

Serving Children in the digital future

A response from Alun Davies, Labour Assembly Member for Mid and West Wales.

Introduction

S4C are to be congratulated on the investment in, and the success of, Planed Plant as a children's strand. Over the past years it has developed an identity and a brand which is recognisable and popular.

It is essential for the strength and future vitality of the Welsh language that provision for children and young people is enhanced.

I am pleased that S4C is considering expanding its provision for children and young people. The expansion in hours broadcast of children's programming has already benefited families where parents are anxious that their children either have an opportunity to acquire the language or have the opportunity to enjoy programming in their language of choice.

In a digital environment where the provision of children's programming has expanded significantly in recent years it is becoming increasingly important that S4C is able to provide a rich and compelling offer to children and young people. This is in line with its public service obligations and follows the policy direction of the Assembly Government which actively seeks to increase the number of children able to speak and enjoy the Welsh language whilst also increasing the opportunities for children to use Welsh.

I also welcome the commitment to continue to invest in original programming for children. It is this aspect of S4C's strategy that has made the service unique and it is this aspect which differentiates S4C's services.

The proposal

The proposal for this new service outlines three potential options for the provision of this enhanced service.

Since the consultation document rules out the third option it would appear that there is only a realistic choice between Option One and Option Two.

In my view this is false choice.

Providing a new service for children

I believe that it is easily possible to both provide this new service and to continue to broadcast the S4C2 service as at present.

In my view the key challenges for children's TV in Welsh are:

- To provide a service that fits the lives of children and families. The crucial times for these groups are in the early mornings before school (0700 – 0900); lunchtime (1200-1400); late afternoons and early evenings (1600 – 1900); school-holidays and weekends.
- To provide a greater number of the most popular children's programming through the medium of Welsh.

I am perplexed as to S4C's proposal to broadcast a service targeted at older children from 1500 onwards. I do not believe that there is an audience available at this time. Most older children will be at school until 1600 and children's programming is already available at this time on S4C and S4C digidol.

There are certainly scheduling issues to address from 1800 to 1900 but these are the issues that all services will face as their audiences change and as they attempt to serve new segments of the audience. There are particular challenges facing any broadcaster in attempting to reach teenagers. This is particularly true for S4C which is required to compete with the cultural power and enormous resources available to broadcasters in English.

I agree with S4C's statement that it will seek to meet the changing patterns of viewing in school holidays and on weekends. It is these times and periods of the week and year that are crucial to S4C in reaching a new audience and in serving the existing audience.

I do not believe that there is sufficient demand for a service which is broadcast during the day. Certainly it would appear from the consultation document that S4C has not been able to demonstrate that this demand exists at present – or may exist in the immediate future. No evidence of audience demand or potential audience levels is provided by S4C.

None of the above challenges are incompatible with the continued broadcasting of the National Assembly service on S4C2. Indeed the times and parts of the week (or year) when there is an audience for this programming are precisely those times when S4C2 is not on the air.

Funding

I believe that S4C should receive enhanced funding from the DCMS to increase the Welsh language content available for children and young people. S4C could play a vital role in increasing the breadth of content on different formats and platforms that will enrich the lives of Welsh-speaking children.

At the same time I would like to see the BBC taking a far more proactive and creative approach to the provision of material available through the medium of Welsh. In this way it would be good to see the BBC providing Welsh language versions of their popular children's programmes for broadcast on S4C as a matter of routine. This policy should also be extended to the BBC's activities such as some of the marketing and

licensed goods in support of programming such as Dr Who which would enable children and young people to use the Welsh language whilst at play and would enhance their viewing experience.

The future of S4C2

I believe that the S4C2 service is an excellent example of how two broadcasters can work together for the wider public interest. S4C2 has an essential role to play in developing, broadening and deepening public understanding of the National Assembly.

It is of particular importance to those people who live furthest from Cardiff and would otherwise be unable to follow proceedings. It is crazy to suggest ending the service at the time when the Assembly's powers have been extended by the 2006 legislation and when the Assembly will be growing and accruing new powers.

This is time to strengthen the service and not to end it.

In many ways it is a tragedy that S4C2 is an unloved service within the broadcaster. The service has not received the support from marketing, or from the BBC in terms of content, that will enable it to develop and grow.

However I believe that a way forward may be found if the new Assembly Commission were to work closely with the two broadcasters in order to enhance the marketing of the channel and presentation of the channel.

The Government of Wales Act 2006 creates a new duty for the Assembly Commission to promote awareness of the Assembly and its work. Clearly the S4C2 service is a means of achieving this objective. Bringing the service to an end or diminishing the service would, in my view, have the effect of undermining the Commission's work in this field.

Rather this consultation may act as a catalyst whereby the different stakeholders may now work together to provide a new enhanced TV service covering the work and proceedings of the National Assembly.

Conclusion

I believe that it is possible for S4C to launch a new service specifically targeted at children and young people whilst at the same time maintaining and enhancing the S4C2 service.

This can be achieved by more creative use of the spare spectrum that exists when S4C2 is not being broadcast (for instance in recess, on weekends and evenings) and the S4C digidol service. This would provide a new and exciting service for children and young people that will at the same time help S4C meet its public service obligations.

Alun Davies AM

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