



**Foreign Affairs
Committee**



**Culture, Media and
Sport Committee**



**International
Development
Committee**

30 January 2025

**Baroness Chapman of Darlington
Parliamentary under-Secretary of State
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

**Stephanie Peacock MP
Minister for Sport, Media, Civil Society and Youth
Department for Culture, Media and Sport**

By email

Dear Jenny and Stephanie,

Thank you for your and your colleagues' attendance at the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Foreign Affairs Committee and International Development Committee's joint oral evidence session on the BBC World Service on Tuesday the 17 December 2024.

We are writing to you on behalf of our committees to convey our initial views before we finalise our respective pieces of work into the BBC World Service. We hope HM Treasury recognises the strength of feeling among Members regarding the World Service, as demonstrated by the unprecedented decision of three select committees of the House of Commons to work together on this matter.

Promoting the soft power value of the BBC World Service

Given its role in espousing UK values across the world and its contribution to development goals, the BBC World Service is a key component of the UK's soft power toolkit. Baroness Chapman told us that the World Service is a "critical part of how we convey our values around the world" and that it has "a great deal to offer" for the UK's ability to use soft power.¹ We believe that more can be done to promote the benefits of the World Service, particularly to the advantage of the UK's international standing and its role in promoting a rules-based and secure international order.

We welcome the aim of the Government that the FCDO and DCMS work more closely together, as evidenced by the creation of the Soft Power Council. The BBC World

¹ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q51](#)

Service can be part of a joined up and strategic approach to how the UK projects its values overseas, promoting fair and independent media and freedom of expression abroad whilst remaining independent of Government and impartial. Any involvement between the BBC World Service and the Soft Power Council must be handled with care, so as to not create confusion about the World Service's independence from the UK Government.

Countering dis/misinformation

At a time when other countries are investing huge amounts in global news and information services, when digital platforms are proliferating, and when artificial intelligence and other new technologies are exploited for malign purposes, trust in the news has become a more valuable commodity than ever before. The BBC is the most trusted news service in the world; it has a hugely valuable brand that has been built up over decades. The value of that brand should not be underestimated.

The BBC World Service has been described as “probably [...] the last international organization that can credibly tackle global disinformation at scale”.² However, it is in competition with global media operators from China and Russia, whose trust scores are improving as they expand and become established in more countries. Jonathan Munro, Global Director and Deputy CEO of BBC News, described this as “an existential threat to those of us who believe trust should be based on impartial news and value-based journalism, not on propaganda”.³ There is an opportunity for the World Service to lead the fight against dis and misinformation and, with investment, to go further in terms of promoting democratic values and impartial media around the world. For instance, the BBC's Russian Service has undertaken hugely important work in assessing the level of casualties in the war in Ukraine and disseminating this information.

The closure of BBC Radio Arabic in Lebanon

The decision to withdraw the BBC World Service Arabic Radio service in Lebanon exemplifies several of the issues that concern our three Committees. The radio frequency previously used by the service was taken over by the Russian Sputnik Radio, so listeners tuning in expecting the World Service heard Russian propaganda. There is a

² Written evidence to the International Development Committee, Jamie Angus [[BBC0006](#)]

³ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q15](#)

pattern of Russian or Chinese state media moving in when the World Service withdraws one of its broadcasting services.⁴

The decision was made at a time when the World Service had to make savings. Faced with a freeze in its license fee income, the BBC decided to reduce its budget by £28.5 million in 2022. However, such decisions can result in outcomes that are at odds with the UK's strategic aim of countering misinformation around the world. The BBC has recognised, with hindsight, that it would make a different decision now. The BBC is aware that it needs to be careful about the pace at which it can withdraw services, like radio, where its audience is not sufficiently ready to move to digital, and it has also been clear that one of the reasons it is asking for an improved funding settlement is to avoid having to make such difficult decisions again.⁵

Furthermore, it has demonstrated that the FCDO should be able to ask questions and challenge the World Service when such decisions are being considered.⁶ At the moment, one of the measures for the World Service is audience reach. Baroness Chapman told us that the Government "may wish to re-appraise the set of metrics" that it uses to assess the BBC World Service, which could include consideration of who might fill a vacuum if the BBC withdraws.⁷ She said she wished to have a relationship with the World Service beyond the annual review "once a year in front of a spreadsheet".⁸

We welcome Baroness Chapman's willingness to engage with the World Service more regularly and hope this could provide a more transparent mechanism for discussions when the World Service wishes to change its services, such as in the case of closing down Arabic Radio. We call on the BBC and Government to review the structures in place for discussing significant changes to a language service that is below the threshold of total closure of the language service. This dialogue should include assessing the risks of what media will fill a vacuum created by such significant changes to a particular service and what that means for countering misinformation.

