

Decriminalisation of TV licence evasion consultation response

The consultation invited views on whether the government should proceed with the decriminalisation of TV licence evasion by replacing the criminal sanction with an alternative civil enforcement scheme. It set out four criteria against which the issue of decriminalisation would be considered:

- whether an alternative enforcement scheme is fairer and more proportionate;
- the cost and difficulty to implement any alternative scheme;
- the potential impact on licence fee payers, particularly the most vulnerable and those with protected characteristics; and
- the overall impact on licence fee collection.

The consultation closed on 1 April 2020 after receiving 154,737 responses from individuals, campaign organisations and other stakeholders. A summary of the responses is included in today's publication.

After carefully considering the responses received, the government remains concerned that a criminal sanction for TV licence evasion is increasingly disproportionate and unfair in a modern public service broadcasting system. The consultation responses showed that a significant number of people oppose the criminal sanction with some highlighting the considerable stress and anxiety it can cause for individuals, including for the most vulnerable in society, such as older people.

However, the government recognises that changing the sanction for TV licence evasion would have wide-ranging impacts for licence fee payers, including the potential for significantly higher fines and costs for individuals who evade the licence fee requirement under a civil regime. The consultation also highlighted significant impacts in terms of both the cost and implementation – particularly as the current system is very efficiently handled in the Magistrates Court – and challenges posed to the ongoing collection of the licence fee. The government remains determined that any future change to the TV licence sanction or enforcement scheme should not be seen as an invitation to evade the TV licence requirement, nor should it privilege the rule-breaking minority over the rule-abiding majority.

The government's consultation response, which we publish today, therefore sets out that the issue of decriminalisation will remain under active consideration while more work is undertaken to understand the impact of alternative enforcement schemes.

In particular, a future decision on decriminalising TV licence evasion would benefit from consideration in the context of wider reform to the BBC. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has a roadmap for reform of the BBC and this provides critical context for any future decision on decriminalisation.

The government will therefore take forward these considerations in the broader context of the next licence fee settlement, which will set the level of the Licence Fee for a period of at least five years from 2022, and where negotiations have recently formally begun.