

Written evidence submitted by BBC World Service (AFU0009)

Introduction

1. BBC World Service provides trusted¹ news to radio, TV and digital audiences around the world in 42 languages including English, reaching a global audience of 318m². It is chiefly funded by the UK Licence Fee with additional grant funding of £104.4m³ [FY 23/24 and 24/25 respectively] from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [FCDO]. While the majority of the BBC World Service's news services for Afghanistan [available in Dari, Pashto, Uzbek, Persian and English] continue to be funded by the Licence Fee, FCDO grant funding has enabled the World Service to strengthen its digital [including TV/video] offer of respective languages.
2. In Afghanistan today – despite severe restrictions imposed by the Taliban on international and local news media alike⁴ – BBC World Service remains the most reliable [84%], trustworthy [84%] and independent [72%] source of news and information for audiences across the country. Moreover while the BBC's historic weekly audience reach has been significantly impacted by Taliban censorship – dropping some 54% from 11.4m to 5.2m⁵ in 2023 – the World Service remains the only international news media organisation still broadcasting inside Afghanistan [through its network of FM relays and partnerships, via digital social and on satellite TV].
3. The BBC's news services for Afghanistan remain a critical source of impartial and accurate insight, analysis and information – an essential lifeline for ordinary people as they navigate severe economic crisis, political turmoil and the curtailing of hard-won [and lost] security and social freedoms. With significant female [41% of television and 33% of radio] and youth [15-24] audiences [44% of television, 32% of radio and 42% of digital]⁶ – and the 2023 launch of lifeline school education series *Dars* – the World Service remains committed to ensuring Afghans have access to its services.
4. Prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021, the BBC World Service had over a hundred staff working across Afghanistan – all of those who wished to leave have now been safely relocated. The BBC's services for Afghanistan are now primarily delivered by teams based in London with a small number of staff in Pakistan, and the region.
5. BBC Media Action – the BBC's international charity, not funded by the Licence Fee – continues to deliver in-country programmes to support mine awareness, health and nutrition, humanitarian response and some media development – including support for Afghanistan's few remaining women-led and women-focussed radio stations. Media Action has also retained a network of [75] local people working with and for them, in addition to a small London-based team.
6. This evidence is an update to written evidence provided to the Foreign Affairs Committee in 2021⁷, and as such focusses on the World Service's current work in Afghanistan [including information available to us about the media environment and any future BBC plans].

¹ BBC News is the most trusted international news brand. Source BBC Global Audience Measure [GAM] 2023

² BBC GAM 2023

³ Following the 2023 Integrated Review – in recognition of significant financial pressures facing the World Service – the Government announced a one-off, cash-flat grant of £20m spread across FY 23/24 and 24/25, in addition to the existing annual grant of £94.4m.

⁴The BBC estimates in excess of 300 independent local media outlets have closed since the Taliban returned to power in 2021. This is in addition to 2022 Taliban bans of international news media VOA and Radio Liberty.

⁵ BBC GAM 2023

⁶ All BBC services for Afghanistan [GAM 2023]

The BBC in Afghanistan – market context

7. Afghanistan has an estimated population of 38m, of whom 72% live in rural areas.
8. The Afghan media environment today is severely constrained – directly and indirectly [self-censorship]. Music is no longer broadcast and women rarely appear on air. Female presenters must cover their hair and face, and many of the country’s female journalists have fled. The majority of local outlets – we estimate at least 300 – have been closed since 2021, with those that remain facing significant censorship by the Taliban regime. The private *Moby Media Group* – whose outlets include most watched channel *Tolo TV* – and state-owned RTA are now firmly in the grip of the Taliban.
9. Following 2022 bans of US State Department-funded Voice of America [VOA] and Radio Liberty, the BBC is today the only international news organisation still able to broadcast inside the country.
10. While some social media platforms – Facebook and YouTube – continue to be accessible, the Taliban have already blocked TikTok, with further bans expected. Digital and online access is further constrained by cost, electricity supply, poor coverage and, for text, the still widespread rates of illiteracy. TV access is similarly dependent on issues of cost and electricity supply.
11. Radio – always an important platform in Afghanistan, which is both cheap and readily available – has therefore become more important than ever since the return to power of the Taliban.

