

Parliamentary Briefing

Switched Off: Save Free TV for Older People

January 2020

Background

Since 2000 any individual aged 75 or over had been entitled to a concessionary TV licence. In 2015, the government decided to pass responsibility for the concession on to the BBC. In 2017 parliament gave the BBC the responsibility under the Digital Economy Act 2017 to decide on the future of that concession from June 2020. From this time the BBC will scrap the universal free TV licence for over 75s but will continue the concession for those in receipt of Pension Credit. This means that 3.7 million pensioners will now have to start paying for the TV licence from June 2020.

In the government's 2019 general election manifesto, they recognised the value of free TV licences for over 75s but stated that they should be funded by the BBC. In the Queen's Speech in December 2019 the government gave no indication of how it would work with the BBC to make this happen.

Age UK's position

For millions of over 75s the TV is not just 'the box in the corner', it is their constant companion, their window on the world and their main form of company. Television plays a central role in their lives.

Age UK firmly believes it is the government's responsibility to look after vulnerable older people, not the BBC's, and the government should take back responsibility for a benefit which was introduced to tackle pensioner poverty. The government agreed the deal with the BBC without any public consultation and without providing the funding the BBC needed to continue the concession. This decision by the government to allow a third party to make decisions on universal benefits is a slippery slope. It runs the risk of other benefits like the bus pass being transferred to bus companies or the winter fuel allowance becoming the responsibility of energy companies. We are concerned about the implications this has for future decisions on older people's benefits.

We demand that the government takes back the funding and administration of the free TV licences scheme.

If TV licences were to be taken away, it would be a cruel blow when older people already have many other challenges in their lives:

- **Poverty:** Contrary to the assertion that older people are well-off, 29% of over 75s live in poverty or just above the poverty line, and 18% of over 75s live in poverty.

- £154.50 per year is a substantial amount for someone on a fixed income, such as a pension, to afford. This is simply not a 'hit' many older people will be able to take.
- Linking the TV licence concession to Pension Credit may sound fair, but many people in very difficult financial circumstances will now be expected to buy a licence because they are not eligible for Pension Credit. It is not the case that everyone on low incomes receives Pension Credit, and 2 in 5 of all older people eligible for Pension Credit don't claim it. Between 2016-17 over 950,000 people 75 and over claimed Pension Credit but a further 650,000 people aged 75 and over were entitled to claim Pension Credit and were not receiving it. There are various reasons why older people do not claim, they may not know the benefit exists, may feel they are not entitled to any help, may be put off by the process of claiming, or struggle on alone assuming others are worse off than them.
 - **Loneliness:** Over a million older people say that the TV is their main source of company and one in four over 75s view the television as their main form of companionship.
 - **Disability:** There are two million people aged over 75, half of whom are disabled and a similar proportion has two or more serious long term health problems, like diabetes or cancer. People with restricted mobility rely heavily on TV for companionship and entertainment.
 - **Practicality:** There are 850,000 people with dementia in the UK, and by 2025 this figure will be one million. From a purely practical point of view, how will the BBC ensure that people in this situation pay for their licence fee, and if they don't pay, how will they go about enforcing it?
 - **Digital exclusion:** More than half of over 75s do not use the internet and rely far more heavily on television for news and as source of information than younger groups. TV is an essential source of information for people who aren't online and plays a crucial role in their ability to be an active citizen in a democracy.

What can you do?

Though the government has said that it recognises the value of free TV licences for over 75s, it has given no indication of how the concession will be reinstated or how it will work with the BBC to make this happen. We need the government to urgently address this, and you can help us to do this by raising the issue in Parliament, through a PQ or Westminster Hall Debate.

Get in touch with us

If you have any questions or would like to arrange a meeting to discuss how we can work together, please contact Robert Henderson, Senior Public Affairs Manager, at Robert.Henderson@ageuk.org.uk or 020 3033 1354.