

COUNCIL– 14 JUNE 2011

The future of BBC Oxford

Report by Head of Strategy and Communications

Introduction

1. As part of the BBC's need to make £89m of cuts from its national BBC Journalism budget, managers at the corporation are considering withdrawing three regional TV news outlets in Oxford, Cambridge and the Channel Islands.
2. The cuts to BBC Journalism are part of wider cost-savings across the BBC that stem from the freezing of the TV licence for five years. The BBC has not made any formal decision on these proposals to date. Any firm proposals in coming months would be subject to the ratification of the BBC Trust, which would wish to hear the views of local people and organisations before making a final decision.
3. There are also suggestions that the BBC is looking at transferring some daytime broadcast time at all of its local radio stations to BBC Five Live. Such moves would not be unique to BBC Oxford.
4. BBC Oxford is based on the Banbury Road in Summertown and operates in the same building as BBC Radio Oxford.

Background

5. Since October 2000, BBC South has produced a distinct news service for Oxfordshire and areas of Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Wiltshire (including Swindon) and Berkshire that are adjacent to the county. Approximately 1 million people live within BBC Oxford TV's broadcast area. Around two-thirds of these people live in Oxfordshire.
6. Previously, the area was covered by Newsroom South East, which also served Greater London and the South East. A restructure of regional coverage meant that the Oxfordshire area was transferred to the BBC South region.
7. Before 2004 South Today Oxford was broadcast from BBC South's studios in Southampton. Studio production of the bulletins was transferred to a new television studio in Oxford in 2004. In April 2008 South Today Oxford was renamed BBC Oxford News.

8. From Monday to Thursday, the programme covers the first fifteen minutes of the main regional news programme at 6:30pm, before rejoining the Southampton newsroom for the second half of South Today. On Friday, the whole 30-minutes of the programme are dedicated to news from Oxfordshire and adjoining areas.
9. Viewers in these areas also receive dedicated bulletins at 3pm, 8pm and after the BBC News at Ten. Regional bulletins from Southampton are broadcast at breakfast and lunchtime and on weekends.
10. ITV's local news for Oxfordshire, Thames Valley Tonight, was moved from the county in 2009. The news service is produced and broadcast from ITV Meridian's studios near Southampton. The move has seen less focus on news from Oxfordshire.

The value of locally based BBC TV news

11. Oxfordshire County Council's decisions, service provision and democratic process are regularly covered by BBC Oxford TV as part of its news bulletins. It therefore plays a significant role in communicating the work of this council to the people of Oxfordshire.
12. BBC South TV's flagship evening bulletin at 6.30pm records an audience share of 38.4%. This means that out of all the people watching TV locally at that time of day, more than a third are watching local news on BBC Oxford – equating to around 300,000 people, the majority of whom live in Oxfordshire. This is a greater audience share than news services delivered from adjacent transmitter areas in the BBC South area at Hannington on the North Downs 16 miles south of Reading and Rowridge on the Isle of Wight.
13. The local TV news bulletins are therefore an important means that the council has of reaching the people of Oxfordshire. This has proved valuable in terms of reaching the public with important context as regards the local impact of public sector cuts and information such as the start of major roadworks schemes, public transport changes or major Capital Programme schemes and issues relating to schools.
14. The BBC's public service ethos has been of particular value to the County Council and its partners in the public sector during times of emergency such as the floods in 2007 and 2008 and in harsh winter episodes in early and late 2010 with important information being transmitted to Oxfordshire residents promptly.

BBC Radio Oxford

15. BBC Radio Oxford currently broadcasts from 5am to 7pm. From 7pm until 1am, the station shares regional programming with neighbouring

BBC local radio stations. From 1am to 5am, the station transfers to BBC Five Live's output.

16. Discussions have taken place at the BBC about reducing the number of hours of programming broadcast from Oxford (and all other local radio stations) – with increased simultaneous broadcasting from Five Live, in addition to the current 1am to 5am arrangement and possibly including programming in the middle of the day.
17. Local radio is equally invaluable in reaching the public with important news and especially at times of emergency.

Communications channels

18. Different communications channels have different properties. Some are particularly good at reaching small, niche audiences. Others are more tailored towards reaching wide audiences. The media generally falls in to the latter category.
19. Cuts to public sector funding have required many councils to examine their own communications budgets. For instance, Oxfordshire County Council took a decision in late 2010 to end funding for its own residents magazine - another means through which wider audiences can be reached with important information.
20. The unique value to individuals and organisations of news delivered through the media is that it can in no way be viewed as propaganda. Other communications channels such as advertising, direct marketing, e-communications and online communications (and in the private sector, sales promotions and personal selling) do not see information being filtered through an independent third-party and can therefore be viewed as propaganda. The balanced use of various communications channels with all of their individual benefits is important to organisations such as Oxfordshire County Council. The democratic nature of the council means that the media is of more importance in that balance than might be the case for a commercial or private organisation.
21. While a TV news service delivered from Southampton would undoubtedly still cover news from Oxford it is reasonable to assume that there would be less dedicated focus on news from the county and on Oxfordshire County Council. The same dilution would result from increased use of the national BBC radio station Five Live instead of coverage delivered from the BBC Radio Oxford studio in Summertown. This would therefore impact on the council's ability to communicate with its local residents.
22. It could also be argued that the existence of a discrete local BBC news service reflects Oxfordshire's coherence as a county and community with a distinctive identity. The local newspaper industry also reflects

this coherence. It is centred on Newsquest's operation at Osney Mead in Oxford. Newsquest Oxfordshire incorporates the Oxford Mail and Times, Banbury Cake, Bicester Advertiser, Witney Gazette and the Abingdon/Didcot/Wantage and Wallingford Herald newspapers.

Financial and Staff Implications

23. There are no financial or staffing implications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

24. The Council is RECOMMENDED to:

- (a) record that it believes that a cessation of the local TV service and dilution of the local radio service would deny the people of Oxfordshire a truly local and comprehensive television news service and that local communities could lose their voice and the council could lose an important channel of communication;**
- (b) ask the Leader of the Council to write to the Chairman of the BBC Trust, the Director General of the BBC and to respond to any consultation on the proposals expressing the Council's concern and opposition;**
- (c) ask the Leader of the Council to write to all six local MPs and the Culture Secretary to express these concerns and ask for their support against the proposals.**

GUY SWINDLE

Head of Strategy and Communications

Background papers: None

Contact Officer: Guy Swindle, Head of Strategy and Communications, Tel: (01865) 815466; Paul Smith, External Relations Manager, Tel: (01865) 810256