that came from editorial policy, they wanted to be in a position to make the decisions about what should go on broadcast. There was a recognition that David's team numbers needed strengthening, because the quantity of output from the BBC has grown exponentially—especially, for instance, in relation to the World Service—but there was no doubt at all that journalists wanted to be in the position where they were continuing to make the decisions and not delegating them to editorial policy as such.

Q26 **The Chair:** I thank Tim Davie, Sir Nicholas Serota and David Jordan. I was struck by the clear opening to this meeting, where Tim described the challenge that you face in having a BBC that is relevant to everyone and that serves all audiences: that is, you are looking at all these complex issues around impartiality, and I was struck by that.

When I was preparing for this, I wondered why we worry so much about journalism and why it is a topic that we turn to so often. It is clearly so important. I wanted to close by paying tribute to journalists. Every year hundreds of journalists are imprisoned around the world, and many die. I think it is because of the work that they do, and the incredibly powerful role that they play, that we care so passionately about this.

I welcome, and I think we welcome, the evidence that you have given us today. We welcome the dialogue that we have had with you. I very much hope to continue to talk to you about these important issues in future. I conclude by thanking the witnesses very much for their time.

David Jordan: Chair, as I suspect this is probably the last meeting that will have witnesses from the BBC, we should thank you for your stewardship of the committee in the time you have been in the chair and for the civil way in which you have dealt with witnesses from the BBC.

Tim Davie: I echo that, Chair. On behalf of all of us, thank you for all the wise questioning. Typically, your last remarks were very important. There is lots of debate about the BBC, but we have always felt that defending good journalism and the creative industries in the UK is a task that needs proper consideration and the best form of interrogation. Thank you on behalf of all of us. We really appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you, and we appreciate the co-operation that we have had from across the BBC. I am sure the committee looks forward to engaging with you in the future. Thank you for those very kind remarks, and I draw the meeting to a close.