

RNIB'S COMMENTS ON THE BBC DOCUMENT "BUILDING PUBLIC VALUE"

1. Introduction

1.1 The Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) is the leading organisation representing the needs and interests of people with a sight problem in the UK. It works directly and indirectly with blind and partially sighted people, representative organisations, visual impairment professionals, national and local government, the broadcasting and entertainment sector, and a range of public and private organisations.

1.2 RNIB recognises that television and radio are the most important media for blind and partially sighted people, giving access to a range of news, information and entertainment. RNIB recognises also that in the digital age access to these media is more difficult, and that at the time of digital switchover many blind and partially sighted people could be left without access to television and radio services. RNIB has worked with a number of organisations over the past few years to identify and address the problems presented by digital television, in particular. The BBC has been a key organisation in access work to date work (e.g. developing audio description) and RNIB welcomes the opportunity to respond to some of its proposals.

1.3 In Building Public Value the BBC has recognised both the importance of digital services and technology and the problems that these present to many people in the UK. A number of themes and issues occur throughout the document and the following section details areas of interest and/or concern to RNIB. In many instances the two organisations can work together to ensure that blind and partially sighted people can benefit from digital television and can achieve a satisfactory switch.

2. Importance of BBC to people with a sight problem

The BBC is very important to people with a sight problem, as a leader in driving digital take-up, as public service broadcaster, as provider of learning materials, as enabler of communities and citizenship participation, and as force for developing talent and career opportunities. Blind and partially sighted people also have specific concerns with regards to the licence fee and the

governance of the BBC.

2.1 Importance of BBC as a leader in driving digital take-up and digital access solutions

The BBC has the potential to lead in the important areas that would benefit blind and partially sighted people, namely by:

- Identifying access problems (e.g. problems in accessing electronic navigation tools such as electronic programme guides; problems in accessing digital teletext services or interactive and on-demand services for people with sight problems). Carrying out research and user testing in these problem areas to achieve affordable open standard solutions that can be implemented across the industry.
- Increasing the amount of audio description on all BBC channels, encouraging other broadcasters to do the same. RNIB would recommend that ideally 50% of programmes should be audio described. More audio description would be an incentive for many blind and partially sighted viewers to move to digital.
- Promoting audio description as a benefit of switching to digital TV e.g. by providing open audio description on analogue television to ensure greater general public awareness.
- Using the BBC's technical experience to encourage more manufacturers to produce audio description capable Freeview receivers.
- Ensuring continuing high quality programmes are provided on digital television, as an incentive to move to digital, but also on analogue in order not to penalise late adopters.
- Playing a leading role in promoting both digital television and audio description to blind and partially sighted people. This involves ensuring that all communications about these services are available in accessible formats and that on-air promotional material contains sufficient verbal information to make it fully comprehensible for viewers with sight problems. Providing information that makes it easy to understand how to access digital television and radio services and equipment.

- Working with others to achieve a long-term free-to-view, cost effective, digital satellite service, particularly to enable viewers to receive digital services prior to switch-over.

2.2 The importance of public service broadcasting to blind and partially sighted people

- Many blind and partially sighted people are more dependent than the general population on the broadcast media for access to news and current affairs, both at a national and local level.
- As the leading UK public service broadcaster, and the only one that receives direct public funding, the BBC has a responsibility to ensure that the principles of universal access (free at the point of delivery) is maintained and that delivery of a range of high quality programming continues.
- With the prospect of a more fragmented broadcasting marketplace public service broadcasters have a role to play in ensuring the continuation of reliable and impartial news and current affairs.

2.3 The importance of accessible learning opportunities to blind and partially sighted people

- The BBC's Open Centres and multimedia learning buses are an ideal way for blind and partially sighted people to get a better understanding of what digital can offer and how it works. It is essential for staff at these centres to know about access technology so that they can provide effective assistance to blind and partially sighted people. RNIB is interested in working with the BBC to ensure that blind and partially sighted people get the best out of these services.
- The Digital Curriculum is an ambitious project and RNIB is already working with the BBC to ensure that it is accessible. It is essential to ensure that this service is available both for mainstream and specialist education.
- The landmark educational campaigns could be extremely valuable, particularly if Media Literacy is included. As identified by the Communications Act 2003 and the recent Ofcom

consultation it is essential for people to understand how to access and use digital services and equipment. This is particularly important for people with a sight problem, the elderly, and those with cognitive difficulties. With its range of services and facilities the BBC is in an ideal position to take a leading role to ensure that the Media Literacy campaign reaches these groups.

