



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Dame Melanie Dawes
Chief Executive
Ofcom

BY EMAIL

27 July 2022

Dear Dame Melanie,

BBC breach of Charter by axing Oxford edition of *South Today*

I am writing following the recent decision by the BBC to axe the Oxford edition of BBC *South Today*. The programme covers both Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, including my own constituency of Aylesbury, and is scheduled to end later this year. The BBC's reasoning for this decision is a desire to move local news online. However, local people are extremely concerned about this decision, which appears to have been taken without any audience consultation.

Many local MPs have expressed their anger at the BBC's proposal. I have raised the subject twice in the House of Commons – both on the floor of the Chamber and in a full debate in Westminster Hall, which can be read [here on Hansard](#). It was in that debate that the Minister for Broadcasting, Matt Warman MP, raised the role of Ofcom in regulating Charter compliance, and it is for this reason that I write to you now.

I believe that the BBC's decision is in breach of the BBC's Royal Charter.

Contained in the First Public Purpose of the [BBC Charter](#) is the following: to “provide... news... to build people’s understanding of all parts of the United Kingdom”, enable “all audiences [to] engage fully with major local... issues” and offer material “not widely available from other United Kingdom news providers”.

I submit that, with its proposal to close the Oxford edition of “South Today” (and indeed the Cambridge edition of “Look East”), the BBC is failing to comply with those Charter requirements.

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR AYLESBURY

In particular:

- The BBC will be failing to offer material “not widely available from other United Kingdom news providers”. The BBC’s local opts of regional tv programmes are all the more essential given other market changes. In particular, many local newspapers have closed in recent years: in August 2020, *Press Gazette* reported that, according to its analysis, 265 local newspapers had shut since 2005. Further, in Aylesbury, the commercial radio station Mix 96 has been subsumed into Bauer’s *Greatest Hits Radio* resulting in the loss of much locally produced and targeted news and programming content. Thus the BBC’s service fills a significant gap
- The BBC has failed to demonstrate how its shift to online local news will adequately serve “all audiences”, especially in the older demographic. The BBC itself says that 75% of the viewers of *South Today* are over the age of 55. While many people in that age bracket are highly digitally aware, plenty of others are not, and they should not be cut off from what is happening in their local area. They should still have access to local information and still be able to see their local politicians being held to account on their television screens
- The BBC’s proposal will prevent all audiences from “engag[ing] fully with major local... issues”. It plans to have one nightly programme broadcast from Southampton, some 90 miles from Aylesbury. Stories about sailing and the coast are not very relevant to my constituents, who live in one of the most inland towns in the United Kingdom. The BBC is proposing to create a TV region that has no geographical identity. The result will be even lower audiences, as people tune out from a programme with stories to which they simply do not relate

Your own organisation has highlighted the importance of television as a source of news. The Ofcom 2021 report on news consumption says:

“TV remains the most common platform for accessing local news.”

In addition:

“Use of TV is most prevalent amongst the 65+ age group, while the internet is the most-used platform for news consumption among 16-24s ... BBC One remains the most-used news source across any platform”.

Indeed, BBC TV is twice as popular as the BBC website and app: the figures are 62% for TV, 31% for online and app. Yet the BBC wants to close its local TV news programmes, and put the content online.

The BBC says that when it closes its Oxford and Cambridge TV programmes, it will devote more resource to its local radio stations. But at Ofcom, you say that fewer than half the population now use the radio for news – just 46%, whereas 79% use television.

The BBC is therefore knowingly cutting programmes from a platform it knows is used and relied upon.

I have spoken to the Acting Director of BBC England, Jason Horton, about this decision. He was unable during that conversation to provide any evidence regarding a desire by audiences to shift from local TV news to online information. In a subsequent document sent to me by Mr Horton was the statement that Ofcom data “reveals over 55s are as likely to access news online as through radio or print.” To my astonishment, the word “television” is not mentioned in the evidence that the BBC provided to support its decision to cut a television news programme. It certainly did not say that older viewers were switching away from TV news, let alone that they wanted to do so and get their local news online instead. In fact, it says that of the weekly visitors to BBC News Online, just 37% are aged 55 or older – in marked contrast to the 75% aged over 55 watching *South Today*, as stated above.

The Westminster Hall debate highlighted grave concern from across the House of Commons about changes to regional BBC television news programmes. In particular, Jamie Stone, the Liberal Democrat MP for Caithness and Easter Ross, provided powerful testimony about the erosion of local information once such programmes are cut.

Given the Minister’s remarks that in relation to Charter compliance “Ofcom regulates that aspect of the BBC, rather than the Government”, I would be grateful for your urgent consideration of this extremely important matter. Specifically, I would like to know whether or not you believe the axing of the Oxford edition of *South Today* puts the BBC in breach of Charter obligations, for which it receives substantial recompense via the licence fee, and if not, why not.

As a former broadcast journalist – indeed I started my own career at BBC Radio Oxford and spent a significant proportion of my career presenting TV news – I know the value of local news and its importance to our communities and to our democracy. I fervently hope you share my concerns and will advise the BBC to reconsider its decision before it is too late.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Butler', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rob Butler
Member of Parliament for Aylesbury