



DEPARTMENT FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

**Government Response to the  
Northern Ireland Affairs Committee  
Report on Television Broadcasting in  
Northern Ireland: 3rd report of Session  
2009/10**

*Presented to Parliament by the  
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport  
by Command of Her Majesty  
March 2010*

**© Crown Copyright 2010**

The text in this document (excluding the Royal Arms and other departmental or agency logos) may be reproduced free of charge in any format or medium providing it is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright and the title of the document specified.

Where we have identified any third party copyright material you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

For any other use of this material please contact the Office of Public Sector Information, Information Policy Team, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU or e-mail: [licensing@opsi.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:licensing@opsi.gsi.gov.uk).

ISBN: 978 0 10 178462 7

Printed in the UK by The Stationery Office Limited  
on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office

ID 2356866 03/10 2561 19585

Printed on paper containing 75% recycled fibre content minimum.

# **Government Response to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Report on Television Broadcasting in Northern Ireland: Third Report of Session 2009-10**

## **Introduction**

The Government welcomes the report and has considered very carefully the evidence presented to the Committee. The Government notes the conclusions and recommendations set out in the report and is pleased to be able to present its response.

Recommendations 4 and 15 are for the BBC to consider and it would be inappropriate for the Government to comment, given the Corporation's independence.

## **Response to conclusions and recommendations**

1. We recommend that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport takes more care to include Northern Ireland in its future thinking and documentation on UK-wide broadcasting. (Paragraph 8)
2. We recommend that the Minister for Creative Industries visits Northern Ireland as soon as possible, and thereafter, at least once a year subsequently to become fully acquainted with the broadcast environment there. As long as broadcasting in Northern Ireland remains the responsibility of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, we recommend that that Department attempts, at the very least, to build some confidence in Northern Ireland that it is properly and fully aware of its responsibilities. (Paragraph 9)

**The Government is fully aware of its responsibilities and is generally satisfied that broadcasting policy does have due regard to Northern Ireland.**

**The Committee may wish to be aware that the process of producing the Digital Britain White Paper included a stakeholder event in Northern Ireland. The White Paper itself included a recommendation intended to benefit television production in the Nations, including Northern Ireland, and also highlighted the work being done to promote media literacy in Northern Ireland.**

**Nonetheless, the Department notes the Committee's recommendations and will keep them in mind in developing future policies.**

3. We attach fundamental importance to the continuity of service and we therefore urge the UK Government to ensure that its discussions with the Government of the Republic of Ireland guarantee that there is no loss of service or amenity to the people of Northern Ireland. We ask for definitive assurance on this point before the end of this Parliament. (Paragraph 12)

**We are pleased to report that the Government of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 1 February. The purpose of the memorandum is that the two Governments co-operate to ensure a smooth transition to digital terrestrial television; ensure the continued widespread availability of TG4 in Northern Ireland, in line with the commitment in the Belfast Agreement; and facilitate the widespread availability of BBC services in Ireland and of RTE services in Northern Ireland.**

5. We recommend that the Government urge Ofcom to monitor levels of production from Northern Ireland by the BBC and Channel 4 to ensure that their targets, as public service broadcasters, are met as speedily as is practicable and without negative impacts on the quality of production. (Paragraph 21)

**Ofcom is an independent regulator and its remit, set out in the Communications Act 2003, requires it to monitor the production quotas set for public service broadcasters. This involves an analysis of production undertaken in the Nations, including Northern Ireland.**

**The Committee's recommendation is therefore one that Ofcom will wish to consider and it would be inappropriate for Government to become involved.**

6. We strongly recommend that the Government ask the BBC seriously and urgently to consider locating a programme commissioner permanently within Northern Ireland with the express mandate of improving and increasing production from the Province. (Paragraph 25)
7. We recommend that the Government seek to engage with broadcasters and producers so as more accurately to reflect life as it is in Northern Ireland in a way that is understandable throughout the rest of the UK. We recommend that the Government encourage the BBC and Channel 4 to use programmes made within the province for UK-wide broadcasting to address the lack of portrayal and to help ensure the people throughout the rest of the UK have a clearer perception of Northern Ireland – its people, its geography and wildlife, history and culture; and of its history and culture in times before “the Troubles”. (Paragraph 30)

**These are recommendations for the broadcasters to consider. Within the framework of the Communications Act and the BBC's Charter and Agreement, the broadcasters are independent of Government and there is no provision for Government to intervene in day-to-day operational and editorial matters. This is important in maintaining the important principle of freedom of expression by broadcasters.**

8. We recommend that given the strength, popularity and reach of UTV as a competitor to the BBC in Northern Ireland at present, an IFNC should be introduced only once the lessons of the pilots in Scotland, Wales and an English Television Broadcasting in Northern Ireland region have been learned. We note that those three areas have been chosen for pilots because continued news provision is under significant immediate threat in each, whereas this is not at present the case in Northern Ireland. We therefore recommend that the Government consult with Ofcom and broadcasters in Northern Ireland after the pilots to fully assess the suitability of IFNCs within the province, taking into account its current unique position within the UK in terms of its news provision. (Paragraph 46)

