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Ms Sharon White
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Ofcom
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By email: Sharon.White@ofcom.org.uk

Ref: Local TV
20 August 2019

Dear Sharon,

I write with regard to Ofcom's consideration of amending the programming commitments in local TV licences, including for Edinburgh and Glasgow, and your related decision on 8 July 2019 to consent to That's TV's proposal to reduce their local production bases in Scotland from five to two.

I note from your consultation on local TV you are minded to approve the changes proposed to the Glasgow and Edinburgh licences which will lower the number of hours of local programming required each week and remove the obligation for this to be repeated. You state you are satisfied these changes will not unacceptably reduce the number and range of programmes about the licence area. In fact you consider while the number of programmes might reduce, the range of programming could potentially increase. You also state viewers would be unlikely to notice any significant reduction and the change will give licensees the opportunity to ensure that their first-run content is suitably tailored for their viewers.

I appreciate that a key contribution of local TV for audiences is providing news and current affairs of interest to each local area and note the operator has committed to continue to focus on news coverage of Dundee, Aberdeen and Ayr in addition to Edinburgh and Glasgow. I also note they contend the consolidation of production bases will free up the resources to do so.

Although the operator has made these commitments, my main concern is the impact to audiences in Scotland from a reduction in the hours of local news and current affairs in the Programming Commitments to minimum levels at a time when the bases in Scotland are being consolidated. It seems apparent looking at how the local TV business is now developing across the UK, with a concentration of license-holders and reversion to production only in the central belt in Scotland this is failing to achieve the aims and commitments of the UK Government's 2011 Local Media Action Plan.

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While I acknowledge the challenge of making local news financially sustainable, the current trend across the media of a decline in local news coverage makes it all the more important that licence holders fulfil commitments to local news coverage. As I said in my letter to Ofcom on 18 May 2018 following the closure of STV2, I regretted the loss of its distinctive news coverage and the closure of STV News Tonight in particular. At the time I asked for reassurance that the new licence holder, That's Media Group, would be required to honour the full commitments of all 5 L-DTPS licences.

I understand recent and proposed changes are being permitted with the aim of protecting local news coverage and based on the operator's pledge to continue to carry diverse local news and respond to each area's needs. However, I would ask you monitor closely the quality and diversity of the output and audiences' views so as to make sure the objective is met.

We remain concerned about the overall trend in the media to reduce its footprint across Scotland and about the effect this will have on making a diversity of viewpoints available for Scottish audiences. We are pleased Ofcom has announced a review of news and current affairs coverage by the BBC but, in view of the continuing changes happening to news coverage, ask Ofcom to consider, either as part of this review or in addition to it, the plurality and quality of news provision available to audiences in Scotland.

I am grateful for the work you and your officials do to improve public service broadcasting. I trust you will continue to press for the improved use of our broadcast media to gain the best possible results for our communities and our audiences while helping to sustain and develop our creative industries.

Kind regards
Fiona Hyslop

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