

broadcasting

It is rare that broadcasting provides significant and potentially radical opportunities for the voluntary sector, but the recently published green paper on the BBC does just that – and voluntary groups are being called on to respond in large numbers to the public consultation.

Under the government's proposals, the BBC will become the cornerstone of unbiased information, education and community action in the information society. No longer merely a broadcaster, it must work towards a set of social goals which the voluntary sector shares, and moreover it will do so in partnership with civil society.

For the first time in the BBC's history, its new Charter, from 2006 to 2016, will lay down a set of clear 'purposes' which all BBC services must serve. These are:

- to sustain citizenship and civil society;
- promote education and learning;
- stimulate culture and cultural activity;
- represent the life of the UK at local, regional and national levels; and
- inform UK citizens about the world.

By using TV, radio and online services in pursuit of these goals the BBC will be engaging in a set of progressive social



All in a good cause: programmes from the Taking Care Season (bottom) and China Season

Time to tune in

Time is running out for charities to engage in the charter renewal debate, says Don Redding

interventions that will not only inform, educate and entertain, but will link citizens and communities together and provide opportunities for engagement and participation. Voluntary sector goals of social inclusion and cohesion, and of community and democratic participation will be served.

The BBC itself has promised "a true creative dialogue in which the public are not passive audiences but active, inspired participants". It says this requires "a more open, responsive BBC... which embraces partnerships", and wants the voluntary sector's help to further develop the draft partnership framework that it published in January.

The importance of these policies cannot be overstated. In the information society the ability of individuals and communities to fulfil their potential citizenship depends crucially upon access to high quality, unbiased information, free at the point of use, together with the means to connect to others and to participate in discussion, debate and social action.

Broadcasting, being the principal trusted source of information on most social and international issues, is central to citizenship, and no other broadcaster has the independence, range of services, and capacity to use related online services in pursuit of these goals.

Moreover, we are losing other public service broadcasters. ITV1 and Channel Five are being permitted to drop most public service commitments, and Channel 4 expects to be severely squeezed as its commercial competition increases.

To understand what the green paper could mean for the third sector, some existing examples of partnership should serve. Comic Relief's tenth Red Nose Day is being supported by unprecedented levels of new programming and

awareness raising across the BBC. The Community Channel, a national digital TV channel supporting the voluntary sector, is strongly backed by the BBC and given a channel slot on its Freeview service.

The recent Taking Care season on children in care, the current China season of programmes, and a forthcoming Africa season in July, have all had strong voluntary sector input and contribute both to awareness raising and to 'off-screen' action.

Until now such initiatives have been one-offs, and sometimes have benefited the BBC more than the voluntary sector "partners". This will change under the next Charter; for a decade the BBC will be held to the task of producing many more such programmes, giving them greater prominence and ensuring all its channels and services are contributing.

Public Voice is backed by the NCVO as the voluntary sector's principal coalition on citizens' interests in communications and has been working for the last 18 months to secure these progressive purposes for the BBC. This lobbying is vital at a time when the broadcasting debate is heavily dominated by commercial interests, most of whom have attempted to restrict and undermine the BBC. They may still have their day: the green paper is only one step in the process, and could still be revised or undermined by a new post-election administration.

Don Redding is co-ordinator of Public Voice

● For more information on the green paper, and to respond to the consultation, visit the DCMS website at www.bbccharterreview.org.uk before May 31