

S4C Authority
Bulletin – November 1999

This is the latest in the S4C Authority's regular bulletins about its discussions and decisions. It reports on the Authority's meetings in Merthyr Tydfil in late October and looks forward to the forthcoming meetings in Llandysul.

PUBLIC MEETING

The Authority has a continuing programme of open public meetings. These give members of the public the opportunity to put their views and questions face to face to the Chair, Elan Closs Stephens, the Chief Executive, Huw Jones and the Director of Programmes, Huw Eirug. Other members of the Authority attend to hear the discussion and to talk informally with members of the public before and after the meetings.

The latest meeting was held at the Civic Centre, Merthyr Tydfil on the evening of Thursday 28th October. Over 60 members of the public attended. Amongst those present was Mr Ted Rowlands, the MP for Merthyr Tydfil, as well as a number of members of Merthyr Borough Council. There was a lively and wide-ranging discussion.

The main issues discussed included: -

- **Locally based and community programmes.**

Some members of the public wished to see substantially more locally based and community programmes, especially on the extra hours of digital programming available to S4C. They also drew attention to the high quality production standards which could now be achieved with the latest video equipment affordable to community groups.

Elan Closs Stephens said that the S4C Authority was conscious of the importance of locally based programmes. In her view it was important that different communities in Wales should know more about each other and address one another through the medium of broadcasting. Although viewing patterns had changed over the years, it was still true that Welsh programmes with a strong local or regional focus tended to attract the majority of their viewers from the areas in question.

Huw Jones said that the needs of the viewer had to be paramount and care had to be taken about the quality of programmes. He added, however, that S4C always welcomed new ideas for programmes and suggested that S4C be sent examples of community produced programmes so they could be considered on their merits.

- **What happens when analogue TV is switched off?**

Concern was expressed about the implications for viewers when analogue TV is switched off. People wanted to know whether they would be required to purchase new equipment and subscriptions to commercial channels.

Huw Jones explained that the date for switch-off would be decided by the United Kingdom Government. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Mr Chris Smith MP had recently announced a broad target of switching off analogue sometime between 2006 and 2010. But he had made it clear that this would only happen once the great majority of people had access to digital TV. He had also said that the Government would keep the timetable under review, and it seemed probable that at some stage it would need to decide whether some groups might need special help to turn to digital. Generally, it was in the Government's, broadcasters' and manufacturers' long-term interests to remove barriers to the uptake of digital. The recent reduction in the cost of set-top boxes and the falling price of other equipment were signs that the market was already beginning to work in favour of consumers, although there was a good way to go.

- **Co-operation between BBC Wales and S4C**

S4C was urged by one audience member to secure greater co-operation with the BBC in future in the interest of taxpayers, licence payers and viewers. He drew particular attention to the importance of co-operation in obtaining programme rights, such as for Welsh rugby.

Huw Jones agreed that co-operation should be sought, wherever possible, with the BBC and with others. He explained that there were many more areas of co-operation between the BBC and S4C than there were of competition or dispute. These included the internationally successful animation co-productions, the live broadcasting of the National Assembly for Wales and the setting up of the Digital College network for Wales. Competition for viewers was a fact of broadcasters' lives, however, which could be important in offering viewers choice and quality services. The deal secured by S4C for the showing of Welsh rugby meant that there were now many more games and many more hours of coverage available to the Welsh public than hitherto. Other members of the public agreed that there had been a significant improvement.

- **Balance between Welsh and English language broadcasting and opportunities**

In response to a question about broadcasting opportunities in Welsh and English in Wales, Elan Closs Stephens explained that, while the direct expenditure of BBC Wales on Welsh and English language programmes was broadly equivalent, the total costs of BBC broadcasting in Wales (most of which were incurred on nationally networked BBC programmes) were significantly greater than expenditure on the BBC's Welsh language programmes. More generally, only S4C broadcasts Welsh language programmes, whereas there are a multitude of public and commercial broadcasters in English, with the prospect of many more to come.

Huw Jones explained that S4C encouraged contributions from all linguistic backgrounds. He pointed to the success of S4C's scholarship schemes in bringing on

young talent. These were available to people regardless of linguistic or ethnic background and had led to the launching of a number of successful careers. These included people who had learned Welsh or significantly developed their Welsh-speaking skills so that they were able to take part in S4C broadcast productions. He also explained that S4C recruits its own staff on the basis of a strict policy of equal opportunities, choosing people on the basis of the skills needed to do specific jobs. Many jobs, such as the commissioning of Welsh language programmes, obviously required fluent Welsh, whereas others, such as engineering, did not. All staff were given full opportunities to develop their linguistic and other skills.

- **Bilingual Soundtracks**

Different views were expressed about whether S4C should offer an English as well as a Welsh language soundtrack for digital programmes such as rugby. Some urged this as an important way of extending S4C's services to the English speaking public in Wales. Others wanted to be helped to understand the Welsh language commentary better, for instance through the provision of translations of key technical terms on the teletext 889 service for Welsh language learners.

Huw Jones explained that this was a genuinely difficult and delicate issue for S4C, which the Authority would doubtless consider carefully. The default setting on TV sets was English so, at present, bilingual soundtracks could only be provided in such a way that those wishing to watch the Welsh language soundtrack would have to change the basic set up on their television sets. The S4C Authority regarded this as unacceptable since it would disadvantage the Welsh speaking audience, which it was S4C's core statutory mission to serve. But the technology was developing rapidly, and it should be possible before too long to provide such a choice at the touch of a button on a TV remote control. The S4C Authority would consider the issue in the light of that possibility, and would have regard to all relevant considerations. These would include the pressure this would place on Welsh speakers in mixed language households (of which there are many) to choose the English language option.