Humanitarian impact of the BBC World Service

The BBC World Service offers live, real-time updates and news coverage during both natural disasters and conflicts, providing valuable context to civilians such as access information for food, water and shelter. This can be crucial during conflicts that heavily

⁴ Oral evidence taken on 19 November 2024, [Qq28-30, Q54](#) [CMS]; and [Q41](#) [FAC]

⁵ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q45](#); [Follow-up letter from the BBC](#), 9 January 2025

⁶ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q61](#)

⁷ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q91](#)

⁸ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q67](#)

feature misinformation, propaganda or media suppression. Services such as Gaza Daily ensure that civilians have access to life-saving information they desperately need, including guidance on how to treat wounds. The closure of the Arabic Radio service, and the subsequent deployment of the emergency pop-up Gaza Daily radio service, demonstrated the value of the BBC having flexibility in how it can deploy its budget when crises develop, so that it can respond with appropriate services.

Furthermore, the World Service's provision of education services, notably the *Dars* programme in Afghanistan, ensures that children who are unable to access education for a variety of reasons do not get left behind. Baroness Chapman told us that the FCDO values "very much" the value of the World Service's contribution in providing humanitarian aid.⁹

The World Service maintains a fund which it can call upon when crisis occur. The FCDO told us that the recent funding settlement for 2025-26 moved responsibility for the crisis pop-up fund "substantially" from the licence fee to the FCDO.¹⁰ We welcome the Government's willingness to bear further responsibility for aspects of the World Service's work, such as the crisis fund, and encourage it to continue to do so in future funding settlements. It is vital that the World Service can call on the resources to respond to crises.

Supporting high quality, independent and impartial journalism

The high-quality journalism of the World Service adds to the reputation of BBC News and the global BBC brand. Audiences across the world, and in the UK, benefit greatly from journalism that aspires to the editorial principles of accuracy, impartiality and transparency. The World Service operates where there is limited access to free media, and 325 of its journalists are in exile because free media is suppressed in their country.¹¹ For instance, threats and intimidation of BBC Persia journalists and their families in Iran. It provides programmes that demonstrate public service broadcasting at its best, such as its BBC Eye investigative journalism,¹² and its long form interviews holding leaders and politicians to account around the world, such as on HARDtalk. With the upcoming loss of HARDtalk, the BBC should be expected to continue challenging and regular long form interviews of political leaders in other countries. We are

⁹ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Qg78-80](#); [Follow-up letter from the FCDO and DCMS](#), 8 January 2025

¹⁰ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q86](#)

¹¹ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q51](#); and on 19 November 2024, [Q18](#) [CMS]

¹² Oral evidence taken on 19 November 2024, [Q35](#) [CMS]; Written evidence to the IDC [[BBC0013](#)]

concerned that whilst plans to cut HARDtalk are clear, plans for a replacement service are less so.

Furthermore, a future agreement that increases the proportion of funds from the Government should include clear safeguards which protect the BBC World Service from being perceived as a voice of Government or engaging in self-censorship to appear to meet the position of the UK Government.

