



RTÉ

Stakeholder Engagement Research Report

December 2023

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01

Purpose & Approach

Project Purpose

Research was conducted to collect feedback from stakeholder groups on the strategic plans published in *A New Direction for RTÉ* document.

Methodology & Approach

RED C hosted a series of 13 x 90-minute online focus groups between 17th November – 4th December 2023.

Recruitment

RTÉ were responsible for identifying and recruiting participants to take part in the research.

Given time and resource constraints, it was decided by RTÉ to prioritise engagement with the two stakeholder groups most likely to be affected by the new strategy; staff and the creative independent sector. As such a combination of invitation to representative groups, and open invitation was applied to recruit participants for the 13 focus groups which were held across November and early December, using the New Direction document as the main stimulus for discussion.

All sessions were conducted in full compliance with GDPR and best practice standards. All data has been supplied to RTÉ on an anonymised and aggregated basis only, as per assurances given to all participants.

Participants



13 x 90-minute online focus groups were hosted, with a total of 69 participants taking part.

Group	Segment	When
1	Staff	Thurs, 16 Nov
2	Staff	Fri, 17 Nov
3	Staff	Wed, 22 Nov
4	Staff	Wed, 22 Nov
5	Staff	Fri, 24 Nov
6	Staff	Tues, 28 Nov
7	Staff	Fri, 1 Dec
8	Staff	Mon, 4 Dec
9	Sector	Mon, 20 Nov
10	Sector	Tues, 21 Nov
11	Sector	Mon, 27 Nov
12	Sector	Tues, 28 Nov
13	Journalism	Mon, 27 Nov



02

A New Direction:
Overall Reaction

Positives emerge



Strong Leader

Kevin Bakhurst is untainted by controversy and provides signs of hope. Perceived to be a present, visible and available leader with evidence of progress demonstrated.



Opportunity

Although much damage has been caused, there is opportunity to restructure and recalibrate as a result of the crisis. However, seizing the opportunity involves challenges.



General Agreement

While elements of contention and scepticism exist, in general there is agreement to the objectives set out in the document. Staff streamlining is the main outlier here and is a grave concern for staff and their representatives.



However, some fundamental concerns exist



One

Has been heard before but needs follow through.



Two

Perceived as a public exercise to appease government and to reflect FOMC recommendations.



Three

Lacks detail and a clear roadmap for the future.



Four

Developed on assumptions - lack of clarity on funding model to support.



Five

Not seen to go far enough – safe and lacking ambition. Unimaginative and reductive in language.



Six

Lacks overarching purpose and clarity about where RTÉ is going. Needs to define the organisation's North Star.



03

A New Direction:
The Detail



More streamlined – a 20% smaller RTÉ

Streamlining: Overall Reaction

- **Concerning for Staff:** of all commitments outlined, this is the most emotive and worrying for staff.
 - There are a minority of staff who feel the complexity of tiers, grades and pay scales in RTÉ has resulted in a need for reduction in staff.
 - Some external stakeholders believe staff reductions should have happened long ago and that it's now being prolonged.
 - Minority of stakeholders feel it's a move towards privatisation.
- **Arbitrary Number:** no explanation as to how this number of job cuts was identified – why 400?
- **Government Appeasement:** commitment outlined for optics and to assist with funding. Feels defeatist to some.
- **Reinforcing Low Morale:** staff feel battered, bashed and disheartened. Lack of job security further exacerbating the situation.
 - Specifically, perceived targeting of upcoming retirees feels insulting, while management on €100k+ p/a feel singled out.
- **Implication for Remainers:** the message is 'more will be done with less' but no roadmap for how this will happen. Concerns that good people will be lost, and this will impact output and sector. How will gaps be closed?
 - Concerns around what streamlining means for the remaining 80%. These concerns are underpinned by challenges for the HR function in optimising those who remain, and discontent with communication and culture.



Streamlining: Perceived Barriers to Success



RTÉ

- **Sense of Scepticism:** especially with ongoing pay disputes and reluctance to introduce tribunal recommendations.
- **A Siloed Organisation:** was personable, involved and accountable pre-One RTÉ but now siloed, separate, slow to engage and lacking cross-organisational understanding.
- **Career Development Challenges:** clear career progression routes, official training (not on-the-job) and performance metric tracking and assessment required.
 - The organisation requires a model which will help optimise the remaining 80%.
 - Requires a rethink of how performance is measured and assessed.
 - HR are essential to manage this in a meaningful manner.

Communication

- **Communication Voids:** absence of roadmap creates a gap in communication. This void is filled by the rumour mill.
 - Requires a single message about how the net 400 will be identified and from where.

Culture

- **Withholding Culture:** felt to be aggravated by One RTÉ which created siloes. Reluctance to share in multiple capacities (e.g., knowledge, staff, equipment).
 - Will create additional challenges with reduced headcount.
 - Need to rebuild workplace culture that supports new ambitions and realities.



More commissioning – 50% increase

More Commissioning: Overall Reaction

- **Mixed Perspectives Depending on Circumstance:** while a good idea at a fundamental level, met with optimism and scepticism.

