

S4C Authority Bulletin March 2000

The Authority held an open meeting at Theatr Clwyd, Mold, on 24 February 2000, and its business meeting at Flintshire County Council's offices, on 25 February 2000.

The Open Meeting

On Thursday, 24 February, the Authority held its largest public open meeting to date. A good number were present, with approximately 80 of the general public going to the trouble to come to discuss and express their opinion on the S4C service.

In addition to the Chair of the Authority, Elan Closs Stephens, the Chief Executive, Huw Jones, and the Director of Programmes, Huw Eirug, took part in the discussion. Other members of the Authority were also present to listen to the discussion and to speak informally with the public before and after the meeting.

The discussion, which lasted for more than two hours, was wide and lively. Amongst matters discussed were:

How S4C promoted itself

An enquiry was made about how S4C went about promoting itself, especially in areas where analogue reception of Welsh and Welsh language television was not possible. Elan Closs Stephens explained that it was difficult for S4C to reach out to Welsh language and Welsh audiences in such areas. In particular, the national newspapers did not give fair coverage to the channel in their weekly television supplements nor in the daily schedules. This was a matter that S4C was continually endeavouring to improve.

S4C on Satellite

The discussion moved on to pay particular attention to the fact that some areas in the East were unable to receive S4C on analogue. Elan Closs Stephens said that this had been a continual problem for S4C. Huw Jones referred to the fact that the most practical solution to the problem was satellite. Members of the public mentioned that they, on the whole, were aware of this, but the cost of having satellite was a barrier to some people; older people in particular found it difficult to afford. Elan Closs Stephens sympathised with this. She mentioned that the Government frequently spoke of social exclusion and suggested that this was a matter for the Government. There was a need to raise this as a matter of importance with politicians in general as well as with the Department of Culture, Media and Sports, in London, which is responsible for the Government's policy on broadcasting across the United Kingdom.

Sub-Titling

The audience referred to how useful sub-titling was on S4C programmes. Nevertheless, they felt that the Channel did not make as wide a provision of the service as it could. The example of *Dechrau Canu, Dechrau Canmol* was given, where it was suggested that sub-titling should be provided for the interviews that were held during the programme. Huw Eirug accepted the comments made and promised to consider what improvements could be made to the sub-titling service.

Re-scheduling of Programmes

Members of the audience raised the fact that trying to establish when Channel 4 programmes would be re-scheduled on S4C was very frustrating. Huw Eirug mentioned that S4C tried to be consistent in scheduling programmes. For example, should a series first be broadcast at 9.00 o'clock on Tuesday evening, that would be the evening and time that the remaining programmes of the series would be broadcast; but it was accepted that there were occasional exceptions owing to practical reasons. Elan Closs Stephens referred to the fact that there was a page on Sbcetel that gave information about the re-scheduling of Channel 4 programmes on S4C.

North East Wales on S4C

The audience felt strongly that North East Wales had been neglected over the last few years, especially in the area of drama. The areas of Gwynedd, the South Wales Valleys, Swansea and Cardiff had been represented on screen, not so the North East. Another specific example was given, that of the *Canrif y Werin* programme, where few and far between were any contributions from people in this area, an area where there are more than enough Welsh speaking people with interesting stories who could have contributed. It was felt that the people of the North East had been forgotten by S4C. Elan Closs Stephens accepted the comments made and emphasised that this was one of the reasons that the S4C Authority was holding open meetings in different areas in Wales, in order to hear the opinions of their audiences across the country.

Huw Eirug recognised that which was expressed by the audience. He believed that the main reason for the situation was the trend for those companies which supplied S4C with programmes to represent their own areas in their productions. Unfortunately, only one production company existed in the North East. In addition, it was necessary for S4C to choose the best scripts from amongst those presented. Having said that, Huw Eirug accepted the comments made and would keep them in mind for the future.

Another problem suffered by the people of the North East was the lack of opportunity to participate as members of audiences when programmes were being recorded. As programmes, especially those involving concerts, were not recorded in their area, it was necessary for them to travel some distance in order to be present. People were tired of having to do this time after time and in the end they would give up going. Theatr Clwyd was suggested as an ideal location for recording programmes. Once again, Huw Eirug accepted the point made and mentioned he would raise the matter with the production companies in his discussions with them.

'The Same Old Faces'

There was a query as to whether there was any reason for the same actors appearing so often on S4C programmes. Huw Jones referred to the fact that this was a complaint which went back to before S4C was established. One of the reasons was that companies wished to employ the best actors available. He also had sympathy for the actors who relied on gaining consistent work in order to secure a living. Another reason for seeing actors so often was that S4C was providing more drama than in the past. S4C was, nevertheless, very conscious of the situation. One member of the audience believed that there were good actors available who were not offered work, whilst others were seen too much.

