

Written evidence submitted by MG ALBA

DCMS Select Committee Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the Media Bill

MG ALBA, the Gaelic Media Service, operates and funds BBC ALBA, the Gaelic language television service, in partnership with the BBC.

In contrast to Welsh and Irish language PSB services, the Gaelic language service has no standing in law and its PSB protections are those secured through agreement with the BBC.

Government has acknowledged the importance of securing a sustainable future for Gaelic broadcasting. In that light, MG ALBA urges the Committee to consider whether the absence of statutory provision for a Gaelic PSB service – which leaves Gaelic broadcasting without a funding mechanism or rights to prominence in the digital domain - is detrimental to the future sustainability of Gaelic broadcasting and, if so, is an omission which ought to be rectified.

Background MG ALBA

MG ALBA was established by the Broadcasting Act 1990 to administer a fund for Gaelic television programmes. Its remit for funding a “wide and diverse range of high quality programmes in Gaelic” was expanded by the Communications Act 2003 to include the ability to operate a television service (other than Channels 3, 4 or 5). Responsibility for funding was transferred to Scottish Ministers in 1999 and governance oversight rests with Ofcom.

The Broadcasting White Paper 2022 captured the role of MG ALBA:

‘MG ALBA is the UK’s Gaelic language media service, with the remit to ensure the provision of a wide and diverse range of high quality programmes in the Gaelic language is made available to persons in Scotland. It makes an incredibly valuable contribution to the lives and wellbeing of Gaelic speakers across Scotland and the UK as a whole including through its partnership with the BBC in providing BBC ALBA.’

‘The government recognises the hugely valuable contribution that MG ALBA makes to the lives and wellbeing of Gaelic speakers across Scotland and the UK, including through its unique partnership with the BBC in the provision of BBC ALBA. Such a partnership must ensure high quality, diverse Gaelic language content continues to be readily available so that Gaelic culture is protected in the years to come. We also recognise that certainty of future funding is important for MG ALBA being able to deliver for Gaelic speakers.’ Extracts from Broadcasting White Paper, 2022

In 2008, under the terms of a bilateral agreement reached on 31 July 2007, the BBC and MG ALBA together launched the Gaelic language television service BBC ALBA. The new channel was supported by start up funding from UK Government and by an increase of funding by Scottish Ministers to MG ALBA and by the BBC to its Gaelic production and news teams.

The current BBC Framework Agreement consolidated the arrangement by including an undertaking by the BBC for the duration of the current BBC Charter to provide a mixed genre television service intended to allow MG ALBA to fulfil its remit for a wide and diverse range of programmes. Unlike the undertakings given to Welsh broadcasting there are no financial or output commitments.

BBC ALBA is also a social, economic, cultural and community catalyst, intrinsic to the ecology of the Highlands and Islands, as well as the rest of the United Kingdom. MG ALBA's contribution, on its own, is responsible for some 340 jobs, half of which are in economically fragile areas.

BBC ALBA help fulfil the UK Government's obligations under Article 11 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages as ratified by the UK in 2001.

The draft Media Bill

Content in Gaelic

Section 1(5)(b)(ii) of the draft Bill states creates a role for Ofcom to assess the sufficiency of indigenous minority language output across the PSB domain:

“...that the audiovisual content made available by the public service broadcasters (taken together) includes what appears to OFCOM to be a sufficient quantity of audiovisual content that— (ii) ...is in, or mainly in, a recognised regional or minority language” And. “...recognised regional or minority language” means Welsh, the Gaelic language as spoken in Scotland, Irish, Scots, Ulster Scots or Cornish.”

We ask the Committee to explore how this is intended work in practice. Key questions include:

- How will this impact each minority language in relation to existing provision?
- How might Ofcom determine a sufficient quantity?
- How will this be managed?
- What is regarded as content?

Omission of any provision for a Gaelic broadcasting service

It is important to note that the draft Media Bill makes no provision for a Gaelic audiovisual broadcasting service.

MG ALBA urges the Committee to explore the reasons for this omission and, in particular, why Parliament should not grant the same esteem in statute to Gaelic broadcasting as it does to Welsh broadcasting.