



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Tim Davie CBE
Director-General
BBC

BY EMAIL

6th September 2022

Dear Mr Davie,

BBC decision to axe Oxford edition of South Today

I am writing to urge you to reverse the decision made by your Acting Director of England to axe the Oxford edition of BBC *South Today*. The programme covers both Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, including my constituency of Aylesbury, and is scheduled to end later this year. I have been told that this is due to a desire to move local news online. However, that desire appears to belong only to the BBC itself. Local people, in contrast, are extremely concerned about your proposal, not least as it appears to have been taken without any audience consultation.

As a former BBC journalist myself – indeed I started my career at BBC Radio Oxford and spent a significant proportion of my career presenting TV news for BBC World before moving to ITN – I know the value of local news and its importance to our communities and to our democracy. I also recognise that the broadcasting market is changing rapidly and broadcasters need to adapt accordingly. However, what always remains fundamental is serving the needs of the audience. This duty is even more incumbent upon the BBC given its funding model.

Instead, with your latest proposals, the BBC plans to subsume the news from Aylesbury into a programme from Southampton. Frankly, stories about sailing and the coast are not terribly relevant to one of the most inland towns in England. The simple truth is that people in Wendover do not have a great deal in common with people in Winchester. News about the havoc caused by HS2 in Buckinghamshire is not very high on the agenda of those who live in Bembridge on the Isle of Wight. The BBC is proposing to create a TV region that simply 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.

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR AYLESBURY

I am particularly concerned about 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.

More broadly, Ofcom has highlighted the continued importance of television as a source of news. Its 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 you want to close your local TV news programmes, and put the content online.

You have also stated that when you close your Oxford TV programme, you will devote more resource to local radio stations. But Ofcom says 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.

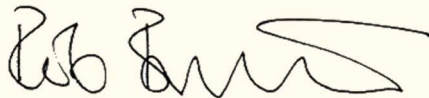
Many local MPs have expressed their anger at your proposal. I have raised the subject twice in the House of Commons – both on the floor of the Chamber and in a full debate in Westminster Hall, which can be read [here on Hansard](#). The debate was founded on my belief that the BBC’s decision is in breach of its Royal Charter, specifically the First Public Purpose: 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”. In response to my debate, the Minister for Broadcasting, Matt Warman MP, raised the role of Ofcom in regulating Charter compliance, and I have expressed my concerns to Dame Melanie Dawes. My letter and Ofcom’s response are attached.

I have spoken to the Acting Director of BBC England, Jason Horton, about the BBC’s decision. He told me unequivocally, “This isn’t about savings. I haven’t got to save a single penny.” This is confirmed in the briefing sent to MPs stating, “The BBC will be maintaining its overall spend on local and regional content in England over the next few years.” So there is no financial imperative for your decision.

Furthermore, Mr Horton was unable during our conversation to provide any evidence regarding a desire by audiences to shift from local TV news to online information. I was astonished that in a document subsequently sent to me by Mr Horton, the word "television" was not mentioned once, despite this supposedly being a rationale to cut a television news programme. There was nothing to suggest 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, your own document 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.

In short, given the lack of financial need and the absence of any audience desire, the decision to scrap the Oxford edition of *South Today* seems to have no basis. Consequently, I implore you to abandon plans to scrap the programme and enable local people to watch local news on the platform they prefer – television.

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