

## COMMENT

# Big rush with little fuss

## at new Birmingham broadcaster



by Neil Hutchins, AQ Broadcast

**B**ig Centre TV is the latest of the new wave of UK Local TV stations, having launched on 28th February. But behind the calm and successful appearance was a frenzied period of activity, as Ofcom had only confirmed their licence just three months earlier. To get from nothing to on-air in such a short timescale was a big challenge but, with the choice of a single, integrated product range, the deadline was met with little fuss.

Big Centre (BCTV) is the new Local TV (LTV) channel for Birmingham, the Black Country, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Available from the Sutton Coldfield and Brierley Hill transmitters on Freeview channel 8, and shortly also to be on Virgin Media cable, the new station covers an area with around 1.2 million homes and perhaps over 2 million potential viewers.

The Birmingham LTV licence is the second-largest after that held by London Live. It was originally awarded in November 2012 to a different company, but when they went into administration before launch it appeared that Ofcom would revoke the licence and start the process to re-award it again from scratch. The Administrators argued that this would delay the appearance of a new channel by many years, and after some considerable effort Ofcom were eventually persuaded to transfer the existing licence to Kaleidoscope TV. In their decision on 17th November 2014, Ofcom noted that they had “decided on balance that it would be in the interests of citizens and consumers in Birmingham to consent to this transfer request” but only on the condition that the new channel would be on-air by 28th February 2015.

Kaleidoscope is a long-established Birmingham-based organisation which specialises in locating previously missing, often believed lost, television footage. It regularly works with major broadcasters to rescue, catalogue and retain material and has an archive containing over 160,000 items. With associated production and publishing



operations, it was well placed to take on the new LTV licence, and formed Kaleidoscope TV as the holding company for Big Centre TV, run by Chris Perry (Channel Director) and Mike Prince (Director of Programmes). A wealth of experience, a wide range of industry contacts and access to a huge archive of legacy content were all positive aspects, but nevertheless at the point the licence was transferred the company had no staff, no office or studio space and no technology in place ahead of a launch date within what was effectively just 12 working weeks.

To address the immediate issue of a location, BCTV arranged to partner with Walsall Studio School in order to use their facilities close the centre of Walsall. This is an arrangement which should work well for both parties - BCTV have access to some ready-made studio space and a talented pool of students, and the partnership is in line with the school's ethos of involving their students in a working environment from an early stage.

Under the licence terms, BCTV have to provide around 27 hours of first-run news and current affairs programming each week, including a 90-minute breakfast show and five two-minute bulletins every day, plus another 41 hours of first-run local programming per week. This is a high requirement compared to some of the smaller LTV stations, and to achieve this volume of production BCTV needed to be able to operate two studios in parallel. The school already had a green screen studio equipped with cameras and a small TriCaster, and this provided the basic starting point for the news operation, but BCTV still had to provide the technical infrastructure for the second studio plus the core components needed to support their overall operation. This is where aQ Broadcast became involved.

The very short timescale for this project meant that it was critical that a proven, integrated solution could be provided - there was no opportunity to attempt untested workflows or complex integrations between disparate systems. Drawing on our experience of previous Local TV projects, plus other work with small-scale and tightly-integrated operations, we were able to specify and deliver a complete solution - not just in time for the on-air date of 28th February but in fact ahead of their launch event three weeks earlier on 6th February.