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Sound Start Group Response to the BBC Trust Review of Children's Services 2013

The Sound Start Group includes parents and professionals in education, childcare, publishing, entertainment and the law. Our mission is to raise awareness of children's rights and needs in public service radio broadcasting. The group is chaired by The Baroness Warnock and coordinated by Susan Stranks.



Photograph courtesy of PSquared

Providing outstanding children's content is one of the BBC's five editorial priorities as set out in the 'Putting Quality First' strategy. We believe it is very important that the BBC serves children across all its platforms as part of its public service mission".

BBC Trust Review of Children's Services 2009

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Introduction:

"Getting the best out of the BBC for licence fee payers" is the strap line of the BBC Trust.

Children do not pay the licence fee but they should have the best publicly funded advertisement-free radio, television and internet services free at the point of use. They need age-appropriate home-grown content to enrich their cultural experience and reflect their lives and the world around them, now and for the future.

There is strong public support for the principle of licence fees to fund public service television and radio and the listed advantages include diversity, high quality, education, innovation, entertainment, information, original productions, pluralism, accessibility, inclusion of minorities, free and free of advertising. The Sound Start Group welcomes this review in the hope that it will be thorough and transparent - leading to a better understanding of what children want and also what they need from UK broadcasting services, in which the BBC should continue to lead the way.

In a strange anomaly UK broadcasting law safeguards children's television but only protects choice and access in radio for listeners aged 15 years and above - leaving the rest dependent on the will of management. We share anxieties about the shrinking percent of UK produced television for children but this response will concentrate on the BBC's policy for children's radio, about which our concerns are well known.

Response:

The BBC Trust Review of Children's Services 2009 states:

"Awareness and reach of radio content for children are very low. The BBC provides CBeebies radio programmes for young children and Big Toe Books for older children on the digital radio station BBC 7 as well as Go4it, a magazine show for children on BBC Radio 4. Audience research indicates that audience awareness and reach for this content is very low, mainly because the programmes are broadcast at inconvenient times and on stations which are primarily aimed at an older audience where children are unlikely to look for content when it is available." [Our underlining]

'Go4It' disappeared in March 2009 but 'CBeebies Radio' and 'Big Toe Books' remained on the digital only speech network, R7. Two years later these too were scrapped.

PSB radio for children has been driven to near extinction under BBC stewardship and, despite decades of expanding capacity, young listeners are left with less than 'Children's Hour' provided in the 1940's when the Home Service was the only platform of delivery.

In 2009 Jana Bennett, Director, BBC Vision, announced that investment in children's programmes would be increased by £25million across the following three years but none was invested in children's radio which has suffered cuts ever since.

The BBC is licensed to provide high quality music, drama, comedy, documentary, news and information in a non-commercial environment to all its communities across all its platforms and to set benchmarks for others to aspire to but, by its own admission, it has struggled to fulfil this obligation to young listeners. This consultation is a welcome opportunity to reassess current policy and find new ways to introduce children to the lifetime of discovery and enjoyment radio can offer, with the BBC leading the way.

BBC Children's Radio: History

'Children's Hour' began in 1922 on the BBC Home Service, which was then the only delivery platform. The programme was axed in 1964, under its later title 'For the Young'.

'Listen with Mother' began in 1950 on the BBC Light Programme moved to the Home Service [Later R4] and was axed in 1982.

'Cat's Whiskers' was launched on Radio 5 in 1986 and was axed in 1994 when the station was re-launched as 5 Live.

The R4 children's magazine programme on Sundays at 7pm was scrapped in 1998.

'Go4It', for four to 14 year olds, launched on Radio 4 in 2001 with a 30 minute magazine format at 7.15pm on Sundays [The slot the BBC had previously found children didn't listen]. 'Go4it' was scrapped in 2009.

Radio 3's term-time series 'Making Tracks' launched in 2005 and was axed in 2006.

Radio 7: the BBC's digital adult speech network launched in 2002 with 'Little Toe' for 4-6 yr olds at 2-5pm and 'Big Toe Books' for 7 yrs plus at 7-8am. 'Little Toe' rebranded as 'CBeebies' Radio and moved to 5-8am and then reduced to 6-8am. 'Big Toe Books' moved from 7-8am to 4-5pm.

