

Age related TV licence consultation

The BBC is funded directly from the Public to be independent of government and commercial pressures and to serve all audiences which ultimately makes the TV licence fee payer a de facto stakeholder of the BBC.

In 2000, the English Government decided to fund free TV licences for those households with a 75-year-old or older living in. It was claimed that it was introduced to try and tackle the growing rise of pensioner poverty. It was delivered by purely government funds.

In 2015, the government decided it would no longer fund this and it was to be abolished in stages. This was a political decision about the allocation of resources. The funds are due to stop in March 2020.

In 2017, the British parliament passed a law transferring responsibility to the BBC itself to decide on age-related concessions beyond the year 2020. The shift away from making government resources to forcing the BBC to decide on any concessions effectively means that by 2020, if concessions are to be made, that there will be a reduction in available funding which will impact on programmes and services.

The BBC is much more than simply a station or service for many people, especially pensioners. The BBC can act as a companion for the elderly and help get over the issue of loneliness for many. It is believed that by 2026 there will be approximately 10% aged 75 or over compared to around 8% in 2016. Despite claims to the contrary, the reality is that pensioner poverty is on the rise, particularly in the north of Ireland where it sits at 19% of pensioners compared to 17% in 2017.

The BBC have put forward three overall options. Within these options there are some ideas of how they feel they could do this. The three options are as follows;

1. The BBC should be Copying the current concession.
2. The BBC should be restoring a universal licence fee.
3. The BBC should be reforming the concession in some way.

Whilst we understand the limited options put forward by the BBC we believe that their approach is short sighted and a missed opportunity to fully engage the public on all possible options.

Sinn Féin believes that the government should fund the licence fee for all households, not just pensioners. The TV licence should become part of a Universal Basic Service provided by government as part of a process of ensuring that everyone participate in the democratic process as informed citizens.

In regards to the options put forward by the BBC, Sinn Féin, as a party would strongly argue that the second best option would be for the UK government to continue the funding of the pensioner scheme. This scheme would enable those less well of pensioners to have that little bit of extra money to buy the necessities such as food, clothes and heating etc. whilst still being able to be informed and entertained. Sinn Féin are a party that protects the most vulnerable and it is clear that introducing any sort of fee for this group to pay would be detrimental and likely to increase pensioner poverty.

If the current scheme cannot be extended, then we are urging the BBC to copy the current concessions. The current scheme was established by the UK government to tackle pensioner poverty and to move away from this concession would have a hugely negative effect on this section of society and the BBC must therefore carry this on.

The Good Friday Agreement and then the St Andrews Agreement committed the Executive to publish and social exclusion strategy to tackle deprivation. We as a party were and continue to be fully supportive of this therefore any scheme that negatively affects a section of society and has the potential to drive them into poverty would not have the support of our party.