

## **Written evidence submitted by Age UK**

### **DCMS Committee inquiry into the future of Public Service Broadcasting**

Age UK welcomes this inquiry. We would like to take the opportunity to highlight the importance of public service broadcasting for many older people and to express our major concerns about the plans to means-test the free TV licence for the over 75s, and the way this has been handled by the Government and the BBC. In our view, a public service broadcaster should not be expected to make decisions about who should receive concessions or be responsible for administering a means-test system – these are in effect part of our welfare system and responsibility should lie firmly with the Government.

### **The importance of mainstream TV and public service broadcasting to older people**

Older people spend much more time viewing broadcast TV than younger age groups and this has remained consistent in recent years. Ofcom report that in 2018 the over 75s spent, on average, 349 minutes a day watching broadcast TV, similar to the 338 minutes spent in 2010.<sup>i</sup> In contrast, time spent watching broadcast TV among younger people, already much lower, fell over this period. For example, the 25-34 age group watched 122 minutes a day in 2018 down from 199 in 2010. Younger viewers are spending more time watching subscription on-demand and online services.

As well as being a source of entertainment, public service broadcasters have an important role in keeping people informed. Despite the rise in social media, TV remains the most important source of news – used by 75% of all adults and 94% of the over 65s. Among all platforms, BBC One is the most used news source, with 58% of adults saying they use it.<sup>ii</sup> The second most used source is ITV, followed by Facebook.

Access to news and up-to-date impartial information from the BBC and other public service broadcasters is particularly important for older people who do not use the internet. While virtually all (99%) of young adults use the internet, less than half (47%) of over 75s are online.

### **Free TV licences for over 75s**

The Committee will be aware that Age UK has been campaigning against the decision to means-test the free TV licence for over 75s. The change, now planned to come into force on 1 August, would result in around 3.75 million households with someone aged 75 or over having to pay for a licence because they are not in receipt of Pension Credit. This will have a major impact on the lives of many of our oldest citizens, particularly the most vulnerable who are living with some combination of disability, low income and loneliness. We remain extremely concerned that unless the decision is reversed many older people will give up their TV despite its importance or cut back on essential items such as food and energy to buy a licence.

The need for the decision to be urgently reconsidered is even greater now due to coronavirus as this has increased isolation for many aged 75+. More than 950,000 people aged 70+ in England (12%, one in eight) are on the shielded patient list for coronavirus and having to live very restricted lives.

Restricting the concession to those aged 75+ receiving Pension Credit misses out many of the least well off including the two out of five people entitled to, but not receiving, Pension Credit. Even

those receiving Pension Credit may face difficulties as they are expected to provide evidence such as a photocopy of a letter from the DWP showing they receive the benefit. This could mean they have to travel to a shop providing photocopying services, perhaps using public transport, and potentially putting themselves at risk especially if they should be shielding.

### **The Government should be responsible for welfare decisions**

The ongoing disagreement between the BBC and the Government about responsibility for funding free TV licences highlights the importance of clarity about the role of public service broadcasters. Responsibility for funding the free TV licence was transferred to the BBC as part of the 2015 funding settlement which was carried out with little public or Parliamentary scrutiny. In Age UK's view, the BBC should not have agreed to take over responsibility for free TV licences, and the Government at the time should not have put pressure on the BBC to do so. It is not appropriate for the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, to be placed in a position where it must decide who should receive concessions or to implement a means- tested system.

In the short-term, we are calling on the Government and the BBC to urgently broker a solution. More than ever, at this very difficult time for many aged 75+, older people should not be caught in the crossfire of a debate about the role of the BBC.

Going forward there needs to be more extensive and open public consultation on decisions about funding the BBC and clear guidance that any concessions or support for particular groups should be the responsibility of Government not public service broadcasters.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.smallscreenbigdebate.co.uk/what-is-ssbd/ssbd-five-year-review>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/157914/uk-news-consumption-2019-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/157914/uk-news-consumption-2019-report.pdf)