

Age-Related TV Licence Policy

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain (WGGB) is a trade union representing professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books, comedy, poetry, animation and videogames. Our members also include emerging and aspiring writers.

WGGB currently has a range of agreements in place with the BBC, ensuring the fair remuneration of writers producing work for its platforms and as such is a key stakeholder.

WGGB welcomes the investment that the BBC continues to make in scriptwriters working across a range of platforms. It is vital for the continued success of the BBC that it is able to commission and produce work of the highest quality.

WGGB believes that the requirement for the BBC to meet the £745 million a year minimum cost of free licence fees for the over 75s, will seriously jeopardise its ability to meet its obligations under its charter as it represents a cut to licence fee revenue of 20%. The BBC has already absorbed a 20% cut in what it can spend on licence payers over the past ten yearsⁱ, a further cut of this scale will inevitably have a negative impact on the number and quality of programmes and services the BBC can produce. A diminished BBC, with fewer and fewer services available will find it harder to justify the continuation of the licence fee.

Furthermore, WGGB has 'in principle' objections to the proposals.

The BBC licence fee is paid by the public in order to fund public service broadcasting across television, radio and, increasingly, online. This is well understood by the public who value the range of services they are able to access including local television and radio.

The provision of free TV licences to any group is undoubtedly a welfare payment and as such should be paid for by government in line with other welfare benefits. It is wholly inappropriate for the cost of a welfare benefit to be passed on to the licence-payer in this way.

It also seems unfair that wealthy home-owners over the age of 75 should receive a free television licence, whilst younger people living in poverty are asked to pay in full.

The BBC and Frontier Economics have been clear in their assessment that demographics have changed significantly since this benefit was introduced in 2000. As the consultation document states:

Affiliated to:

British Copyright Council, British Screen Advisory Council, Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, Creators' Rights Alliance, Federation of Screenwriters in Europe, Federation of Entertainment Unions, Filmmakers' Alliance, International Affiliation of Writers Guilds, Performers' Alliance, Trades Union Congress, Union Network International, World Intellectual Property Organisation

Government figures show that the income of households with someone over 75 today is much closer to the average household income than it was back in 2000. This is because average incomes for households with someone over 75 have grown quicker than those of households generally in the last 18 years. The average income of households headed by someone aged over 75 has increased from 56% to 80% of the average for working-age families.ⁱⁱ

WGGB's preference would be for the Government to pay for and administer a licence-fee exemption system for those considered to be in most need.

In conclusion, as it is not possible for the BBC to absorb the cost of free licences for the over 75s without considerable damage to its output and as all other options amount to a tacit acceptance that the cost of government welfare provisions can be passed on to the licence-payer, WGGB sees no alternative than the BBC reverting to a universal licence fee.

ⁱ BBC Consultation document page 6

ⁱⁱ BBC Consultation document page 34