

**NUJ briefing – BBC World Service**

February 2025

**Introduction**

The BBC World Service operates across 42 languages with most of its funding received from the BBC licence fee and funding of £104.4m from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development office (FCDO).

In October, the FCDO announced enhanced funding of £32.6m for the World Service in a welcome and much-needed commitment, but the BBC indicated it would need to work through details of the funding, highlighting the World Service was not immune to pressures facing the rest of the BBC.

Previous freezing of the licence fee had a profound impact on the broadcaster and cuts announced in 2022 meant that despite language services accounting for almost two-thirds of the BBC’s then 489m global audience, audiences have since lost access to valued content.

In January 2025, the BBC announced plans to make £6m in savings within the World Service to close the shortfall caused by the freezing of the licence fee. An overall net loss of 130 posts including those in the UK is expected and has been condemned by the NUJ for its impact on the BBC’s ability to produce sustainable journalism valued by audiences. Yet again, journalists bear the brunt of cuts and are left concerned about whether more may be made, if a long-term funding solution remains unclear.

The World Service provides unrivalled journalism which shines a light on all parts of the globe and attracts 320m of the BBC’s 450m weekly listeners. It is the world's largest external broadcaster in terms of reception area, language selection and audience reach, providing many millions with trustworthy and impartial news they are unable to get at home. During the pandemic the BBC provided trusted, accurate information and advice, debunking rampant misinformation, and held authorities to account.

The BBC’s Global Audience Measurement reports that the BBC News Arabic language service saw a 9% increase in audiences in 2024, reaching 35m people weekly. The service proved vital as audiences sought accurate reporting on the Israel-Gaza war.

BBC Persian radio previously broadcast for over 70 years is now a digital-only service and was crucial in covering protests in Iran and ongoing human rights breaches.

Tim Davie, BBC director general, has warned of the impact of cuts and how they have helped countries including Russia and China to promote “unchallenged propaganda.”

Davie said in October “Had the BBC been able to retain our impartial radio output, these messages would have been much harder for local audiences to find. In this context, the further retreat of the BBC World Service should be a cause for serious global concern."

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, millions turned to the BBC in Russian and Ukrainian for independent, accurate information. Audiences to the Russian website more than tripled at the start of the war. In the face of Russian attempts to block international news content, the BBC stepped up its efforts to reach audiences however it could. The BBC launched new TikTok channels, issued advice on circumvention tools enabling people to reach news websites, offered BBC TV news programmes free of charge to other European TV networks, and launched two new shortwave frequencies of World Service English programmes.

BBC Africa’s coverage of the plight of African students and diaspora trapped in Ukraine prompted governments to act, setting up schemes to help those affected get to safety.

The invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza war clearly demonstrated, radio remains a crucial way to reach audiences who might find their access to trusted news via the internet suddenly cut off.

Language services have covered war in Ethiopia, Russia’s invasion and pro-democracy protests in Myanmar. Whilst the World Service provides news to countries globally, it’s role in countries closer to the UK is also valued. NUJ members in the Netherlands have stressed how much it is relied upon for its trusted information.

**BBC Africa Services**

The BBC’s Africa services have been trusted and cherished for more than 60 years. Services such as Focus on Africa radio were launched at a time when only 17 countries in Africa had gained independence. Since then, the BBC has been the voice informing millions during civil wars, military coups, and natural disasters.

In 2022, the BBC’s Francophone services reached 20.9 million each week, and were more popular than international competitors with bigger budgets and more correspondents, thanks to quality international news coverage. BBC Hausa reached 16.8 million and English language coverage reached 29.4 million.

The BBC is uniquely placed to cover stories and ask questions which local stations cannot. The broadcaster’s Somali service reached 5.7 million people per week (2022) and is considered a trusted source for where Somali speakers can get reliable and impartial international news, and the only programme where those in power can be held to account without fear. The Swahili service reached 8.7 million per week and is relied upon to cover challenging political situations which local journalists are afraid to speak out on.

**Press freedom worldwide**

Journalists globally face threats to their safety in arbitrary attacks, kidnappings and imprisonment despite committing no crime. Access to truths about the realities of events in citizens’ own countries mean the World Service is a moral imperative and one even more valued when we consider the use of internet shutdowns wielded by those in power to prevent accurate reporting.

With data prohibitively expensive, many Africans still only have access to radio and TV to stay informed, especially those in rural areas with connectivity challenges, or countries such as Ethiopia, Cameroon, Sudan and Uganda, now frequently experiencing internet shutdowns. State surveillance of journalists is a real threat in many countries and the space opened by cutting back the World Service and Language Services is likely to be filled by media outlets controlled or funded by countries such as Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia. NUJ members at BBC Arabic radio have previously expressed concern over drastic cuts, stating the BBC is giving its Arabic competitors, mainly Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, a golden chance to steal its audience and its well-trained journalists.

The BBC’s language programmes provide crucial public services. Many audiences in Africa are being badly affected by climate change - BBC services raise awareness of the new dangers and measures that need to be taken, and hold those in power accountable, such as with the wildfire disaster on Mt Kilimanjaro.

The NUJ believes that while operated by the BBC, the funding for the World Service should once again be delivered by the government rather than from the licence fee.

In January, chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Culture, Media and Sport (CMS) and the International Development Committee urged the FCDO and the Department of Culture Media and Sport to make representations to the Treasury “to rebalance the relative contributions from the licence fee and FCDO, so that the World Service income becomes less reliant on the licence fee.”

Committee chairs Dame Emily Thornberry MP, Dame Caroline Dinenage MP and Sarah Champion MP recognised the recent uplift in funding provided by government but expressed concern that “even if this level of increase was repeated in the forthcoming Spending Review, it could nonetheless lead to a decline in the World Service.”

The NUJ recognises concern by the committee chairs about the BBC’s vulnerability “when revenue from the licence fee is falling and the BBC continues to have to make savings across its services.”

The union believes government must urgently provide adequate funding to support the BBC in its reporting and news coverage of events worldwide. The upcoming Charter Review provides an important opportunity to re-establish full government funding; the World Service is widely recognised as important to the UK’s soft power but with endless cuts, this will inevitably diminish.

**We urge parliamentarians to:**

* Call for fair and adequate funding of the BBC World Service with government funding as done previously, removing the reliance on the licence fee
* Sign EDM 793 recognising the accurate and impartial role of the World Service as misinformation and disinformation spreads on social media [Funding for the BBC World Service - Early Day Motions - UK Parliament](https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/63154/funding-for-the-bbc-world-service)
* Highlight the importance of services by the World Service in supporting media freedom and access to information, through its valued diverse programmes spanning over 40 languages
* Ask questions about the impact further cuts to the World Service would have on diminishing the UK’s soft power and its trusted position as the provider of impartial, trusted information