Optimism

- Helps somewhat with concerns around staff reductions.
- Has been done before in the past and is possible.
- In-house infrastructure has challenges which require investment or outsourcing.
- Independent sector are more nimble and flexible.
- From a sector perspective, PSB funding can help seed further external funding.

Scepticism

- What's driving this move? Won't save money.
- Doesn't go far enough considering inflation and previous spend commitments.

- **Halfway House:** minority of staff and many sector feel the current suggestion doesn't go far enough and could go further in the direction of the Channel 4 and ITV publisher broadcaster model. This is seen to have contributed to a sizeable independent sector.
- **Lacking a Plan:** clarity needs to be provided on what's being outsourced and in what areas (e.g., is radio included? What about TV?). What will RTÉ's role be – overseeing or genuine independent production?
 - Clarity needed to ensure focus for RTÉ and to ensure talent is attracted and developed appropriately by HR for organisation needs.
- **Perception Inaccuracies:** internal concerns about the industry's ability to respond are at odds with the industry's sense of being fully capable to take on more and welcoming even more commissions. Also gaps in perceived desire to work with RTÉ; internally perceptions that this is an ambition whereas externally less clarity on the benefit (esp. within podcasts).
- **Industry Responsibility:** concern from staff about "pushing" people into the independent sector and the lack of stability that comes from that.



Commissioning: Perceived Barriers to Success



Current Commissioning Structure

- **New Approach:** for the sector, RTÉ's current commissioning structure is perceived as outdated and in need of reinvigoration – needs to be quicker, more active in decision making, recognising independent producer needs.
- **More Ambition:** some feel bravery is required on what's commissioned. Sense that RTÉ "play it safe" with commissions and are losing out on good content to the bigger SVOD providers.

Disconnect with Industry Attitude

- **No Organisation is an Island:** currently RTÉ don't behave like they're part of the global ecosystem.
 - Meaningful conversations around intellectual property ownership and collaboration is needed and not something RTÉ are seen to have engaged with in the past.
 - A belief that RTÉ need to be comfortable not owning content outright so as to be part of quality, ambitious external production.

Streamlined Staff

- **New Roles:** if commissioning increasing, workload of those liaising with independent sector also increasing. Needs to be considered in streamlining.
 - Training to enable this also needs to be considered by HR.

Small Pool

- **Enable Growth:** can this commitment be a catalyst to further support development and creativity in the sector, beyond the big companies typically engaged.
 - For example, day hiring RTÉ facilities to bring in fresh talent.



More nationwide production, expanding in Cork

More Nationwide: Overall Reaction

- **Has Validity:** less centralised model has appeal.
 - **Representative:** presence in nationwide communities to better represent audiences.
 - **Visibility:** being part of a nationwide landscape and better connecting with audiences.
 - **Brand:** weakens RTÉ's negative D4 public association.
 - **Staff Lifestyle:** recognition that lower grade roles are struggling financially in Dublin.
- **Success Elsewhere:** BBC Salford repeatedly mentioned as a successful example of how to do this. However, it is a careful balance and there are perceived challenges in trying to decentralise too much.
- **Political Move:** incorporated to appease TDs and their narrative with constituents.
- **Investment Concern:** worry about the cost of this ambition given funding concerns. Nationwide production will require investment, with Dublin-centred model believed to be cheaper given existing infrastructure.
- **Lacking Ambition:** for some, it feels tokenistic. One non-Dublin location is not brave enough. To truly enable diverse content, requirement to focus on more than Cork (e.g., Limerick and Galway).



More Nationwide: Perceived Barriers to Success



Ground Up Attitude

- **Building from Scratch:** while some talk about this being a positive and an opportunity for a fresh start, others are concerned about the level of investment required and the return on such.
- **Partnership Approach:** a more collaborative approach perceived to be more sustainable and ambitious.
 - The approach feels feasible given RTÉ's demonstrated experience of co-producing effectively in the past.
 - Striking deals with universities, linking up with other creative sectors (e.g., the movie sector) and hubs (e.g., for podcasting).
 - Consider renting RTÉ infrastructure in Dublin (e.g., editing suites).
 - Consider a Partnership Team that runs this aspect of the business.

Empowerment & Resource

- **Greater Authority:** to make a partnership approach work financially for RTÉ, departments need to be empowered to drive best value for money.
 - Need to look at resources (e.g., time and ability) to negotiate here.

Lack of Roadmap

- **Gap in Direction:** belief that presence in different regions is currently underutilised. Strategies for each region are required to maximise each region - i.e., what will move and what are the regions responsible for that's unique and different to Dublin? This will provide focus.
 - What will happen to existing studios in Dublin – is the plan to keep them at full capacity? What's the strategy here?



