



Athlone Community Radio
submission to
The Future of Media Commission
Public Consultation

January 8th, 2021

Introduction

Athlone Community Radio is one of 21 licenced Community Radio broadcasters in Ireland and was set up in 2007 and commenced broadcasting on a 10 year Community Sound Broadcasting Licence in January 2011.

This submission from Athlone Community Radio is from a community media perspective to ensure that the commission is aware of the work, ethos, benefits, and importance of community media in the Irish media landscape.

Community Media is rarely considered or acknowledged when there are discussions, debates, or decisions on media and seems that it is seen -if indeed it is seen at all- as not an important or legitimate form of media and somehow lesser than other types of media in Ireland. It is also regularly confused with local media by our elected representatives and legislators.

Athlone Community Radio sees public service media as crucial to any functioning democracy as its primary mission is to provide a public service and not to pander to its shareholders/financiers.

We believe the Government should look to safeguard existing media that provides this public service including Community Media ensuring that it is properly resourced and not beholden to funding from sectors or individuals that can drive or thwart the content it delivers.

Question 1. How should Government develop and support the concept and role of public service media and what should its role in relation to public service content in the wider media be?

Government should set out to support and develop public service media and content by ensuring adequate funding streams are made available which will support those dedicated to providing public service content and social benefits as delivered by the community media sector.

Over the last decade only 2 new community radio licences have been issued. This indicates the lack of attention to developing a strong independent community media sector whose

remit is to provide public service and content and social benefits to communities throughout Ireland.

With proper funding Community Media especially would gain better access to cover core costs associated with delivering these types of programmes such as training, premises, equipment, IT and Software, Insurance etc– the basics that are needed to ensure independent and public service content.

Community Media not just delivers content that is public service, but it also assists capacity building at community and individual level delivering social benefits to the communities it serves.

It does this through programming, training, access to groups and individuals and provides a community hub to bring all of these together.

It increases communities understanding of media, promoting media literacy by delivering training to communities and volunteers including QQI accredited courses specifically designed for the Community Media Sector through Craol- Community Radio Ireland which in turn encourages and promotes people to take become active participants in media rather than just being passive consumers.

What can be learned from the evolution of public service media over the last decade?

There are regular reports on the chronic shortage of funding within RTE and the need for reform and modernisation. However this has been talked about for years with plans for changes to the funding model from Licence fee to Broadcasting Charge to downsizing and outsourcing but decisions have continually been kicked down the road. What we have learned is that ignoring the problem does not make it go away and government need to sort this urgently or we are in danger of weakening our public service broadcasters.

Looking at this question from a Community Media perspective two things stand out:

The lack of new licences being issued and ad hoc funding. These have frustrated the development of this sector. Only two community licences were issued in the past 10 years while four community stations ceased broadcasting in the same period.

Some stations receive funding from Pobal, some depend on Community Employment Schemes, some have success in obtaining various grants from various sources and some have success with applications to Sound and Vision. All have to come up with other sources

of funding such as community fundraising events, local advertising, and sponsorship but it is the unstable nature of this form of funding that prevents stations from developing.

What systems may be required to support and sustain public service content, e.g. high quality, independent journalism, in an increasingly competitive and consolidated market?

In the current media landscape it is vital that we have free and independent media sources. In a democracy it is crucial we maintain and sustain independent and high quality journalism that is a trusted source delivering factual news and content.

Without this there is the concern that consumers of media will be limited to “echo chambers” created and financed by a very concentrated ownership structure that drives the agenda.

To ensure high quality independent journalism funding must be available with regulation that ensures and monitors quality and compliance.

Athlone Community Radio promotes media literacy through training in conjunction with Craol- Community Radio Ireland. We deliver a variety of QQI accredited courses to ensure a high standard of research and broadcasting is achieved. We also provide work experience to third level students studying various courses including communications, journalism and media production and we have hosted work placements from Tralee IT, Cavan Institute, Moate Business College, DIT, DCU, AIT to name a few. We note that these students find it very difficult to secure work placements that are part of their courses and Community Radio stations throughout the country are a hugely important resource in this area.

How might public service media be more effective in promoting the Irish language, sport, and culture?

Suitable funding for public service media and public service content and the delivery of social benefits would lead to better and more effective promotion of Irish Language, Sport, Music, Culture, and the Arts. Community Media provides coverage at community and local level on a range of sports, music, arts, heritage, and culture including the Irish language and needs to be encouraged and enabled to develop and continue this work.

Irish language content requires extra supports as it is extremely limited on most broadcasters.

It is not just about encouraging or requiring broadcasters to produce Irish language programmes but to enable them to do so be this on public service, community or commercial.

How might public service media better respond to the needs and expectations of the public?

Community Radio Stations through constant engagement with their communities adapt and develop their schedules and content to meet those needs. Community Media is based on access and engagement and is owned and controlled by the community it serves and this facilitates a clearer response to the needs of the community.

Community media also has access to funding through the BAI Community Broadcasting Support Scheme to carry out research/needs' analysis/evaluations and this is a great benefit to the sector.

What can we learn from other jurisdictions?

A report from the European Broadcasting Union found that Countries that have popular, well-funded public service broadcasters encounter less right wing extremism and corruption, have more press freedom, and contributes to a strong democracy.

Question 2. How should public service media be financed sustainably?

There have been a number of recommendations over the years on how public service media should be funded and this is something that needs to be decided now and not when it is too late for the sector. RTE and TG4 should be funded from either the tax intake or through a dedicated broadcasting charge to take in to account that media is accessed not only through TV sets.

Community media should be funded through a core fund and this should be aligned to the funding model decided for Public Service broadcasters in the future.

Question 3. How should media be governed and regulated?

What regulatory changes at EU or global level might impact on the governance of public service media in the period ahead?

For Community Media the current governance and regulations works relatively well. However the whole media sector requires a new form of regulation that can consider all platforms and may need to be an EU wide regulator.

What challenges are posed to a vibrant, independent public service media by increasing consolidation / declining plurality of ownership in the Irish market?

Community Media is unique in its independence as all stations are individual entities owned and governed by the communities they serve. They promote diversity and plurality, access and engagement and strengthen the range and variety of voices and opinion heard on the Irish airwaves. It is vital to ensure we have an independent and strong public service media with public service and social benefit content.

Are current legislative and regulatory controls for public service media adequate?

The current regulatory controls by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland are very robust and works well for Community Media but will need expansion and more resources to cover all media platforms.