



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Steve Carson  
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BBC Scotland

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**BY E-MAIL**

**11 Novmeber 2020**

Dear Mr Carson,

### **BBC Annual Report and Accounts**

I am writing to thank you for giving evidence, with your colleague Glyn Isherwood, to the Committee on 29 October 2020. Despite the challenging environment in which BBC Scotland is currently operating, the Committee is encouraged by the progress made by the BBC in Scotland and the success of the BBC Scotland Channel.

I am writing regarding three issues the Committee wishes to raise with you following your evidence to the Committee. These are commissioning; reflecting Scotland's diversity and the licence fee for those aged over-75.

#### Commissioning

Since the beginning of the parliamentary session and through our report on Screen, "Making Scotland a Screen Leader", the Committee has emphasised the need for commissioning power to sit at the devolved level. The introduction of the new BBC Scotland channel in February of last year demonstrates the BBC's commitment to decentralisation and it is encouraging that decisions regarding BBC Scotland's £125m content budget sit entirely within BBC Scotland. We also welcome, the point you raised in evidence to the Committee, that the level of 'co-commissioning' undertaken by BBC Scotland is increasing allied to the combining of BBC Scotland 'nations content' and network content. Nevertheless, we encourage you to give further consideration as to how the level of network commissioning undertaken in Scotland can be increased and whether lessons can be learned from other BBC Nations such as Wales. We would draw your attention again to the evidence on this matter we have taken from independent producers who continue to point out that too many decisions are taken in London.

## Representing Scotland's diversity

Purpose 4 of the BBC Charter sets out the commitment to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions. In evidence, the Committee raised concerns about news programming not reflecting regional stories but instead being too focused on the 'central-belt'. The Committee welcomes your commitment in evidence to better reflect audiences across the nation and we would be interested in further details regarding how you propose to do so. As was pointed out in the committee the south of Scotland is poorly serviced compared to ITV Border which has more regional content. In addition, Mr Isherwood, highlighted, in evidence, the review of the local democracy scheme and the lessons learned. The Committee would appreciate further information regarding how the review will contribute to the improvement of news services in Scotland.

In terms of the public's perception of the BBC, the Committee noted that Ofcom's 2019 Annual Report on the BBC<sup>1</sup> highlighted that people in Scotland continue to rate the BBC's delivery less favourably than the UK population as a whole, although the Committee recognises that the proportion of adults that watch the BBC in Scotland is broadly the same as other parts of the UK. The Committee recognises your perspective that the production of high-quality content will be the primary means of addressing public perceptions of BBC Scotland. However, the Committee also considers that public perceptions may also relate to a wider set of issues that are wider in scope than the quality of content. The Committee therefore requests what further actions, if any, BBC Scotland is undertaking to understand and respond to public perceptions in Scotland of the BBC.

## Licence fee: over-75s

We note from your evidence that there are 350,000 people resident in over-75 households in Scotland, with a proportion of those households exempt from paying the licence fee as they receive pension credit. In evidence, the Committee discussed the potential impact that additional expenditure might have for the over 75s, particularly those in more rural or remote areas where isolation is an issue. Although the Committee appreciates that there is a balance to be struck between collecting revenue and the funding of services, we remain concerned that the reintroduction of the licence fee for some over 75s, particularly during this difficult period, risks some going into debt. The Committee would therefore recommend that serious consideration be given to what further measures can be undertaken to alleviate the burden on over 75s until the COVID19 pandemic has abated. The Committee would also be interested in how the BBC monitors the impact of the licence fee on the over 75s to ensure it doesn't detrimentally affect their financial circumstances.

Once again can I thank you and your colleague for your assistance in our scrutiny of the BBC Annual Report and Accounts and I look forward to hearing from you.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/173735/second-bbc-annual-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/173735/second-bbc-annual-report.pdf)

The Committee would welcome a response to the issues raised in this letter by Friday 11 December 2020.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joan McAlpine', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Joan McAlpine MSP  
Convener, Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee