

Parkinson's UK response: Age-related TV licence policy consultation

About Parkinson's UK

1. Every hour, two people in the UK are told they have Parkinson's – a brain condition that turns lives upside down, leaving a future full of uncertainty.
2. Parkinson's UK is here to make sure people have whatever they need to take back control – from information to inspiration.
3. We want everyone to get the best health and social care. So, we bring professionals together to drive improvements that enable people to live life to the full.

About Parkinson's

4. Parkinson's affects about 145,000 people in the UK¹. While the majority of people develop symptoms after the age of 65, thousands of working age people are also affected².
5. Parkinson's is a progressive, fluctuating neurological disorder, which affects all aspects of daily living including talking, swallowing and writing. People with Parkinson's often find it hard to move freely. There are also other issues such as pain, depression, dementia, hallucinations, and continence problems. The severity of symptoms can fluctuate from day to day and people can experience rapid changes in functionality over the course of the day. There is no cure.

Overview

1. Parkinson's UK welcomes the BBC's consultation into the age-related TV licence policy. We sought the opinions of people with Parkinson's from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and ages, which forms the basis of our response.
2. Parkinson's UK calls for the ultimate responsibility and cost of free TV licences for those over 75 should remain under the purview of the UK Government. And we are concerned that the impact of this decision could result in cuts to BBC services, the removal of free TV licences from potentially vulnerable people, or a combination of both.
3. Our key comments are as follows:
 - The current concession would prove too costly for the BBC to maintain and could lead to service cuts.
 - Restoring the universal licence fee would be an undue financial burden on members of the public, who are least able to afford the costs.
 - Discounting the cost would still lead to a financial burden on people with Parkinson's who already have a high cost of living.
 - Increasing the age of the concession would lead to some people with Parkinson's losing out on a much-needed service.
 - Parkinson's UK is opposed to means-testing age related benefits. This could lead to significant numbers of people losing out on the TV licences they are entitled to because they are not claiming Pension Credit.
 - The UK Government should take responsibility for reforming and paying the concession.

Question 1. Your views about three overall options:

a. copying the current concession

4. If the BBC were to copy the current concession it would likely prove to be too expensive to maintain and would lead to a significant drop in quality and range of the programmes available.

¹ 'Parkinson's prevalence in the United Kingdom 2018'

² Pringsheim, Tamara, et al. "The prevalence of Parkinson's disease" *Movement Disorders* 29.13 (2014): 1583-1590.

b. Restoring a universal licence fee

5. If the BBC were to restore a universal licence fee, we would recommend they would need to conduct a comprehensive assessment to understand the impact on those that would lose their entitlement to a free licence. Research Sheffield Hallam University conducted has shown that the cost of living with Parkinson's for a household each year is on average of over £16,000. Adding extra costs will increase the burden on those who may already be struggling financially.³
6. Half of all people over the age of 75 are living with a disability and there are an estimated 77,000 people living with Parkinson's in this age group.⁴ For many of those with Parkinson's that will be affected, they rely on their TV for entertainment and companionship. With nearly a third of over 75s living in poverty, or just above the poverty line. Asking them to pay another bill when they may already be struggling is likely to lead to further financial difficulties.⁵
7. Loneliness and social isolation are a common experience for people with neurological conditions. For example, people with Parkinson's typically report very sharp increases in social isolation as their condition progresses, with a very negative impact on quality of life.⁶ Mental health symptoms including apathy, depression and anxiety can be the most distressing symptoms of Parkinson's. These symptoms can prevent people from maintaining social networks.⁷ For people with Parkinson's who experience these and other difficulties, free TV licences can be a lifeline that helps them stay connected and maintain their wellbeing.
8. The Government has itself acknowledged the impact of loneliness, stating that 'up to a fifth of all UK adults feel lonely most or all of the time and with evidence showing loneliness can be as bad for health as obesity or smoking'.⁸ Removing free TV licences is likely to be counter productive in reducing loneliness among those over the age of 75.

