

Date:- 31 March 2004

BBC Charter Review Consultation
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2 - 4 Cockspur Street
LONDON
SW1 5DH

Dear Sir or Madam

**BBC Charter Review Consultation
Personal Comments for Consideration by the Minister**

This letter confirms the message given to your representative manning the BBC Charter Review Telephone Line 0207 211 6418 today to the effect that I wished to submit personal comments on the BBC Charter Review.

I regret the late submission but I have only just been made aware of the existence of a Charter Review and that the closing date for comments is 31 March 2001. Your telephone representative took my name and post code and informed me that my intention to comments would be recorded and that the submission would be considered when received.

I am prompted to make a comment with regard to the BBC Charter Review because of the present inability to achieve "Free to View" Digital Television Services by neither Digital Terrestrial nor Digital Satellite Television Services in Cemaes Bay. This inability to receive "Free to View" digital television services includes the 'independent' television channels. I believe the problems and difficulties I have experienced in trying to get "Free to View" digital television services are pertinent to the BBC Charter Review and should be considered in determining the future broadcasting strategy for the future of "Free to View" television broadcasting by the BBC or its future successor.

I have written to my Member of Parliament previously on this problem of receiving digital terrestrial television. My letters date 18 January 2002, 2 April 2002, and 21 June 2002 and more recently in February 2004 refer. I have not had a satisfactory reply either from the Member of Parliament, or any responsible Minister, or Government Department, on the matters raised about the inability to receive terrestrial digital television services in Cemaes Bay.

I am writing to you now on the same general topic of the supposedly "Free to View" Digital Television Services provided by both terrestrial and satellite television transmissions.

I am a pensioner. I am 74 years of age and married. I live in Cemaes Bay. This is an isolated rural farming community on the extreme northern coast of the Isle of Anglesey.

To date no organisation has demonstrated a commitment to providing terrestrial digital television services in Cemaes Bay by upgrading the local television transmitting aerial.

Theoretically there is supposed to be an option available to the Cemaes Bay community to opt for a satellite digital television service by establishing a supply contract arrangement with a satellite digital television company such as Sky.

Even if I could afford it I would not under any circumstances pay a Package Subscription Fee to Sky because the package contents are unsuited to my tastes and Sky will not allow me to "cherry pick" the programmes I would like to receive. In any case at present it is not possible to receive all the "Free to View" digital television services from Sky. ITV programmes are not longer available on a "Free to View" basis from Sky.

Since I last wrote to you the cost of the Television Licence Fee to own a television set has increased every year to its present value of £116. From my point of view this is not good value for money. I am unable to influence the content of the BBC programmes and all the comments I have made over the years have been ignored. In my opinion the BBC is not accountable to the Licence Fee Payers whose Licence Fee Money funds the BBC to enable the organisation to make its television and radio programmes.

In addition the BBC does not behave responsibly with the Television Licence Fee Money it is provided with to enable it to make programmes

The Labour Government still maintains the pretext that the Television Licence Fee is a fee for owning a Television Receiver while giving all the £2.2 billion Licence Fee money to the BBC to fund its television and radio broadcasting. Also during this period I have witnessed an escalation of the BBC costs associated with extending the BBC digital Television Broadcasting services to additional programmes. These include BBC 3, BBC 4, BBCi, BBC News, BBC Parliament, BBC Text, BBC Choice, BBC News 24, BBC Knowledge. There are probably more which I do not know about. None of these services are available to me now or in the future.

In addition the BBC has been allowed to divert its precious financial resources into a variety of activities which are in no way associated with producing and transmitting television and radio programmes. The income from these activities does not appear to benefit the television and radio audiences in terms of programme quality and content nor does the income appear to contribute to a reduction of the Television Licence Fee. The activities I refer to are as follows:-

- The operation of an extensive and expensive internet service. This has no direct and measurable benefit to the television and radio audience. It is only available to those people who have both computers, modems, and telephone services at their disposal.

This is highly discriminatory to the majority of the population who do not have, and cannot afford these facilities.

The cost of this internet service is never revealed in a manner that enable the Television Licence Fee Payer to draw a conclusion that the BBC's financial resources are being knowingly misused on this discriminatory service.

- The BBC continually wastes the Licence Fee Money by producing expensive elaborate computer generated graphics for its own advertising purposes and intermission interval presentations between its scheduled programmes.

....> The cost of this Information Technology based production is so high and potentially lucrative that the BBC now proposes to sell its "In-house" Information Technology Department to a private bidder for £200 million+.>
(Continued over leaf).....>

...>

This sale of its "In-house" Information Technology Department means that in future all the BBC's Information Technology work will now be outsourced to a preferred exclusive supplier under the guise of a formal falacious tendering procedure. This will be similar to the Governments Information Technology tendering procedure in which all the contract work ends up with EDS. In Government the end product has always been wasteful and excessive expenditure and unworkable solutions which are always late.