The BBC in Afghanistan – distribution and weekly reach

12. The BBC provides a daily audio stream of Pashto, Dari and English news and current affairs content to audiences via a network of 32 relays and an expanded MW and SW schedule. The *Salamwatan* radio network of 26 private stations across 34 provinces also broadcasts the BBC’s Pashto and Dari news programmes, while audiences in Kabul can additionally tune into a dedicated World Service English FM relay. The Afghan *Shamsad TV* news portal streams BBC News Pashto’s text feeds, and all the BBC’s languages for Afghanistan are available online and via digital social platforms.
13. In January 2023, the BBC further launched a dedicated satellite TV channel for Afghanistan which includes the newly created *Dars* school education programme [for 11-16 year olds] and a daily 30-minute bulletin from BBC News Uzbek [available via live satellite Monday to Friday 17:45 local time, with repeats across the day/week]. The BBC News Afghanistan satellite channel brings together BBC World Service’s multilingual offer for Afghanistan, with BBC News Pashto, BBC News Dari, and BBC News Uzbek TV and radio content as well as the BBC Persian TV programming.
14. BBC News Persian’s 24/7 satellite TV is also accessible inside Afghanistan, as are the BBC’s News Channel and commercially-funded bbc.com/news.
15. BBC World Service’s most recent weekly audience reach figures for these services in Afghanistan [2023] are as follows:

⁷ [BBC World Service written evidence - FAC Afghanistan inquiry 2021](#)

	BBC News Pashto	BBC News Dari	BBC News Uzbek	BBC News Persian	BBC News English
<i>All platforms – TV, radio & online</i>	2.3m	1.4m	63.7k	2m	115.8k

BBC News Pashto

16. While the Pashto service has been affected by the Taliban’s 2022 blanket ban on the broadcast of international television news output, it has managed to retain its in-country FM radio presence and partnerships [in addition to online and digital social]. This is in contrast to American-funded Radio Liberty and the VOA, who are no longer able to broadcast inside Afghanistan. The BBC was the only international broadcaster on air under the previous Taliban rule, and we have been informed anecdotally that members of the regime continue to listen to our programmes to this day.
17. The Service broadcasts five live radio slots daily including news and current affairs [*World Today* and *Newshour* format] and live phone-ins with listeners including women, in addition to the *Dars* school education programme aimed at 11-16 year olds.
18. BBC News Pashto daily TV programme, 30min *BBC Naray Da Wakht*, and documentaries are streamed live from London and are available on demand via the BBC News Pashto [YouTube channel](#) and [Facebook](#) pages, via the BBC News Afghanistan satellite channel, and in Pakistan – via Mashriq TV.
19. BBC News Pashto online⁸ provides news, insight and analysis about Afghanistan, Pakistan, the wider region as well as international coverage for a global Pashto-speaking audience. Digital social [Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube] provides a similar range of news output and despite the barriers to access is proving an important area of audience growth [64% increase in weekly digital reach since 2022].
20. The Service provides dedicated programmes and coverage of issues affecting women and girls – one such story about women’s rights⁹ was cited in the UN’s 2023 Human Rights Council report – and is also a critical source of information for wider BBC News coverage. In 2021, a story about the impact of the Taliban regime on maternal health¹⁰ was reportedly instrumental in securing the release of World Bank hospital funding to the country.

BBC News Dari

21. The Service broadcasts three live radio slots daily including news and currents [*World Today* and *Newshour* format] and a live phone-in with listeners, in addition to the *Dars* school education programme:
22. *Word of the Day* – a one-hour audience-participation programme - is proving particularly popular with listeners, while women and girls report that it is a critical window on the world. The programme has also become a regular fixture among both supporters and opponents of the Taliban, where they routinely debate their differences.

⁸ [BBC News Pashto website](#)

⁹ [BBC News Pashto website - Afghanistan women's rights erased](#)

¹⁰ [BBC News website - Giving birth under the Taliban](#)

23. BBC News Afghan radio output in Pashto and Dari includes *Word of the Day*, weekly programme *Woman* (*Mermen* in Pashto, and *Zan* in Dari), a weekly health magazine *Darman* (produced by BBC Media Action), editions of *Dars* and other programmes. In addition to the other platforms, the radio content is also available on FM in Afghanistan and on shortwave.

