

PRESS RELEASE

Leading coalition says “top-slicing” will lead to a decline in high-quality public service content

A leading coalition of civil society groups, charities, community groups, unions and arts organisations has today entered the debate on top slicing the Licence Fee, saying that Government proposals to give 3.5% of the fee to failing news services in the Nations and regions are not in the interests of UK citizens.

In a reply to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s consultation on sustainable independent and impartial news, the Citizens’ Coalition for Public Service Broadcasting (CCPSB) said that top slicing the Licence Fee would represent a fundamental change in the ecology of UK public service broadcasting, leading to a decline in high-quality, diverse public service content. The coalition suggests that industry levies and regulatory assets could provide new sources of revenue, which could be used to maintain and strengthen non-BBC public service broadcasting instead.

The consultation from the DCMS suggests that the portion of the Licence Fee currently used to fund digital switchover should be given to support the National and regional news services currently provided by ITV after the UK has become a fully digital-TV-consuming nation in 2012.

The Chair of CCPSB, Professor Sylvia Harvey, said: “Use of the Licence Fee confers a great privilege on the BBC. We would encourage some of this money to be used by the Corporation to strengthen partnerships with the other UK public service broadcasters (PSBs), developing imaginative ways - through joint ventures and sharing of resources and knowledge - to help them increase their income or reduce their costs. We understand that the BBC has agreed in principle to share some regional news facilities with ITV. The potential is there for ITV to cut its costs significantly – and such proposals could keep ITV’s endangered regional news services on the air.

“We think that taking some of the Licence Fee payers’ money and passing it on to other commercial broadcasters – as the Government is proposing - is a policy of despair; it is an example of ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’, and could both undermine the BBC’s ability to produce excellent programmes, and provide too little to create new and sustainable news services. Fortunately there is now significant evidence that modest industry levies, of the kind used in many other countries, could provide critical additional sources of funding.”

She went on to say: “We are also concerned about the way in which the Government has approached the public consultation on the issue of passing on Licence Fee money to other, commercial players. Government has adopted the specialist term “contained contestability” as a preferred alternative to the term “top-slicing”, and this has not made it easy for the general public to understand the issues at stake or to comment meaningfully on the best way forward. We do not think it is logically possible to have a bit of ‘contestability’ any more than it is possible to be a little bit pregnant.

“Government should demonstrate some concern for preferences expressed by the public, but not captured in recent research by DCMS. Other recent research showed a clear public preference for having the surplus from the Licence Fee returned to Licence Fee payers after 2012 [Ipsos Mori for the BBC Trust, August-September 2009]. Clearly there are various options that should be explored more fully by the DCMS and the rest of the Government.”

CCPSB is also calling on the Government to ensure the continued provision of UK and world news from a variety of sources, as well as other UK-originated popular and public service programming, including comedy and drama, aimed at different age groups and sections of society and which reflects the UK’s core values and its rich and diverse cultural heritage.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- The Citizens’ Coalition for Public Service Broadcasting (CCPSB) is a broad mix of civil society groups, charities, community groups, unions and arts organisations that believe public service broadcasting is a public good.
- A full list of CCPSB’s members can be found online at <http://www.publicservicebroadcasting.org.uk/sign-up/>
- The DCMS’s consultation on *Sustainable independent and impartial news; in the Nations, locally and in the regions* is an outcome of the *Digital Britain* report. Full details can be found online at: http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/broadcasting/6216.aspx
- The CCPSB submission to the consultation can be found online at <http://www.publicservicebroadcasting.org.uk/resources/>
- For further information, please contact Rebecca Fulton on 07866 801906, or by email at psbcoalition@googlemail.com.