Both strands were scrapped in the BBC's Strategy for Children's Audio: February 2011, when radio for listeners under six years old was terminated and the remaining 25% for older children was rescheduled as 'family listening' on R4Extra - the rebranded R7: an adult speech network that is also the licensed home of horror, sci-fi and stand-up comedy.

This illustrates the BBC's fragmented efforts to nurture the radio habit in the young and the consensus is that the BBC buried its children's radio in adult speech formats where it languished unpublicised, undiscovered and unloved - disrupting schedules and interfering with adult listening, which was given precedence.

The need:

Radio is essential to children's culture and its value cannot be overestimated. It stimulates listening, talking, imagination, concentration, comprehension, coordination and memory.

Radio can reach beyond family, school and peer-group, not only providing what children think they want but also what they never knew they could have.

A succession of government reports has revealed an increase in language deficit, with children joining reception class unable to express themselves or understand what is asked of them. This can lead to isolation, poor self esteem and even bullying, which hinders their school and social life as well as future employment chances. Radio can help.

Practitioners in childcare and education agree that shared and solo listening to high quality songs, stories, rhymes, word games, music and movement supports children in home and school settings, but many parents don't know traditional stories and rhymes and prefer to sing along to the pop charts, which generally have little relevance to young children's lives. Radio can support disabled, sick and home-schooled children and bring balance to the prevailing screen and keyboard activity so often blamed for communication delay, obesity and attention disorders. Radio can also help families who are learning English as an additional Language, particularly those who may be more confined to the home by custom or religion.

Current BBC policy:

In preparing this response it is necessary to refer to the **BBC's Strategy for Children's Audio** which introduced current policy in February 2011. This document is central to any debate about BBC Children's radio as it ordered significant revisions to the R7 Service Licence and implemented the following changes as permanent and ongoing:

- delete the BBC's mandate to provide a non-commercial radio home *for* children and reword it to provide content *that appeals to* children
- cut 75% of children's radio time (from 1,400 hrs to 350 hrs a year)
- cut 50% of the children's radio budget (Of £640.1m budget for BBC domestic radio less than £600K is allocated to 'family radio content')
- replace all radio for under-sixes with original content delivered as 20 minute internet downloads. (These average 12 minutes of overwhelmingly TV sourced material)
- reschedule remaining content for children aged six and over in a 'family friendly' hour on rebranded R4Extra, which is the designated home of horror, sci-fi, fantasy and stand-up comedy
- prioritise release of BBC children's radio archive to commercial operators.

The Strategy was challenged by families, educators and childcare professionals who were concerned about the permanent loss of BBC Children's Radio; unfairness compared with general savings of 16-20%; internet-only content for under-sixes; unsuitable context for family listening and trade of archive to commercial rivals.

A meeting of protest in the House of Lords recommended a delay pending further consultation but the changes were ratified and implemented in full. Conversely, R6; the Asian Network; World Service and BBC Local Radio gained whole or partial reprieves.

For years the BBC insisted that children didn't want radio but only TV and pop music - the rest, they said, could buy tapes or CDs. Today's argument is that children prefer listening to 'audio' online via computers and personal devices. Adults also access audio via computers and personal devices and still benefit from traditional radio delivery.

The aggregate word 'audio' tends to muddy the waters and undermines the unique qualities of radio. Tim Davie was Director of BBC Audio & Music but Lord Patten insisted that Helen Boaden was appointed **Director of Radio** in welcome respect for the medium.

Guidelines and Questionnaires for the Review:

The selected age-range of the target audience is unclear. "*Children aged between 6 and 12*" actually means those aged 7 to 11 and "*Children under 12*" means those up to 11. "*Children aged 6 to 12*" more accurately represents the age range chosen by Trustees but why have they excluded listeners aged 13 and 14 who make up 22.2% of the children served by R4Extra's 'family content'? The age-range appears to be dictated by the CBBC and CBeebies television brands which also exclude 13 and 14 year olds. Young people listen to many stations - R1, R2 and 5Live, for example - but their interests in music and speech range beyond these. Dedicated content should be available up to secondary school leaving age.

