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9 December 2020

The Convener
Culture, Tourism, Europe & External Affairs Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Dear Convener,

Thank you for your letter of 11th November, following the Committee's evidence session on the 29th October. I'm heartened to read about the Committee's positive views of the progress BBC Scotland is making in this most challenging year, and your comments on the BBC Scotland channel.

I am pleased to be able to respond to the Committee's further questions as follows:

Commissioning

The BBC agrees that having commissioners based in the nations and regions is critically important in helping to ensure we are reflecting the lives and perspectives of audiences across the whole of the UK. As well as the BBC Scotland team of commissioners, we currently have 5 Network commissioners based in Glasgow, across Drama, Comedy, Entertainment, Children's and Daytime – more than any other individual nation. Wales currently has no dedicated Network commissioners, so whilst we think this is important and we want to strengthen our footprint, it is not a case that Scotland is out of step with other areas.

As you heard in evidence sessions recently, the one role we have not yet replaced with a Scotland-based appointment is in Factual commissioning – where we have been providing cover from London on an interim basis whilst we shape our future facing commissioning strategy to inform the most suitable role for Scotland, and source the right talent. Who that person is and their ability to be a tastemaker of the future to attract future business to Scotland is as important as the role being Scotland-based. But we would hope the Committee recognises the value that the 5 existing network commissioners bring – as cited by Claire Mundell, Neil Webster, and Alan Clements – along with the evidence about the increased strength of the relationship between BBC Scotland and Network commissioning, and our partnership work with Screen Scotland to support skills and business development.

In addition, the BBC has taken proactive steps to support the Scottish screen sector during the COVID pandemic. We have opened new opportunities for Scottish producers with guaranteed commissions on both BBC3 and BBC2 – with the potential for returning series which are vitally important for both skills and business development. We are currently supporting 15 Scottish companies through our Small Indie Fund, as well as the TRC Supersizer and RAD programmes, the Scottish Writers Room, and several other talent initiatives with Screen Scotland. We would like to assure the committee that network colleagues are pro-actively engaged in supporting the Scottish sector to not only survive the current conditions – but to be in the best position to thrive thereafter.

Representing Scotland's Diversity

a) Beyond the Central Belt

It is vitally important to me that BBC Scotland – across all of its services – continues to develop the way it represents all of Scotland. Indeed, in my first meeting with the Scotland-wide team here as the new BBC Scotland Director, I said I believed it was as important that we reflect the nation's geographical diversity as much as the range of other more usually discussed diversity criteria which are also of great importance to our programme-makers.

The BBC in Scotland already produces content from a range of our own bases all around Scotland – Aberdeen, Dumbarton, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, Kirkwall, Lerwick, Portree, Selkirk, and Stornoway. We also commission content from independent production companies based far beyond Glasgow. Our drama *Guilt*, for example, was made by Happy Tramp North, which is based in Forres. I am committed to continuing to ensure the BBC operates in a range of locations around Scotland. That is why I have asked teams to consider how they can become even more connected with their local communities, helping to ensure that a broad range of Scotland's voices and experiences is heard across both our news and non-news output.

There is of course a range of programmes which already covers the length and breadth of the nation in their output. These include on TV *Landward*, *Debate Night*, *Mirror Mirror*, *Beechgrove*, *The People's News* and *My Kind of Town*. Other commissions in the last year have been rooted in specific locations, such as *The Children's Hospital* (Aberdeen), *The Farm* (Perthshire), *Seòid a' Chidsin* (Isle of Lewis) and *Bannan* (Isle of Skye). Meanwhile a range of radio output is produced around Scotland including *The Afternoon Show* from Edinburgh, a number of weekly music programmes from Aberdeen and *Aithris na Maidne* every day from Portree and Inverness. This is a strong foundation from which I believe we can continue to build, and hear an even broader selection of Scotland's voices.

b) Local Democracy Reporter Scheme

The Local Democracy Reporting (LDR) Service created up to 150 new journalism jobs to help fill a gap in the reporting of local democracy issues across the UK. There are 21.5 FTE Local Democracy Reporter posts allocated for Scotland.

The introduction of LDRs has allowed far greater additional scrutiny of decisions being made at a local level, primarily by local councils but also local NHS and police boards etc. Very many important stories would not see the light of day were it not for this additional scrutiny. LDRs provide weekly scrutiny of council meetings and decisions. Their specialist role allows them to forge formal and informal relationships within councils and broader communities that have enabled them to report on relevant issues which haven't been tabled on agendas.