**The Government agrees with the Committee's view and will naturally discuss when a roll out of IFNCs to Northern Ireland can be accomplished with all interested parties including Ofcom, broadcasters and the Northern Ireland Executive.**

9. We recommend that the Government assess the non-news based needs of Northern Ireland, and also actively and urgently consider devolving to the Northern Ireland Assembly the administration of funding for local, non-news programming possibly to include drama, children's content and current affairs in Northern Ireland. (Paragraph 50)

**The Government has had to distinguish between where plurality is desirable and where it is essential. The priority for the Government is to focus on what is essential and evidence shows that people care most about news. For a significant, but smaller group, plural provision of original non-news programming is also seen as important. The Government's Digital Economy Bill will place a new requirement for the Channel 4 Corporation (C4C) to include content for older children and young adults in its services. We consider that adjusting C4C's functions in this way is a more appropriate way of securing increased provision of children's content without adding pressure on the public purse during this difficult economic period.**

10. We recommend that, given its legal obligations under the Belfast Agreement, the UK Government prioritise the guarantee of funding for the Irish Broadcasting Fund beyond March 2011. (Paragraph 57)

**The Government has agreed that it will continue to fund the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund, with a further £3m a year being made available for a further 4 years up to 2015.**

11. We recommend that the Government fully assess minority language provision, particularly the provision of Ulster Scots, in Northern Ireland and ensure that it is meeting its obligations as stated in the Belfast Agreement and the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. (Paragraph 60)

**The Belfast Agreement committed the Government to exploring the scope for achieving more widespread availability of TG4 in Northern Ireland and to seek more effective ways to encourage and provide support for the Irish language film and television production in Northern Ireland. The Government considers both these undertakings fulfilled. The erection of a new aerial at Divis has enabled the widespread availability of TG4 throughout Northern Ireland and the recent MoU signed with the Irish government ensures this will continue post-DSO. Similarly, the establishment of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund has ensured greater financial support for an independent Irish language production sector in Northern Ireland. The Government is satisfied that it is meeting its obligations under the Charter, and the recent third report of the Committee of Experts on the Charter confirmed that those undertakings in respect of broadcasting matters at Article 11 of the Charter have been fulfilled.**

12. This short inquiry has clearly demonstrated that Northern Ireland is culturally neglected by the BBC, Channel 4 and those who commission television programmes within the UK and by those with ministerial responsibilities in the UK Government. Concerted efforts need urgently to be directed towards eradicating that neglect. (Paragraph 61)

**The Government is satisfied that it is meeting its responsibilities. For example, as noted above, the Government has renewed its commitment to fund the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund. Nonetheless, the Government will bear the recommendation in mind.**

13. UTV has the biggest audience share of any local news provider in the UK, demonstrating a clear demand for output produced in Northern Ireland. Further to satisfy that demand, we greatly welcome the emergence of a number of small independent companies within Northern Ireland. (Paragraph 62)

**The Government notes the Committee's conclusion and considers that Government measures intended to boost the independent production sector have supported the Committee's findings. For example, the Communications Act and the BBC's Charter and Agreement include measures intended to boost independent and regional production.**

14. An independently funded news consortium pilot may not be an immediate priority, but we repeat that the portrayal of Northern Ireland throughout the rest of the UK and beyond is poor. It is also crucial that a fund for non-news provision, to be administered by the Northern Ireland Assembly, should be provided by the Government. (Paragraph 63)

**The Government is aware of proposals for a publicly funded independent media commission for Northern Ireland charged with commissioning news and non-news programmes from independent producers in Northern Ireland. The Government is not proposing to create and centrally fund such a commission at this time. However, it is open to the Northern Ireland Executive to fund content itself if it is considered a priority.**



information & publishing solutions

Published by TSO (The Stationery Office) and available from:

**Online**

[www.tsoshop.co.uk](http://www.tsoshop.co.uk)

**Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail**

TSO

PO Box 29, Norwich, NR3 1GN

Telephone orders/General enquiries: 0870 600 5522

Order through the Parliamentary Hotline Lo-Call 0845 7 023474

Fax orders: 0870 600 5533

E-mail: [customer.services@tso.co.uk](mailto:customer.services@tso.co.uk)

Textphone: 0870 240 3701

**The Parliamentary Bookshop**

12 Bridge Street, Parliament Square

London SW1A 2JX

Telephone orders/General enquiries: 020 7219 3890

Fax orders: 020 7219 3866

Email: [bookshop@parliament.uk](mailto:bookshop@parliament.uk)

Internet: <http://www.bookshop.parliament.uk>

**TSO@Blackwell and other Accredited Agents**

**Customers can also order publications from:**

TSO Ireland

16 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GD

Tel 028 9023 8451 Fax 028 9023 5401

ISBN 978-0-10-178462-7