Children aged under six and their families are not represented in the Questionnaires but are subject to a separate CBeebies survey. This audience suffered most in policy which replaced their daily hours with 'Crime and Thrillers' and left them with downloads that families without the internet cannot access. These vulnerable listeners lost all their BBC radio and their views and those of their parents should be openly canvassed rather than restricted to CBeebies interviews which are likely to focus respondents on the downloads and away from the radio hours they replaced.

Guidelines advise that R4Extra is the primary service for broadcasting children's radio programmes without warning about the adult focus of the rest of the network. As a consequence responding children could stray across unsuitable material when searching out content they are asked to comment on and there is the potential for harm and offence.

BBC School Radio is excluded from the Review but having for so long been relegated to downloads at 3am in term-time, this extensive archive of valuable material also needs urgent review, as it represents publicly funded content that could benefit children more widely and efficiently.

BBC Editorial Guidelines:

Radio has no watershed and producers and executives fight strenuously against imposing one. R4Extra airs content that can include extreme violence, potentially offensive language and sexually explicit material in programmes repeated up to three times a day. Adult podcasts are available next to those for the 4 O'Clock Show at a click of the mouse.

Television can control the images children watch but there's no way to control what they 'see' via radio, which requires extra care because sound can be more vivid than pictures.

In response to complaints about conflicted scheduling contravening Editorial Guidelines the BBC insists R4Extra is an adult network to which the number of children listening is minimal, and advises parental monitoring. Making children's radio so insecure that parents need to police it taints the medium and children's perception of it. Adults don't want censorship but children need time and space to discover the joy of radio in safety. As the home of adult horror, crime and stand-up comedy R4Extra isn't that space.

Do children listen?:

By way of excuse for scrapping its children's radio remit the BBC speculated that today's children may no longer be able to listen without visual stimulation - apparently unmindful of culpability were such an alarming surmise to be true. Conversely, the BBC highlights the popularity of BBC 'Schools News Report' and R2's current '500 Words' story competition [sadly not open to 14 year olds] but these once-a-year events represent a tiny example of radio's potential in young lives.

FUNKids, abracaDABra!, Takeover Radio, Children and Radio and many RSL's in schools and clubs fight independently to bring radio to children and young audiences certainly enjoy hearing and creating it. With its vast public subsidy the BBC should take the helm and help to steady the ship rather than abandon it. Release of the redundant children's archive to third parties was made a priority in the Audio Strategy but, after more than two years of unforeseen copyright hurdles, just 26 CBeebies Stories have been released [to internet service abracaDABra!] with many hours of shelved content still awaiting clearance.

In 2001 Culture Secretary, Chris Smith, promised to reserve not one but several digital radio networks for children and education, however, when DAB was released, his successor, Tessa Jowell, approved the BBC's five new formats, none of which was for children.

Children should have been allocated a DAB network by the BBC but if they must be shoe-horned into an adult format we have advised management several times that R2 is preferable, with its mixed speech and music remit and family friendly hosts such as Anneke Rice and Chris Evans. *However, care must always be exercised over children's exposure to news coverage.*

Research commissioned by **Children 2000** in 2001, 2010, 2011 and 2013 shows strong public support for a digital radio network dedicated to young children and their families compared to the BBC's five digital formats. In the first three studies a children's service polled top-line or above and the most recent, in April 2013, placed it third.

Least popular in each case is the BBC Asian Network and our response to the Trust Review of this network proposed revision of the Service Licence to provide more inclusively for families with young children across all our communities. However, planned closure of the network was repealed and it remains on air with an annual budget of £9.3 million.

