

## **BBC age-related TV licence policy consultation – response by The Silver Line**

### **About The Silver Line**

1. The Silver Line is the only national 24/7 helpline for lonely older people. It is free and confidential and covers all of the UK and the Channel Islands. It was founded by Dame Esther Rantzen in November 2013, and she remains our President and one of our trustees.
2. In the five years we have been in operation we have taken over two million calls. We currently receive over 1,500 calls a day on average. Three quarters of our calls are taken in the evenings and the weekends when other services are closed.
3. Our callers are aged 55 and over. However, we receive a disproportionately large number of callers from the oldest of our citizens; we get a higher percentage of our calls from the over 90s than their proportion in the wider population. They are often the loneliest due to the death of a spouse or friends, or because they have limited mobility and can't leave the house.

### **General points**

4. Before addressing the specific questions raised in the consultation document, there are a few more general points we would like to make. First, we do not think the funding of TV licences for older people should be a responsibility of the BBC. It is invidious to make comparisons between the cost of this long-standing benefit to older people and the cost of a TV channel. We believe this should properly be taken back as a responsibility of government, paid for by general taxation.
5. Similarly, we do not think it is helpful for older people to be set against younger people as part of this debate. This should not be an inter-generational dispute. The issue for us is that over the last 20 years free TV licences have become a benefit that older people have come to appreciate and value, particularly those on lower incomes. Removing it from them would be unfair especially when so many have become reliant on it.
6. It is also worth noting the scale of loneliness amongst older people and the impact it can have on people's physical and mental health. Loneliness, living alone and poor social connections are as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad, 2010) and is likely to increase your risk of death by 29% (Holt-Lunstad, 2015).
7. Research shows there are 1.2 million chronically lonely older people in the UK (Age UK, 2016) and that the number of over 50s experiencing loneliness is set to reach two million by 2025/26, up almost 50% in ten years (Age UK, 2018).

### **The Silver Line polling**

8. In November 2018 we carried out a short poll with some of our callers with whom we have an ongoing relationship, through our regular "keeping in touch" calls. We asked a series of

questions of 200 older people who were geographically spread across the country on a range of issues.

9. Of note for this consultation are two questions we asked, one on activities during the day and the other about use of the internet. With the former we asked:-

Which of these activities do you spend most of your time doing during the day?

- Reading
- Gardening
- Shopping
- Watching TV
- Listening to the radio
- Talking to friends and family
- Other

10. The result for this question showed that 54% of respondents said watching TV was their main activity during the day. This was followed by 23% who said listening to the radio and 13% who said reading.
11. The second question simply asked: "Do you use the internet?" Two-thirds (66%) said they did not, with only one-third (34%) saying they did.
12. Taken together, these questions show that for older people television can be a lifeline. In an increasingly digital world we know from our callers that many of them feel left behind as there can be a general assumption that everyone is online. For many people who call The Silver Line the television is their route to the outside world. As such the current TV licence concession is a vital public service, especially for those who have been most loyal to the BBC over many decades. Whatever option is taken, these older people should be protected as far as possible.

### **Specific consultation questions**

13. As stated above, our preferred option is that the current concession is copied but is taken back by the government and funded out of taxation. In terms of reform, if we had to select between your three choices they would be (in order of preference) raising the age, discounting, and means-testing.
14. Turning to the final choice first, we would oppose anything that brought means-testing to the provision of TV licences. The main reason for this is that means-testing is shown to be ineffective. The government's own evidence in relation to the take up of Pension Credit shows that many people who would be entitled to a free TV licence in these circumstances wouldn't claim it, either through a lack of knowledge or a reluctance to apply for the passporting benefit Pension Credit.
15. Between discounting and raising the age, we would prefer the latter over the former. This is because we know that the older someone is the more likely they live alone, have fewer friends or are housebound. For the oldest of our citizens, many of whom have low incomes,

the television is a vital part of their life and preserving the TV licence concession for them should be a priority.

16. In terms of the age at which any reformed concession should be set, we don't offer a view other than to say it should be kept as close to the current age limit of 75 as possible in order to minimise the number of losers. We would also like transitional arrangements to be put in place which would protect those who currently have the concession. If the age was raised to, say, 80 it would be deeply unfair to start re-charging those aged between 75-79 who would lose out under the new scheme. A gradual introduction of any change in this way would minimise the number of losers and avoid the negative consequences associated with taking an entitlement away from people who already receive it.

### **Conclusion**

17. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. As an organisation who is in daily contact with older people, we would be happy to discuss the contents of this response or any more final proposals that emerge throughout this process.
18. For further information please contact Sophie Andrews, Chief Executive (☎) or Alexandra Matthews, Communications Officer (☎).

The Silver Line

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