



SILVER VOICES

SILVER VOICES RESPONSE TO BBC ON FREE TV LICENCES

Silver Voices is the only independent, individual membership, organisation for senior citizens in the UK. We currently have 1250 members from across all regions and devolved nations of the UK and we are growing fast. Further information about Silver Voices is available on our website:

www.silvervoices.co.uk.

We have consulted every individual Silver Voices member on this response, which has overwhelming support.

SILVER VOICES RESPONSE TO BBC CONSULTATION

1 The free TV licence for over 75s is a universal benefit introduced by the Government in 2000. There should be no changes to this benefit without a Parliamentary vote. It is a very dangerous precedent for the Government to pass off responsibility for changing, or potentially scrapping, this benefit to a non-elected body like the BBC. It is like passing the responsibility for policy on free prescriptions to the NHS and for the Winter Fuel Allowance to the energy companies.

2 The BBC consultation document strongly implies that the free TV licence was introduced primarily to combat pensioner poverty. This is completely untrue. Gordon Brown introduced this measure in his 1999 budget, and he has recently explained that although pension credit was the chosen means to combat pensioner poverty, “we were determined to match this with an improvement in universal provision... to recognise the contribution all elderly citizens had made to our community and to ensure dignity for all in retirement”.

3 The BBC consultation document irresponsibly compounds the myth of intergenerational unfairness against the young. The reality is that senior citizens will have paid their taxes (and TV licences) for many decades and it is hardly unfair that we should receive some universal benefits when our disposable income is much less than during our working years. The young will get old too, one day, so they are not being excluded from this benefit!

4 The BBC appears to be leaning heavily towards future means-testing of this benefit, probably based on pension credit eligibility. The main problem with means-tested benefits is that a significant number of those eligible fail to apply, for a number of reasons (including the complexity of the application process and pride). Government figures reveal that about one third of those eligible for pension credit fail to claim it. That is 1.3 million senior citizens in the UK who would be plunged deeper into poverty by losing their free TV licence as well!

5 Pensioner poverty is not in fact falling as the BBC alleges. Joseph Rowntree Foundation research shows that pensioner poverty started rising again in 2012, and by 2017 16% of pensioners were living in poverty, rising to 36% among private renters.

6 Silver Voices is also concerned about the millions more who are living just above the poverty line. The UK state pension is the worst in the developed world and a £150 annual hit through the TV licence will be impossible to afford for many. Senior citizens already have to juggle food and energy costs and this extra burden may be the last straw. Age UK research indicates that abolishing the free licence would push 50,000 more pensioners into poverty.

7 The consultation document fails to acknowledge the costs and reputational damage to the BBC of enforcing changes to the free licence policy. What would the BBC do if there was a mass refusal from senior citizens to pay the licence fee? The first 90-year-old pensioner hauled before the courts would create a media firestorm.

8 Many senior citizens depend on the TV to combat loneliness and social isolation. Half of the over 75s have a disability and many do not have access to the internet. A free TV licence is not a luxury in such cases but a vital aid for physical and mental health. The private sector consultants who helped to prepare the BBC document provided many statistics, but not the potential extra costs to the UK's health and social care budgets of these proposals!

According to Age UK research:

- **Nearly 1 million older people in the UK often or always feel lonely**
- **360,000 older people have not had a conversation with friends or family for over a week (200,000 of these for over a month)**
- **3.7 million older people agree that television is their main form of company**

The research speaks for itself.

9 The BBC is quite wrong to counterpose the costs of maintaining the scheme against those of all the programmes and channels it claims would have to be cut. This scare tactic may come back to haunt the BBC Board and opens the door to criticisms of extravagant wages and exorbitant production costs.

Instead, following this consultation exercise, the BBC should insist that the scheme must be maintained as it stands, and that the Government should either take back full responsibility for this universal benefit or reimburse the BBC for its full costs.

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