Conclusion:

In the interests of duty and fairness this Review needs to consider the following questions:

1. Do the instant cuts of 75% airtime and 50% budget compare fairly with savings averaging 16-20% across other departments spread over five years?
2. Do TV sourced podcasts averaging 12 minutes duration adequately replace regular daily radio for children aged under six, bearing in mind families without internet access, who may be the most needful group?
3. Does trade of public archive to rival commercial stations mitigate against the BBC's withdrawal from Children's Radio?
4. Is such trade likely to commercialise young ears and top-slice the licence fee?
5. In decades of expanding capacity is it fair to reduce children's public service radio to less than 'Children's Hour' provided in the 1940s when the Home Service was the only platform of delivery?
6. Does 15 to 20 minutes of children's content in a daily hour of clips from adult stations, delivered via the network licensed for horror, sci-fi and stand-up comedy, represent fair apportionment and responsible placement of publicly funded radio for listeners aged six to 14 years?
7. Does the current high rotation and repetition of adult content across BBC R4 and R4Extra, together with numerous free downloads and commercial CDs, compare fairly with the space and content officially allocated to family radio?
8. Is less than £600k per annum from an annual budget of £640.1million for BBC domestic radio a fair proportion of the BBC's domestic radio budget to invest in family content?

Providing outstanding children's content is one of the BBC's five editorial priorities and the Trust requires the BBC to serve children across all its platforms as part of its public service mission. Radio is a significant public platform and, if the BBC is permitted to drop its remit to provide radio for children and trade superfluous archive with rival companies it will commercialise young ears and top-slice the licence fee. Furthermore, if the gambit fails to satisfy private share-holders children's radio will die. No other community of listeners is treated with such disdain.

Rajar figures for the '4 O'Clock Show' don't account for listeners aged under 15 years so it will be difficult to gage their interest. Given ongoing scheduling difficulties, there is a real danger that children will be expunged from yet another BBC network as a problematic and disinterested audience. What follows could be years more prevarication and copyright wrangles at public expense while young listeners wait on the sidelines. A year is a long time in a young child's life and radio can and should be an exciting part of it.

The Savile case and fallout from it has placed care and protection of children at the top of the BBC agenda. Scheduling of children's radio on an adult network that is officially licensed as the home of horror, sci-fi and stand-up comedy calls into question the BBC's judgement.

We make no apology for reiterating our concerns about young listeners who continue to be so neglected. BBC savings were necessary but children suffered unfairly in the forefront of the cuts and their rights and needs have been sidelined without fair assessment. Clearly there is scope for a rigorous and transparent review of public radio for children but all the facts need to be on the table.

A way forward:

A generous daily slice of news-free airtime on R2 would offer a safer temporary solution. Meanwhile a complete rethink is needed, with robust research and transparent appraisal of available content, capacity and funding. We have suggested this could be conducted in partnership with committed practitioners from the public, private and voluntary sectors, to partner BBC resources with wide relevant experience.

The Sound Start Group proposed an independent evaluation of radio's potential in children's leisure and learning in 2008, 2009 and again 2010 and a template for this can be found at www.sound-start.com.

Contact: Susan Stranks, Coordinator, Sound Start Group. www.sound-start.com

Documents relied on >>>

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- MORI and Capibus Ipsos MORI surveys
- [2001 Research Data](#)
- [2010 Research Data](#)
- [2011 Research Data](#)
- [2013 Research Data](#)
- [Broadcasting & Communications Act 2003](#)
- [R7 and R4Extra Service Licences](#)
- [Ofcom Broadcasting Codes](#)
- [BBC Charter](#)
- [BBC Editorial Guidelines](#)
- [BBC Trust Service Review of the Asian Network](#)
- [Delivering Quality First \(DQF\)](#)
- [Sound Start Group Response to BBC Trust Consultation on Delivering Quality First](#)
- [Sound Start Group Response to BBC Trust Consultation on the Asian Network](#)
- [Hart and Risley \(1995\)](#)
- [Bercow Review \(July 2008\)](#)
- [Frank Field Report on Poverty and Life Chances \(December 2010\)](#)
- [Allen Report \(January 2011\)](#)
- [Reg Bailey Report - Letting Children be Children \(June 2011\)](#)
- [Jean Gross Report \(December 2011\)](#)
- [Darren Henley's Report - Music Education in England \(February 2011\)](#)
- [Darren Henley's Review of Cultural Education \(April 2012\)](#)
- [Speaking Out: Young offenders - RCSLT \(2010\)](#)

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