



BBC Charter Review Inquiry

COSLA has recently considered the funding of future broadband initiatives in the UK, and the recent proposal to cease top-slicing the BBC licence fee post 2017 to resource the roll out of superfast broadband to every household in the UK. In the context of your current inquiry, I wanted to draw this to your attention in regard to Scotland receiving a fairer share of BBC spending and the impact of further cuts you have posed as key questions to be addressed.

I wanted to respond to your inquiry on BBC Charter and particularly the significant concern highlighted by COSLA Leaders around the withdrawal of the broadband top-slice.

The recent UK Budget and wider policy debates have outlined a number of aspirations relating to broadband and digital matters that have a significant interest for Scottish local communities. In particular, the current UK Government's manifesto pledge for the roll out of universal broadband and better mobile connections was welcomed by Leaders, especially given suggestions elsewhere of the potential to stop short of universal UK broadband provision.

COSLA has welcomed the previous pledges from UK Governments that no one, or area, in the UK will be left behind in the rollout of superfast broadband, whether in rural or urban areas. However, in the context of the ongoing BBC Charter Review consultation, I would welcome clarity on the continued top-slicing of the licence fee for digital infrastructure beyond 2017 to continue to fund this roll-out of superfast broadband.

Council Leaders have outlined a desire for equity and fairness that this top-slicing continues into the future until all licence fee payers have been provided with the minimum tolerable and future-proofed standard of broadband.

Leaders in their debate noted Ofcom's recent suggestion that the bare minimum for broadband speed for household was 10Mbps. Many had examples where they have constituents who are struggling to get beyond dial-up speeds or basic broadband speeds of 2 Mbps still. They were concerned that the policy focus might shift to other digital issues before we had provided an equitable and fair minimum standard of access to all communities.

As part of your Review of the BBC Charter we would request the Committee scrutinises the broadband funding available to digitally remote UK Communities post 2017. I would hope your Committee can express views of support for the continued rollout of appropriate levels of broadband funding to all BBC Licence fee payers.

COSLA has also noted with concern Ofcom's suggestion of the potential for a growing digital divide and social exclusion from digital services if further targeted action is not progressed. Given the certain growing provision of BBC services via digital means, the lack of acceptable bandwidth in digitally remote communities could stop certain parts of the population from equal access to all BBC services in future. This could lead to a two-tier system of service for certain communities despite paying the same universal licence fee.

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Leaders have previously supported Ofcom's initial view that competition alone will not provide widespread availability of digital connectivity, and that there will be a continuing requirement for public interventions in terms of funding, policy and regulatory frameworks such as the funding provided through the licence fee to the BDUK initiative.

Excluding significant numbers from the benefits of a digital society could have a significant impact on skills development, the ability to consume public services and local economic development. COSLA see the benefits of further social inclusion obligations on the private sector would like to see these included in the conditions of future rounds of public policy and funding initiatives. Similarly I would expect an obligation on a public service broadcaster that, in providing infrastructure funding to upgrade the most likely future means for distributing BBC services, funding should not cease before all communities have a fair share and acceptable minimum standard of service.

I would also welcome clarification on the source of funding, if not top sliced from the BBC licence fee, to conclude equitably the roll out of superfast broadband in Scotland.

Whilst, I recognise this is a specific point in relation to the BBC Charter Review consultation I would welcome your considering the points raised in this letter as a focussed response to your inquiry from Scottish Local Government.

Cllr Stephen Hagan
COSLA DES Spokesperson