- Sport and music play a very strong part in many blind and partially sighted peoples lives, with RNIB's college at Redhill having a dedicated music centre. RNIB would welcome discussions on the BBC's plans on grass roots participation.

2.4 The importance of localness, communities, citizenship participation to blind and partially sighted people

- Many blind and partially sighted people would welcome a more local radio and television news service and the opportunity to get more involved in their community, but would need encouragement and the facilities to enable them to do so. The success of the Glasgow-based internet radio station for Blind and Partially sighted people VIP on air proves that once the facilities are provided, the take-up by the community of blind and partially sighted people follows shortly. RNIB is interested in further partnership working to provide similar radio services to blind and partially sighted in other regions.
- The BBC's iCan site sounds excellent and RNIB would want to ensure that it is promoted as widely as possible.
- Initiatives such as BBC Connector and Get Writing could help blind and partially sighted people overcome the isolation they often feel, particularly if they are housebound. RNIB would welcome discussing how to get people more involved and how to reach blind and partially sighted people as a specific community of interest.

2.4 The importance of developing blind and partially sighted people's talent, career opportunities, reflecting society

- The BBC has outlined ambitious programming plans in order to achieve originality and excellence. This presents an ideal opportunity to ensure that disabled programme makers and

performers including blind and partially sighted people can become more part of the mainstream. There is the opportunity also for developing talent and for raising the profile of disability in society as a whole. As a global media player the BBC should set a good example.

- With its range of services and staff the BBC is in an ideal position to provide training and opportunities for disabled programme makers and performers, to ensure that they can compete on an equal basis. As a member of the Broadcasters and Creative Industries Disability Network the BBC has said that it applies equal opportunities to its employment practices. It is essential to recognise that people with a sight problem can work in a range of media areas, with the right support. RNIB is keen to work with the BBC to develop work placement and career opportunities for blind and partially sighted people.
- RNIB welcomes the BBC's commitment to improve portrayal of people with disabilities and looks forward to further discussions on how this will be achieved.
- RNIB welcomes the BBC's aim to ensure that the interests and needs of its audience are at its centre. It is essential that BBC staff dealing with the public understand the issues and frustrations of being blind or partially sighted, so that they can understand and deal effectively with queries and complaints.

2.5 Licence Fee

- RNIB supports the principle of the TV Licence Fee as the method of paying for the BBC's services in-so-far as it ensures that the BBC is accountable to the public, and that the needs and interests of the audience are paramount. However, if there are changes in the future it will be essential to ensure that in any direct payment scheme reduced fees are still available to people with a sight problem, particularly while such a wide range of broadcast services are inaccessible to them.
- RNIB welcomes the BBC's aim to find ways of improving the collection of the fee. If the proposal to end the renewal of the TV Licence for over-75s is agreed it will be essential for all communications about this to be available in a range of accessible formats.

2.6 Governing the BBC

- RNIB supports the BBC's proposals for making the Board of Governors more independent, with the appropriate resources to carry out their role more effectively. In order to achieve a more effective role RNIB feels that is essential that at least one BBC Governor should be a person with a disability or a person with detailed knowledge of people with disabilities.
- Too often the needs and interests of some groups in society are overlooked in the desire to achieve the largest audience or drive the take-up of new technology. To help the Governors have a greater understanding when dealing with specific issues RNIB recommends the setting up of a disability and consumer advisory group.

3. Conclusion

RNIB recognises the support that the BBC has given to the needs of blind and partially sighted people and hopes that the two organisations can continue to work together to achieve a successful digital switchover that provides access solutions and benefits for blind and partially sighted people.

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