

Parliamentary Briefing

Switched Off: Save Free TV for Older People

July 2020

Background

Since 2000 any individual aged 75 or over has been entitled to a concessionary TV licence. In 2015, the Government decided to pass responsibility for the concession 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.

In 2019 the BBC, following a public consultation, announced they would scrap the universal free TV licence except for those over-75's in receipt of Pension Credit from 1st June 2020. This means that 3.7 million pensioners will now have to start paying for the TV licence. At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 the BBC and Government agreed to delay removing the concession for all over-75s until 1st August 2020.

The BBC's decision to go ahead with removing the TV licence concession in August 2020 is bitterly disappointing. However, the responsibility lies with the Government, who cannot absolve itself of accountability for the upset and distress being caused to many over-75s. Millions have had a torrid time over the last few months and this must feel like another kick in the teeth during a terrible year. The Government needs to sit down with the BBC urgently to keep these TV licences for over-75s free.

“I live on my own. I have no family. I used to speak to the milkman once a week, but the milk is delivered between midnight and 5am so I don't see him now. The TV is the only voice I have heard since I went to the hairdressers in February. Without the TV I would not know about the virus. Taking away the licence is taking away my only link to the world; if that is done then I am no longer recognised as part of the world.”

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. This is especially true during the Covid-19 pandemic, where many over-75s have been shielding, many of whom live alone and have been particularly susceptible to loneliness at this time.

The BBC and Government's decision to pause the removal of the concession by just two months is not good enough. In order to prove eligibility for the free licence if you are on Pension Credit under the BBC's plan you need to send in evidence. The leaflet about the BBC's new scheme advised older people that they could get this photocopied at their local corner shop, or public library, and yet older people who are shielding are still being advised to avoid all shops, while meanwhile libraries remain closed. The BBC also said that teams of contracted workers will visit older people in their own homes to help them complete their new TV licence documentation, but this is unlikely to be allowed any time soon for anyone

who has been told to shield. These processes are likely to cause considerable anxiety to older people whilst the risks and restrictions created by the pandemic remain and there have been no announcements to explain how to protect this vulnerable group as many of them set up their TV licence for the first time. The fear of contracting the virus will put many vulnerable people in a difficult situation between breaking the law by not paying for the licence, and the threat of Covid-19.

Age UK firmly believes it is the Government's responsibility to look after vulnerable older people, to design and deliver what is arguably a state benefit, not the BBC's. 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:

- **Covid-19:** Over 950,000 people aged 70+ in England (12% or one in eight) were shielding from the virus. In addition, there are hundreds of thousands more older people who live with someone who is highly vulnerable, or who are struggling to get through the pandemic because of their mental and physical health problems.
- **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. The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that 39% of those aged 75 and older who are eligible for Pension Credit, 590,000 (2 in 5 people), do not receive it.
- **Loneliness:** 38% of over-75s (2.1 million people) agreed that television was their main form of company, and 40% of over-75s (2.2 million people) live alone.
- **Disability:** There are 5.7 million people aged over 75, 2 million 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.

"I can't go anywhere without risking my life and now the Government are going to make me pay for one of the few pleasures I have left. Considering that I feel the Government have done little or nothing to help older people in this pandemic the current TV situation is a disgrace."

Help save free TV licences for the over-75s

We need the Government and the BBC to come together and find a solution. You can help us to do this by raising the issue in Parliament, through a PQ or Westminster Hall Debate.

If you 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