In our view the LDRs have been and will continue to be an invaluable additional resource in improving news services in Scotland – not just to our own BBC newsrooms and those of our competitors – but also as an important service to the wider public in explaining how decisions are made. In terms of ongoing reviews of the service, one of the contract-holders in Scotland, Reach, recently told us “Changes within the industry mean most of our local brands no longer have the resource to maintain reporters solely focused on council news. Up until the introduction of LDRs, reporters would juggle council coverage alongside other duties such as police news, court reporting etc.”

So far in 2020, the Local Democracy Reporters have filed approx. 4,000 stories. Sarah Hilley (based at the Ayrshire Post) was highly commended in this year's LDR of the Year category for a submission that included an exclusive interview with [a woman who says she was sexually abused for years by teacher in Ayrshire](#). From how the LDR Scheme has been operating across all the UK, the majority of content produced was used by at least one partner, and on average each story generated by LDR resulted in 5 pieces of content (across all platforms including Social Media).

We have now started the re-tendering process for the Local Democracy Reporting Service. Local News Partners who wish to become Suppliers (to employ the LDRs) have until 15th January 2021 to complete their application. The new contracts will begin on 1st July 2021.

c) Public Perceptions of the BBC in Scotland

I do stand by what I said in evidence to the Committee that the most important factor influencing perceptions of the BBC in Scotland is the production of high quality content which reflects the lives of people living here. In part, this is linked to the points around geography (above). The impact which the right content can have can be profound. Ofcom's third Annual Report on the BBC was published on 25th November 2020. Ofcom stated that while the BBC Scotland channel is still establishing itself with audiences in Scotland, early indications from Ofcom's BBC Performance Tracker suggest that the channel may have had a positive impact already on viewers' impressions of the BBC and its delivery of the Public Purposes in the year to March 2020. People in Scotland who said that they watched the BBC Scotland channel were more likely to give the BBC a positive impression score (73% gave a 7-10 out of 10

rating) than people in Scotland who said they did not watch it (51%). This is why I believe that the production of high quality content from and for Scotland is of fundamental importance.

Across all of BBC Scotland's services, I am certain that we have provided a range of public services to the audience in Scotland which has not been found elsewhere, and which I know, both from viewing figures and from audience feedback, have been welcomed. The BBC has ensured regular coverage of Covid news updates and briefings and of the responses of the administrations all around the UK. Our Learning and Bitesize offer has been widely praised by teachers, parents and learners and continues to offer a bespoke service for Scotland's curriculum in this most testing of years in our schools. Meanwhile, specially commissioned religious output, particularly while access to places of worship remains highly restricted or where those places of worship are closed, continues to offer valuable content to the audience with a new series of *Reflections at the Quay* just getting underway, and *The Service* continuing on the BBC Scotland channel as well.

This sits alongside quality content which entertains of course – and not just the comedy and drama we make here in Scotland. Scottish audiences do value the network content provided by the BBC, be it *Strictly Come Dancing*, *Doctor Who* or *Call the Midwife*, and I know the Director General has set out as one of his main four priorities for the BBC the creation of more high-impact content from across the UK which will also impact on audience perceptions. This sits alongside the BBC's renewed commitment to impartiality, also a commitment for the Director General, and the recently published revised guidelines on impartiality and social media use will of course be fully taken on board here in Scotland.

The BBC's role in the wider creative sector is also of importance here. In oral evidence, I spoke of the value of our partnership with Screen Scotland in developing new formats and commissions here in the nation. This is just one of our partnerships which are another means by which we will continue to build strong and productive relationships with major Scottish institutions. Other key partnerships include MG ALBA for the delivery of BBC ALBA, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and Scotland's National Library.

Licence Fee: Over-75s

The current position on TV licences for those aged over-75 has a history dating back to 2015. I hope it might be helpful if I set out the position in some detail.

Background

The initial decision about the future of TV licences for those aged 75 or over was made last year, in June 2019. At that point, the BBC announced details of the new TV licence fee concession for those over 75, which was due to be implemented from June 2020. That decision followed the largest consultation that the BBC has ever conducted, with over 190,000 responses. As a result, from June 2020, it was decided that any household with someone aged over 75 who receives Pension Credit will be eligible for a free TV licence funded

by the BBC. This consultation had been necessary as the previous scheme, funded entirely by the UK Government whereby it paid for TV Licences for everyone aged 75 or over was due to come to an end. The BBC, from 2020, would be liable for the costs of any free TV licences.

The BBC Board believed this was the fairest option to help the poorest pensioners. It was also the fairest option for all licence fee payers, as this means everyone will continue to receive the best programmes and services that the BBC can provide. The Board believed it was important that the BBC did not take on the role of making a judgment about poverty. Instead, the BBC Board decided to use the UK Government's own framework. The UK Government sets and controls Pension Credit, not the BBC.