Sufficient, predictable and long-term funding for the World Service

Baroness Chapman said it had been acknowledged that the decision in 2010 to shift the burden of funding the World Service from central government to the licence fee was “not the wisest”.¹³ Indeed Lisa Nandy MP, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, has said that current model for funding the BBC World Service is unsustainable.¹⁴ The result is the current hybrid structure, with roughly two thirds of its income from the licence fee and one third from the FCDO. The FCDO portion has become subject to annual negotiations, which Baroness Chapman also acknowledged does not enable the World Service to plan effectively.¹⁵ The consensus in our committees’ individual evidence sessions was for funding settlements of at least three years.¹⁶

It leaves the World Service vulnerable when revenue from the licence fee is falling and the BBC continues to have to make savings across its services, such as those to BBC News that included HARDtalk. The BBC is in the unenviable position of having to choose either savings to domestic programmes watched by licence fee payers, or to the World Service whose audience is overwhelmingly outside the UK and not licence fee payers.¹⁷

The World Service will receive £137million from the FCDO for 2025-26, which includes an uplift of £32.6 million, but which the BBC told us was £20 million less than what they asked for. While this uplift protects language services from immediate closure,¹⁸ it does not protect the World Service from savings that have to be made to cope with inflationary pressure and enable it to respond to the ambitions of its competitors—the Chinese and Russian state media combined are spending £8billion a year, the BBC

¹³ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Q70](#)

¹⁴ Oral evidence taken before CMS Committee, 10 December 2024, [Q50](#)

¹⁵ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Qq70-74](#);

¹⁶ Oral evidence taken on 19 November 2024, [Q38](#) [FAC]; and [Q50](#) [CMS]

¹⁷ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, Q28; Q35; And on 19 November 2024 [Q10](#) [CMS]

¹⁸ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, Q65

World Service is spending about £400 million.¹⁹ The risk of closing a language service in future remains.²⁰

The BBC has asked for the Government to take back responsibility for funding the World Service, as it did before 2014. Its view, with which we have sympathy, is that the World Service benefits the UK as a whole, and Government funding would provide stability, allowing the World Service to adopt more strategic priorities and grow. Maintaining budgets at the current level will lead to decline in the World Service,²¹ and a World Service in decline will be less able to provide the valuable services that our three Committees heard compelling evidence on.

Consideration of a long-term funding solution that might match the BBC's request is for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the BBC Charter Review, a process that will continue into late 2027. Until that process concludes, the presumption is that the World Service will continue to be funded mainly from the licence fee with additional funds from the FCDO. It is not clear to us how this will improve upon the current situation for at least the period of the Spending Review.²²

The Foreign Affairs, International Development, and Culture, Media and Sport Committees support the BBC World Service and urge the Government to back it with sufficient resources so it can continue its valuable work and, in future, grow and expand its activities.

We believe that the World Service benefits the whole of the UK, not just in terms of its journalism and public service programming, but also for its contribution to the UK's soft power and security, its humanitarian support, fighting misinformation and disinformation, and as a positive reflection of the UK's values to the world.

We welcome the £32.6m uplift provided to the World Service for 2025-26, but are concerned that, even if this level of increase was repeated in the forthcoming Spending Review, it could nonetheless lead to a decline in the World Service.

¹⁹ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, [Qq1-5](#); And on 19 November 2024 Q60 [CMS]

²⁰ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, Q29

²¹ Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, Qq5-6

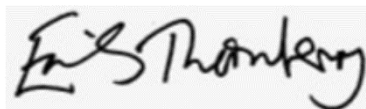
²² Oral evidence taken on 17 December 2024, Qq69-74

We urge the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to jointly make the case to HM Treasury on behalf of the World Service in the forthcoming Spending Review and use this opportunity to rebalance the relative contributions from the licence fee and FCDO, so that the World Service income becomes less reliant on the licence fee. It should move away from short term funding cycles, and aim for funding rounds of at least three years, which would enable the World Service to plan confidently the digital services and prepare for challenges such as artificial intelligence.

All three of our committees may wish to make further recommendations on the BBC World Service depending on their future inquiries. The Foreign Affairs Committee has launched an inquiry into UK's Soft Power and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee is likely to inquire into BBC Charter Review once that process is underway.

We would be grateful for a response by 3 March 2025. We intend to place your response in the public domain. We will be sending a copy of this letter to Tim Davie, Director General of the BBC, and Sir Oliver Robbins KCMG, Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Yours sincerely,



Dame Emily Thornberry MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee



Dame Caroline Dinenage MP
Chair, Culture, Media and Sport Committee



Sarah Champion MP
Chair, International Development Committee