Specific Programmes

Members of the audience made comment about some specific programmes:

Pam fi Duw - It was felt that an improvement was necessary in the standard of Welsh in this series. Elan Closs Stephens replied by saying that S4C had language guidelines for programmes that allowed editorial flexibility according to the nature and objectives of the individual programme. For example, there was an expectation for Welsh in a programme such as *Newyddion* to be correct and polished. On the other hand, a programme such as *Pam fi Duw* sought to represent some children who came from bilingual schools in the industrial valleys. Huw Eirug added that there was a duty on the broadcaster to represent the country it broadcast to. What he said was recognised, but the member of the public who raised the point felt that *Pam fi Duw* had gone beyond the boundary of what was acceptable.

Byd Pws – This programme was praised by a young member of the audience who mentioned that a number of their friends also liked it very much. It was felt that it was a great shame that the programme had come to an end so soon. Huw Eirug was very pleased to hear that the programme had found favour and promised that there would be another series.

Extended Broadcasting Hours

An enquiry was made as to whether there was an intention to extend the number of S4C Welsh programmes. Elan Closs Stephens referred to the fact that S4C was now broadcasting 12 hours a day on S4C Digital, namely approximately three times the number of hours broadcast on analogue; achieved without any extra funding from the Government.

Lifelong Learning Programmes

A member of the audience drew attention to the trend over the last ten years for people to retire early. As a result there was an increase in the older audience who watched television during the day and a number of those had an interest in continuing education programmes. They asked if S4C had plans to meet this type of demand in the future. Elan Closs Stephens referred to the development of the Digital College which was to start in the Autumn. This service would offer opportunities for continuing and further education.

The Authority's Business Meeting

In the Authority's Business Meeting the following day the matters under discussion were:

Application for Sponsorship

The Authority considered an application for sponsorship from the Wales Young Farmers' Club towards the work of the Club in the field of stage arts. S4C's support of the Club the previous year had helped it to hold a creative writing course; a number of training sessions with Club members from all parts of Wales; a number of local courses to learn theatre skills, including acting, lighting and so on. The main focus of activities was a competition - a Pantomime in English and a Farce in Welsh. An outline was given of similar plans for the current year.

It was agreed that the Wales Young Farmers' Club's artistic objectives supported the Channel's work in the long term and it was agreed to give £5,000 in sponsorship to the Club.

Director of Programmes Report

The Authority considered the performance of the following programmes:

- *Heno*
- *Dudley*
- *Glan Clwyd*
- *Pacio*
- *Pengelli*
- *Byd Pws*
- *I Dot*
- *Pawb a'i Farn*
- *Ar y Bocs*
- *Yma Mae Nghân*
- *Canrif y Werin*
- *Sioe Gelf*
- *John 10%*
- *Palmant Aur*

There will be an assessment of the performance of S4C programmes in the Annual Report.

Having discussed the above, Members took advantage of the opportunity to congratulate the Director of Programmes and everyone connected with the film *Solomon a Gaenor* on the Oscar nomination. It was noted that this was the fourth nomination for an Oscar within ten years; this was quite an achievement for any company, not to mention for an organisation of relatively small size such as S4C. Wishes of good luck were expressed for the awards night.

Review of S4C's Performance in 1999

The Authority considered a report on S4C's performance against targets in the Corporate Plan for 1999. S4C had met or had done better than the majority of targets, although there were some instances where they had not been reached. The more important elements of the review would be included in the Annual Report which is to be published in June.

Corporate Governance and Management Systems

Members considered a report on S4C's corporate governance and management systems especially in consideration of the recommendations in the Turnbull report on good practice. It was agreed that it should be adopted as a useful tool to ensure that the Authority had the strongest possible arrangements for all S4C's management systems. It was also agreed that the majority of arrangements had already been established, but that there was a need to review the role, structure and membership of the Authority's committees, in order that the Authority may monitor and evaluate the management system every year in the most effective way.

Review and Funding of the BBC

There was a discussion of the BBC funding review published by Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. It was noted that the cost of the television licence was to rise by £3 a year, namely an increase of 1.5% over inflation. It was also noted that the Government expected the BBC to find significant savings and commercial income. It was agreed that the Government's decision reiterated S4C's own argument for ensuring an increase in its public finance to ensure provision of services of the highest standard possible in Welsh to face the competition in the digital age. This was particularly true considering that, unlike other broadcasters, S4C did not receive additional funding to assist the introduction of digital television.

Meeting with the BBC Broadcasting Council for Wales

It was confirmed that arrangements had been made for S4C Members to meet with Members of the BBC Broadcasting Council on Thursday evening, 31 March 2000, at S4C's headquarters.

Other Issues

Members received the usual reports on the following:

- Audit Committee Meeting held on 28 January 2000
- Compliance with programme codes
- S4C Finances.

Future Meetings

The Authority would hold its usual business meetings in Cardiff in March and April. Its next public meeting would be held in Mid Wales at 7.00 p.m. on 25 May 2000 – exact location to be decided.