BBC News Uzbek

24. As part of the move to digital-first, the service revamped and extended its digital content for audiences inside Afghanistan and global Afghan Uzbek diaspora, expanded its Facebook content, launched an Instagram account aimed at youth and women, and introduced a podcast. In 2023, BBC News Uzbek content tailored for Uzbek-speakers in Afghanistan was made available to them via the BBC News Afghanistan satellite channel.
25. The 30-minute magazine show consists of a 15-minute live news round-up, including packages from inside Afghanistan, and a 15-minute pre-recorded visualised educational podcast in Uzbek. The show is also live streamed on BBC News Uzbek's Afghanistan YouTube channel and Facebook page.
26. The Service further produces the weekly 30-minute education programme *Uzbek Mirosi*. Aimed at young Afghan Uzbek audiences as well as Afghanistan's Turkman, Kyrgyz and Uighur-speaking audiences, the programme brings inspirational stories and educational content, focusing on Uzbek and regional cultural, historical heritage, with original features and documentaries as well as discussions on women's issues. BBC News Uzbek for Afghanistan is the only source of accurate and impartial information for Uzbek-speaking audiences inside the country.
27. A recent example of editorial impact is a story about two migrants travelling from Afghanistan to Iran, then onwards to Turkey, who were kidnapped and tortured by smugglers¹¹. After weeks of forensic investigation by BBC News Uzbek, the story was published by a number of World Service language Services and BBC News, attracting record page views inside the country and across the region.

Launch of *Dars* school education programme

28. In February 2023 the new academic year in Afghanistan was about to start when the Taliban regime renewed its ban on girls attending secondary school. Within weeks – on 1 April – and using emergency funding the BBC World Service had launched its new multimedia school education programme *Dars* for 11-16 year olds¹². Meaning 'lesson' in Pashto and Dari, the magazine programme offers children who would otherwise be excluded from learning modules in Maths, English, Science and History, along with topical news stories and inspiration from around the world.
29. The programme is presented by four young Afghan journalists - Shazia Haya and Malaika Ahmadzai in Pashto, and Aalia Farzan and Sahar Rahimi in Dari, all of whom fled Afghanistan and are now based with the BBC in London – and is available on BBC News Pashto and BBC News Dari radio [FM, SW and MW], BBC Persian TV, BBC online and via our new satellite TV channel for Afghanistan [repeated 5 times daily]. Learning modules also appear on social

¹¹ [BBC News website - Afghan migrants kidnapped and tortured on Iran-Turkey border](#)

¹² [BBC press release on launch of Dars](#)

media – Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, including catch-up playlists, which are also proving popular with refugee communities.

30. Lessons in maths and science are produced with content and support from BBC Bitesize, the BBC's online study support resource for UK school-age pupils. *Dars* also provides content from BBC Learning English, tiered for lower- and higher-stage learning, and shares inspirational stories from the BBC World Service, including *100 Women*.
31. The reaction from the audience so far has been overwhelming, with viewers calling in to World Service radio programmes to find out more. One young viewer contacted us to say: *'It has been about two years since we were banned from school. We hoped to return to school this year, but it didn't happen, and only boys went back to school. Our future is very unclear. But the new program the BBC has launched gave us hope! The fact that we can study again, and progress gives us hope. It is like a light in a very dark tunnel'*.
32. The BBC has recently completed focus groups with teachers and students in Nangarhar, Balkh, Herat and Kandahar provinces: teachers reported recommending the programme to their students, while the students said watching it motivated them to learn and that they would like even more science and health lessons.
33. Series 2 of *Dars* is launching on 7 October 2023. The new series will run for the next three months, until the end of the current Afghan school year in December 2023.
34. BBC (Licence Fee) emergency funding for the programme will end in December, after Series 2; the BBC is currently exploring how it can continue to expand the offer until December 2024, delivering three more series.

BBC Media Action

35. The BBC's international charity, BBC Media Action, continues to deliver in-country programmes to support mine awareness, health and nutrition, humanitarian response and some media development – including support for Afghanistan's few remaining women-led and women-focused radio stations. Throughout the upheaval of 2021, Media Action remained in Afghanistan and continues to produce high quality programming and support to local media, with an in-country team of 75 (in Kabul and with representation in every province) and a small supporting London-based team.
36. *Open Jirga*, BBC Media Action's popular public debate programme, is not expected to return. The long-running radio drama *New Home New Life* is still in production by partner AEPO, which became independent from BBC Media Action in 2012, and is aired on a local broadcaster.

Conclusion

37. The continuing and rapid deterioration of media freedoms, human rights and humanitarian support across Afghanistan underlines the increasingly important role of independent international news broadcasters. The World Service – the only international news organisation currently able to broadcast inside the country – is uniquely placed to give voice to ordinary people from all sections of Afghan society, challenge the increasingly narrowing worldview available to them, and provide lifeline information and education services to the most vulnerable, in particular women and children.

38. The BBC also recognises its key role in continuing to provide in-depth coverage of Afghanistan to UK and global audiences. With the help of adequate long-term funding from the FCDO, and sufficient Licence Fee funding, the BBC World Service will be well positioned to continue its mission to provide accurate, impartial and impactful journalism for audiences across Afghanistan.

6 October 2023