Other Issues

In response to other points, S4C's representatives said that they would: -

- continue to do all they could to provide consistent and convenient slots for Channel 4 programmes. This depended significantly on sufficient warning from Channel 4 about forthcoming programmes.
- continue to draw the public's attention to S4C's internationally co-produced animations
- strike the right balance between on-screen promotions (to make sure that viewers are aware of forthcoming programmes) and the need to maximise the amount of broadcast programme time
- strike an acceptable balance between the coverage of a wide range of Welsh sports, including amateur sports, and the needs of audiences for other programme genres.

THE AUTHORITY'S MONTHLY BUSINESS MEETING

The Authority held its monthly business meeting the following day at the Civic Centre in Merthyr Tydfil. The main areas of discussion and decision were: -

Improving public services by exploiting S4C's spare digital capacity

The Broadcasting Act 1996 had capped S4C's Government grant at then current levels, subject to an annual increase in line with the Retail Prices Index. At the same time, the Act gave S4C the ability to supplement its Government funding, so as to maintain and improve the quality of its public services, by engaging in commercial activities in the broadcasting field. As part of its strategy to exploit this opportunity fully, S4C had successfully tendered for a share of the capacity for digital terrestrial TV broadcasting across the United Kingdom. This is over and above the dedicated capacity provided in the 1996 Act, which enables S4C to provide S4C Digital. S4C is using some of this additional capacity to broadcast live the National Assembly for Wales, in co-operation with BBC Wales, on S4C 2. S4C has also procured satellite capacity across the UK to broadcast its digital services, including S4C digital and S4C 2. This means that viewers throughout Wales, and across the UK can receive all S4C's services. There is spare capacity on S4C Digital overnight, and on S4C 2 when the Assembly is not in public session.

The Authority considered plans for the exploitation of this spare capacity. It agreed that S4C's wholly owned commercial subsidiary, S4C Masnachol, should: -

- proceed with plans to exploit the spare digital terrestrial capacity across the United Kingdom through SDN Limited. This is a company established by S4C for this purpose in partnership with United News and Media and NTL. Each partner has a one-third share holding. The venture will require the investment of some of S4C's commercial income over the next few years, but the return is expected to be considerably greater than other possible uses of these resources. There will be no subsidy from S4C's public funds. The Authority regarded this investment as vital to enable S4C to sustain and improve its Welsh language services in the years ahead.
- exploit for the next three years the spare capacity on S4C Digital and S4C2, again to generate the maximum possible income for future investment in public services.

Strong language in programmes

The Authority considered whether the strong language used in parts of the last series of Tair Chwaer, including shortly after the 9pm watershed, breached the statutory programme guidelines, and whether any further guidance was needed for programme commissioners and suppliers. After viewing the programme, the Authority was of the view that, although the language was at the stronger end of the scale, it was defensible in terms of the context and the authenticity of the scene in question. It concluded, therefore, that there had been no breach of the guidelines and that there was no immediate need for additional guidance.

Corporate Plan 2000

The Authority considered and approved an outline of the Authority's corporate plan for 2000. It will consider the full plan at its next meeting. The Authority expects to publish the plan in December.

Disclosure Policy and Procedures

The Authority adopted a comprehensive policy and procedure in accordance with the requirements of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. This sets out how, acting in good faith, members of staff in S4C can ensure that suspicions of malpractice by managers or colleagues can be brought to light and dealt with effectively without detriment to the individual drawing attention to the matter. The initial avenues are to appropriate senior people within S4C who are not the subject of the allegations. In cases where the allegations concern the most senior members of staff, or where the person drawing attention to the allegations is not satisfied with the way they have been handled by senior management, the procedure provides for the matter to be drawn to the attention of the Chair or a member of the Authority. Finally, if the person who has raised the issue is not content with the way it has been handled by the Chair or a member of the Authority, they may draw the matter to the attention of an appropriate public authority, such as the police, the relevant Government department or an MP.

Registers of Interests

The Authority reviewed the arrangements for the declaration of interests and the handling of conflicts of interest involving members of the Authority or the staff of S4C. It reaffirmed the arrangements for members to declare relevant pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests to other members and for these to be recorded in a register available for public viewing. Members would continue to take whatever action was appropriate, in agreement with their colleagues, to deal with any conflict of interests in accordance with the code of practice adopted by the Authority (a copy of which will shortly be placed on the S4C website).

The staff of S4C are required to make declarations of relevant pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests to their line managers and a central register is kept internally. Senior managers are responsible for ensuring that there are no actual conflicts of interest in the handling of business. In the case of members of the Management Team, declarations and action to resolve actual conflicts of interest are reported to the Authority, which satisfies itself that the appropriate steps have been taken.

Other Matters

The Authority also considered regular reports on: -

- the performance of S4C's programmes
- compliance with programme guidelines
- viewers' complaints about individual programmes
- S4C's finances

Next Meeting

The S4C Authority will hold an open public meeting at the Porth Hotel, Llandysul at 7pm on Thursday 25th November. It will hold its private business meeting there the following day.