The new scheme will cost the BBC around £250 million by 2021/22 depending on the take-up of Pension Credit. The cost of this new scheme will require the BBC to divert some spending on programmes and services while continuing to find new savings and expanding its commercial revenue to cope. The decision does, however, prevent widespread service closures which would have been required had we copied the Government's scheme, which would have cost £750m a year rising to £1 billion by the end of the decade.

Financial Impact on the BBC

The funding available today for the BBC's UK public services is already 24% lower than if the licence fee had risen with inflation from 2010. The BBC will of course continue to find efficiency savings. Independent benchmarking found that the BBC spent less than 6% of its controllable spend on support activities and was within the most efficient 25% of global telecommunications and media companies.

The Board was clear that diverting £250m a year of the BBC's spend on programmes and services risks weakening the delivery of the BBC's mission and purposes - particularly in a much more competitive global market. Therefore, the cost of this new scheme will require difficult choices. In addition, the BBC will need to continue to find new savings and expand its commercial revenue to keep pace with audience expectations.

The impact of copying the previous UK Government scheme could have required unprecedented closures of services, including BBC Two, BBC Four, the BBC News Channel, the BBC Scotland channel, Radio 5live and 5live Sports Extra, and a number of local radio stations. The Board believed service closures on such a scale would profoundly damage the BBC for everyone, especially older people who use the BBC the most. They would have a severe impact on the BBC's ability to deliver its mission to serve all audiences. These cuts would damage the creative economy, particularly in the nations and regions and make the BBC much worse value for money for those who do pay for their TV licence.

The full background to the previous decision can be read [here](#), and full details of the previous consultation and an analysis of the responses are available [here](#).

COVID-19 delay to commencement of new scheme for those aged over-75

The BBC Board decided at the height of the pandemic that it should not launch the new scheme for over-75 TV licences as planned in June 2020. The BBC Board therefore delayed the commencement of the new scheme until August 2020. This delay alone has cost the BBC over £70m which would have been spent on programmes and services. The additional costs of continuing the previous scheme have not been met by the UK Government.

The scheme is now moving forward, but safety will be at its heart:

- Any household with someone aged over 75 who receives Pension Credit will be entitled to a free TV licence paid for by the BBC.
- Implementation of the new scheme will be Covid-19 safe. No one needs to take any immediate action, or leave their home, to claim for a free TV licence or pay for one.
- TV Licencing has been writing to all over-75 licence holders with clear guidance. For those who now need to pay, they have a range of options and can choose to pay weekly, fortnightly, or monthly, if they don't want to pay the licence fee all in one go.

No one needs to take any action until they receive a letter from TV Licencing. However, there is a free telephone information line where customers can access recorded information on the new policy by calling 0800 232 1382 and information can also be found on the TV Licencing website www.tvl.co.uk/age.

As you would expect, the BBC has also been working with a range of external organisations to help support people during this time. No one will be expected to pay for a new licence until they have been contacted by letter from TV Licencing and claimed a free TV licence or agreed a payment plan.

Other Matters raised in evidence

a) Recruitment

I undertook to come back to the Committee with details about recruitment statistics for frontline roles at BBC Scotland. Since the start of the pandemic, the BBC has only been recruiting for business-critical roles.

We had 56 hires in the 12 months to 31st October 2020. Overall we appointed 31 females (55%) and 25 (45%) males. These figures cover both posts where an external candidate was appointed and posts where an internal candidate was recruited. These figures cover those employees who work directly for BBC Scotland, but not those based in Scotland but working for another part of the BBC.

b) Sunday Politics

I was asked about the scheduling of *Sunday Politics*. It is the case, as the Committee is aware, that the people of Scotland elect representatives to two parliaments. *Politics Scotland* on Sunday generally follows the Westminster timetable, because it's part of a UK-wide programme brand, and has a slot in the BBC One weekend schedule across the UK. This pattern also operates at BBC Wales and BBC Northern Ireland. Here in Scotland, we also broadcast two other programmes which generally follow the Holyrood timetable – a Wednesday edition of *Politics Scotland*, and a programme on Thursdays which covers First Minister's Questions from Holyrood.

That said, we are currently reviewing our Sunday morning output, on TV and radio, and will give further consideration to the question raised at the committee meeting about the scheduling of *Politics Scotland*.

c) Online Newspaper Reviews

We have alerted colleagues who work in the BBC UK online news team to the issues raised by the Committee. They have explained that to include all national and regional variations of pan-UK titles, such as The Mail, The Sun, The Mirror, The Telegraph and Times, etc, and on a daily basis, as well as the significant number of local titles within each nation and across English regions, would prove logistically difficult to resource and maintain. We will, however, continue to explore ways in which Scotland's stories can continue to feature prominently online with audiences across the UK.

Please let me know if I can help with any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Carson
Director, Scotland