

## Opening Statement from Adrian Lynch, Director Audiences, Channels, Marketing, RTÉ

11 November 2020

Thank you for the invitation to attend today. I am pleased to meet with the Committee and to discuss together the critical issues facing public media in Ireland.

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on the media sector generally, not least on public media. At the start of this pandemic our focus was simply staying on air, or remaining in print. But we have gone far beyond this initial ambition to deliver for the people of Ireland, day-in, day-out. Despite the logistical, financial, and human challenges of the early stages of the pandemic, Ireland's media, both local and national, has played a critical and leading role in keeping people in Ireland informed, engaged, and safe.

Naturally, I want to highlight the very particular contribution made by RTÉ during this time.

Along with public service media all over Europe, RTÉ has informed and empowered the public in Ireland. In the most recent Behaviours and Attitudes research, 90% indicated that they turn to RTÉ for information, while a further 76% said that they would trust RTÉ above all else.

This is a confidence and trust has been earned over many years, and in many ways. Whether it be in moments of celebration, or in times of crisis, it is RTÉ's privilege and RTÉ's unique responsibility to be the place where people turn, and the place that brings the nation together.

RTÉ showed clear public purpose during this crisis. As an essential service, bringing the nation together, RTÉ maintained full schedules across all services, augmenting where appropriate with additional live broadcasts and brand-new programmes. Certain productions had to be suspended, or stepped down, due to public health restrictions. But new and exciting programming - such as *Home School Hub* and *Ireland on Call*- were commissioned in their place, often within exceptionally tight deadlines. This level of resilience, and this level of output under such challenging circumstances, was not easy. But, thanks to the flexibility of staff as well as our partners in the independent sector, the service to the people of Ireland was not only upheld, but excelled.

Alongside comprehensive and in-depth news coverage, RTÉ has been a source of companionship, diversion and connection for millions. People have leaned upon new daily religious services, and on a wealth of pop-up cultural events supported by RTÉ. People have turned to stories in all its forms, from documentaries, to drama and comedy, to investigative journalism, and the nation has joined together in helping us to bring light to darker days, with events such as *RTÉ Shine a Light* and *RTÉ Does Comic Relief*. New Irish drama like the hugely acclaimed *Normal People* got the nation talking and connecting more than ever. And with connection comes community: we have rallied around Irish businesses, Irish artists, producers, frontline workers and the vulnerable – together, RTÉ and the people of Ireland have raised over €12 million this year for charity.

And for family and friends who could not travel back to Ireland, RTÉ has played a unique and important role.

These achievements came against the backdrop of extreme financial uncertainty. RTÉ is funded through a combination of public funding (TV Licence) and commercial income. An immediate result of Covid-19 was a sharp drop in licence fee revenue, and a decline in advertising revenue. Commercial income in Quarter Four has stabilised to some degree, as has income from the TV Licence, but the outlook for 2021 is uncertain. Certain types of expenditure (such as commitments to major sporting events) have only been deferred, and this adds to the financial pressures of the year ahead. The toll of Brexit on the national economy, and commercial performance, is unknowable. The combination of a broken TV Licence system and a precarious commercial environment exposes undeniable vulnerabilities for the national public service media.

The newly formed Media Commission began its formal programme of work last week, with the intention that they complete their deliberations and formal assessment within the next nine months. We welcome the commitment in the Programme for Government to ‘chart a pathway for public service broadcasting and independent media into the future.’ This pathway is much needed.

Covid-19 has underscored the importance of public service media to the functioning of a country, of a democracy, to the nurturing of cultural vitality, unity, and community. We would urge all members of the Committee to engage with the work of the Commission, and to consider its recommendations with urgency, clarity and shared purpose.