Digitally transformed and personalised

Digitally Transformed: Overall Reaction

- **Overdue:** has been heard before and has been paused. Concerns that RTÉ have fallen too far behind comparable operators. This feels like a game of catch up.
- **Real Opportunity:** currently not providing long form audio content or playing in the podcast space which is understood to have huge potential.
- **Important but Challenging:** a difficult ambition for most to argue with, however there are top of mind difficulties faced.
 - **Funding:** very reliant on government providing funding. Perceived to require massive investment.
 - **Skills:** concerns around skills and bandwidth internally. Where will these skillsets come from? Does it require external resourcing and how does this look in terms of cost and streamlining staff numbers?
 - **External Vulnerability:** staff believe RTÉ need to build this intelligence internally as the landscape is now digital. There needs to be future proofing in the plan.
 - **Focus:** belief that the organisation is overly focused on "lowest cost" rather than best option which is hampering in the medium-long term.
- **PSB Tension:** personalisation perceived to potentially cause tension between PSB and commercial.
 - Concern that worthy public service content may be undermined and lose out in this model. In the digital world, it's all about popularity.
 - RTÉ often create low viewership but worthy content. Concern that this move may damage the essence of RTÉ's existence.
- **Archives Opportunity:** perception that Archives could play a bigger role in podcasts and digital to help with content volume.



Digitally Transformed: Perceived Barriers to Success



Culture

- **Siloed:** digital transformation requires a willingness to work outwards and with others. Internal culture needs to be rebuilt to allow this.
- **Risk Averse:** freedom to experiment and willingness to take a risk is required to make the commitment possible. Not how RTÉ currently operate.
 - BBC Sounds identified as an admirable and inspirational model which has perceived freedom to experiment or add unusual elements.
- **Slower Pace:** the digital sector has different expectations of agility, timescales and monetising their process.
 - RTÉ need to rethink decision making culture, structure and formality to allow for greater ease.

Lack of Strategy

- **Short Cycle Pattern:** RTÉ perceived to have adopted a reactive approach, rather than developing a medium-long term outlook. Decision making vacuum has led to a pause in digital and a falling behind for the organisation.
 - Requires a strategy.
- **Dedicated Lead:** recognition of the effort of some individuals in RTÉ in this space, however generally assigned to those as a supplementary role to the day job.
 - Requires someone who's solely accountable for driving and delivering.

Linear Commitment

- **Concurrent Channels:** challenging to dedicate focus to the new digital approach while feeding linear schedules. Perceived as two different beasts.



Financial sustainability and stronger governance

Sustainability & Governance: Overall Reaction

- **Indifference:** of all commitments outlined in the document, reaction was most indifferent here.
- **Government Reassurance:** for some, sounds like a sign off to reassure that things are changing and to secure public funding.
- **Undeniable:** hugely important and core to the running of any organisation. However, perceived to have lacked in the past.
 - Accountability in particular feels strongly tied to ‘financial accountability’ and is essential moving forward to secure trust internally and externally.
 - Requires training to ensure it's instilled in culture.
- **Lack of Ownership:** a noted gap in acknowledgement of the need to re-build goodwill in the RTÉ brand.
 - Accountability currently lacking but perception that Kevin Bakhurst wants mistakes to be pointed out.
 - Was a culture of quiet previously, but this appears to be shifting with new leadership.



Sustainability & Governance: Perceived Barriers to Success

Commerciality

- **Transparency:** more clarity needed on how public versus commercial work is funded, and how one funds the other.
 - At the moment, perceived lack of clarity raises suspicion.
- **Creative Value Routes:** currently studios, regional correspondents and suites feel underused.
 - Plans needed to demonstrate a commitment to unlocking value in RTÉ resources.

Funding

- **Uncertainty:** how funding will be achieved is not addressed in the document.
 - Feeling that the document is focusing too much on the right now rather than building a plan for the future.
- **Impacts Commitment:** accountability only feels doable providing there's clarity on funding and commerciality, but this is not the reality currently.

Accountability Variation

- **Irresponsibility not Systematic:** many staff talk about the difficulty securing PO approval for the most basic of spends. Excess is not a culture across organisation.
 - Reaction and response to spending should be appropriate and proportionate. There's a need for some sense of agility.

Strategy

- **Trackable:** requires a plan with clear metrics for success identified.
- **Transformational:** need a transformational financial approach – brave and entrepreneurial.



04

Key Research Takeaways

Key Research Takeaways



01

While positives emerge, there are some fundamental concerns that lead to scepticism and uncertainty which could compromise support.

02

There's a need to develop a clear North Star for the organisation. Stakeholders believe this should focus on a commitment to audiences and Irish storytelling.

03

Staff streamlining is the most concerning of all commitments internally. RTÉ's past track record, culture, communication, and career development and training are damaging credibility here.

04

More commissioning of content is met with a mix of optimism and scepticism. The current commissioning structure, attitude to commissioning and the streamlining staff ambition are perceived to have a significant impact on success here.

05

A nationwide production approach has validity for many. However, concerns about investment, internal resourcing and lack of clear roadmap need to be addressed to secure buy-in.

06

Striving for digital transformation is undeniably important from a stakeholder perspective and felt to be overdue. The internal culture and way of working, the ongoing commitment to linear and a lack of explicit longer-term strategy are stumbling blocks in enabling believability currently.

07

Commitment to Financial Sustainability and Governance is met with most indifference. Concerns that the commerciality of RTÉ, lack of public funding commitment, and variability in financial accountability internally could hold the organisation back. Perceived need for a trackable and transformational strategy to make this credible.

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