



Foreign, Commonwealth  
& Development Office



Department  
for Culture,  
Media & Sport

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Rt Hon 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

3 March 2025

Dear Emily, Caroline and Sarah,

Thank you for your joint letter of 30 January 2025, relating to the inquiries into the BBC World Service, being taken forward by the Committees which you respectively chair. We are writing to you to address the points raised in your letter.

**World Service value**

HM Government highly values the World Service, which reaches a global audience of 320 million, and remains the world's most trusted international news service. While its services are aimed primarily at global audiences, it delivers benefits to the UK and is an asset for the whole of government.

The World Service is a UK soft power asset, contributing to positive perceptions of the UK and HMG's economic growth mission. It reaches audiences in important economic markets around the world, including India, Nigeria, Kenya, Singapore and the USA. Soft power

indices and perception studies regularly highlight the BBC's soft power attraction.<sup>1</sup> Research demonstrates that international BBC consumers, particularly 'influential' audiences: have a more positive attitude towards the UK; are more likely to use UK goods and suppliers; and are more likely to invest in the UK and visit the UK for leisure, study, or business.<sup>2</sup>

The World Service bolsters UK security. The World Service shapes the global information environment through its provision of impartial, accurate news. Through high quality and investigative journalism, it also exposes, debunks and counters the misinformation, disinformation and harmful narratives hostile states and others produce internationally. In Europe and Central Asia it reaches into Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In the Middle East it reaches audiences in Iran, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq.

The World Service plays a crucial role in supporting international development and humanitarian goals. It serves audiences living under repressive authoritarian regimes and 75% of its audience live in countries with low/no media freedom. Just five days after the fall of Assad in Syria, the World Service set up enhanced services in Arabic and English, providing audiences with a trusted source of independent news when it is most needed. It is now bringing its educational programme, Dars or 'lesson' – described by the United Nations as a "learning lifeline" for children in Afghanistan – to the Middle East and North Africa through Dars Arabic.

## **World Service funding**

HM Government is backing the World Service with resources. HM Government is providing an uplift of £32.6m (or 31%) for the World Service in 2025/26, taking HM Government's total contribution to £137m. This ensures that the World Service can continue operating in 42 languages and helps to support its emergency crisis response capability. This was a large funding uplift in a tough fiscal situation.

The HM Government funding settlement for the World Service for 2026/27 onwards will be determined through the ongoing Spending Review process. This will set HM Government funding for the World Service for three years. The FCDO and DCMS are working together on this. HM Government is also consulting the BBC. As you know, the fiscal position is exceptionally difficult and the FCDO is an unprotected Department. In this context, we anticipate that HM Government and the BBC will need to take difficult prioritisation decisions.

The BBC funding model will be looked at through the DCMS-led Charter Review, into which the FCDO will input, ensuring foreign policy priorities are given due consideration. Charter Review will look at a range of issues to ensure the BBC can thrive well into the future. To achieve this aim, we must ensure the BBC has a sustainable funding model that is fair for those who pay for it. Ahead of the new BBC Charter in 2028, HM Government is open-minded about the future of the BBC Licence Fee and how the World Service is funded.

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<sup>1</sup> [Keeping the UK's creative industries globally competitive | UAL](#)

<sup>2</sup> 2022 Tapestry Research - [research-the-impact-and-influence-of-the-bbc.pdf](#)

The BBC is operationally and editorially independent and decides how to most effectively and efficiently deliver the World Service. The BBC is adapting the World Service to reflect changing communication technologies and audience media consumption patterns. This includes implementing their 'Digital First' strategy and incorporating new and developing technologies, including AI. Digital technology and innovation can help to maximise return on investment, and in many countries internet penetration rates are already high and growing. It is important however that the BBC does this carefully so as not to lose audiences as they transition away from linear technologies, particularly in high priority countries with low digital penetration.

While funding for Russian and Chinese state media, including Russia Today and CGTN, is opaque, we know that both are investing in global news operations. Nonetheless, the World Service retains its position as the world's most trusted international news broadcaster.

### **Arabic radio closure**

The BBC closed the Arabic radio service in January 2023. The BBC has acknowledged that, given events in the Middle East since, it may have been a mistake. Nevertheless, HM Government welcomes the BBC's flexibility since then in standing up emergency radio services in Gaza, Sudan and now Syria, in response to the humanitarian crises arising in those places. Moreover, the BBC Arabic service continues on digital and TV, reaching an audience of 35 million across the Middle East and North Africa and wider. Internet penetration rates are very high in countries in the region.

Broadcast licences are in demand and if the BBC vacates certain frequencies there is a chance that Russia, China and others will move in to take them. HMG is aware that Radio Sputnik, which is part of Russian state media, picked up the radio frequency that the BBC vacated in Lebanon when closing down the Arabic radio service.

### **Governance arrangements**

Under the current governance arrangements, the Foreign Secretary agrees with the BBC the objectives, priorities and targets (OPTs) for the World Service. The current set of OPTs were agreed and published in January 2024. The ongoing Spending Review process is the right time to review these metrics, particularly to ensure that they reflect this Government's strategic priorities and the evolving geo-political context.

The Foreign Secretary also approves opening or closure of a full language service. However, decisions on transmission and distribution platforms, such as a radio or TV service, are for the BBC. FCDO Ministers engage routinely with the BBC on the World Service to ask questions and challenge when the BBC is taking major decisions with impacts on HM Government strategic priorities, particularly any changes to language services and transmission platforms. We will continue to build our already strong, collaborative and respectful relationship.

The Charter Review is the right time to consider the governance arrangements for the World Service in the round. Any arrangements will need to protect the BBC's operational and editorial independence to ensure the World Service remains credible and trusted by global audiences.

### **Soft Power Council**

The Soft Power Council will advise HM Government on the development of a Soft Power Strategy, including how to support the UK's soft power assets and how to harness them through international interventions in support of foreign policy priorities. Tom Fussell sits on the Soft Council - he is CEO of BBC Studios and a member of the BBC Board. BBC Studios is the principal commercial arm of the BBC Group, responsible for generating revenue and profits which are returned to the BBC to support the licence fee. There are no current plans for the World Service itself to be formally represented.

We are grateful to the Committees for their time and effort to undertake this inquiry. We will keep under careful consideration the points they have made, particularly through the ongoing Spending Review and the upcoming Charter Review. We look forward to engaging with the Committees in future on the World Service.

Yours sincerely,



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