c. Reforming the concession in some way

9. If the BBC were to reform the concession it could lead to other difficulties that need to be taken into account. Some people do not claim the benefits they are entitled to, such as Pension Credit. In fact, around two-fifths of people (or 1.2 million people) who are entitled to Pension Credit do not claim it.⁹ This would mean they could not claim the free TV licence even though their low income means that they should be entitled.
10. In addition, recent government changes to Pension Credit for mixed age couples could mean that people on low incomes over 75 are prevented from receiving their TV licence due to having a younger partner.
11. If receipt of a free TV licence was tied to being in receipt of Pension Credit, it may lead to a situation where more than a million people are not getting the licence to which they should be entitled. Often people do not realise they are able to claim the benefit, or they have difficulty with the complex application process or they may be worried about the stigma attached to claiming a benefit.
12. If the BBC were to reform the concession, we believe they would need to investigate ways of mitigating the impact on those who are likely to miss out because they do not claim the benefit to which they are entitled.

Question 2: Your views about three particular reform options:

³ <https://www.parkinsons.org.uk/news/whats-cost-living-parkinsons>

⁴ 'Parkinson's prevalence in the United Kingdom 2018'

⁵ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/plymouth/about-us/latest-news/articles/2018/december/tv-licence-campaign/>

⁶ Karlsen KH, Tandberg E, Årslund D, Larsen JP (2000) Health related quality of life in Parkinson's disease: a prospective longitudinal study *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2000;69:584-589;

⁷ "Someone cares if I'm not there" Addressing loneliness in disabled people, A report by the disability charity Sense for the Jo Cox Commission on loneliness

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy>

⁹ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/campaigning/save-free-tv-for-older-people/>

a. Discount the cost of the licence fee for older households

13. While this would reduce the financial impact compared with restoring a universal licence fee, it would still increase the financial burden on those who are least able to afford the extra expenditure. As noted previously, the cost of living with Parkinson's can already be considerable and adding to this cost would be likely to lead to more financial difficulty, even if it is less than the full TV licence fee.

b. Change the age at which households receive a free TV licence

14. If the age at which a person with Parkinson's receives a free TV licence was changed it could have devastating effects on those that would lose out. If the age was increased to 80, around 28,000 people with Parkinson's could lose out on a free TV licence.¹⁰ With the additional cost of living with Parkinson's, those who are on a low income may struggle to make up the additional costs¹¹ and as a result they would risk losing a much-needed source of entertainment, companionship and for those who don't have the internet, their only way of staying up to date with what is happening in the world.

c. Means-test a licence fee concession for older people

15. It is the policy of Parkinson's UK to oppose and campaign against the introduction of means-testing for age-related benefits, such as the free TV licence for over 75s. People with Parkinson's should be able to access a system of non-means tested disability benefits to help meet the costs of living with a long-term condition and to fully participate in society. Free TV licences for over 75s are important in helping older people with Parkinson's maintain their wellbeing and independence. We do not believe that they should be means-tested.

16. As noted above, means-testing the TV licence fee could lead to over a million people losing out and the BBC should consider ways of mitigating this before introducing a means-test for free TV licences.

Question 3. Any other comments?

17. Parkinson's UK recommends:

- a) That the BBC should not restore a universal licence fee. This would have a severe effect on people with Parkinson's over the age of 75 who are living on a low income.
- b) The UK Government should take responsibility for any changes to free TV licences for over 75s.
- c) The UK Government should also be responsible for the cost of the scheme in the future. The concession scheme was introduced by the UK Government in 2000, but now, in an effort to cut expenditure it is shifting the cost to the BBC. The financial and reputational consequences for the BBC are unacceptable and the UK Government should take responsibility.

Parkinson's UK
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¹⁰ 'Parkinson's prevalence in the United Kingdom 2018'

¹¹ <https://www.parkinsons.org.uk/news/whats-cost-living-parkinsons>