The new Information Technology Company providing the BBC computer graphics services will have Directors who will receive excessive payments and costly perks.

The new Information Technology Company will also have to make a profit so that its very select number of shareholders will be paid large dividends. This, in turn, means that the outsourced Information Technology Computer Graphics Services will cost more than they do now and so our Television Licence Fee will increase again to much higher levels in the future.

- The BBC uses the Television Licence Fee money to produce programmes which are transmitted world wide by satellite. The BBC has not remit to transmit progammes outside the UK - even to expatriates liveing abroad. This is done for Government propaganda purposes but the Government does not fund these services. This is a total waste of my Television Licence Fee Money.

The BBC has the nerve to transmit these progammes by digital satellite around the world but it has the nerve to not make any arrangements to enable me, as a Licence Fee payer, to receive any of these programmes.

The BBC has, to date, not made any serious attempt to make arrangements to ensure that the digital terrestrial "Free to View" television services reach all the population of the UK. In this respect it is only reflecting the Governments inadequate target for the digital television service to reach 95% of the population by 2006 after which the analogue television service will be switched off.

As I have pointed out above Cemaes Bay is in a geographical area which cannot receive television signals, neither analogue nor digital terrestrial, from the main transmitters. The hills around Cemaes Bay prevent reception. Cemaes Bay has to have its own local television transmitter which at present only transmits the "Free to View" analogue television services. To date there are no plans to upgrade the Cemaes Bay local television transmitter to enable it to receive the digital terrestrial "Free to View" television services.

Until the creation of OFCOM the responsibility for upgrading the special local television transmitters in the poor receptionareas rested with the Independent Television COMmission and they did nothing about this problem. The ITC just ignored their responsibility and the Government let them get away with it. I have just discovered the OFCOM website and to my amazement I find that the Independent Television Commission has been let totally off the hook as far as providing digital terrestrial aerial transmitters in isolated communities which are unable to receive digital terrestrial television services directly. It appears that the Labour Government has agreed that the isolated communities can consider providing their own self help low power transmitters at their own expense if this is technically feasible.

It is abundantly clear that the Labour Government has responded willingly to the lobbying of the Independent Television Industry and allowed the Independent Television Commission to unburden itself of the responsibility of providing the transmitting aerials for the isolated communities which are unable to receive digital terrestrial television.

It is for the above reasons that I believe that the Television Licence Fee should be abolished and the BBC should be sold off to the private sector and totally disassociated from Government control. At present it is simply acting as the Government Propaganda Machine and lacks the freedom to be able to do free unfettered investigative journalism.

In the private sector the BBC will have to compete with the other independent television channels. The future BBC must be made to raise its programme making money from advertising and sponsorship. That will make it accountable to both its viewers and its advertisers and sponsors.

If this is done the country will have two sets of programmes produced from advertising revenues and sponsorship and a third set of programmes funded by digital satellite programme package fees.

The "Free to View" television and radio service must be maintained. It is not acceptable to privatise the BBC and then start to charge BBC programme package fees as per digital satellite television.

The BBC Board of Governors should be scrapped as they do not provide a useful function of scrutiny and control - as demonstrated by the Dr. Kelly affair. BBC television and radio are no different to all the other communications media and hence the BBC should fall within the remit of OFCOM so that the public know exactly where it stands in relation to the organisation.

In its present form the BBC is totally unresponsive to public view and comment. It pays lip service to this aspect of its service.

In my recent desperate attempts to get a Digital Television Service at my home in Cemaes Bay I found from a grey coloured leaflet issued by all the Television Channels that I am supposed to be able to get. This leaflet told me that I could obtain digital television services by the following means:-

(1). Digital Terrestrial Television from an Television Transmitting Aerial of all free to view channels via "Freeview" by purchasing a special set top box digital decoder.

OR

(2). Digital Satellite Television of all "Free to View Channels" via a set top box digital decoder and a satellite dish aerial receiver.

OR

(3). Digital Television via a cable service.

My attempts to secure a Digital Television Service providing all the "Free to View Channels" have revealed the following facts. Incidentally the grey leaflet states that I should be able to receive 15 "Free to View Channels".

(1). We cannot get "Freeview", (08700 10 10 10) because there is no "Freeview" transmission of Digital Terrestrial Television Channels to this Post Code Area.

(2). We cannot get Broadband because the providers will not extend their Broadband Service to this area because there is insufficient demand in this rural community to justify the provision of this service. In any case the broadband service is very expensive and I could not afford this on my pension income.

(3). We cannot connect to a cable TV service because this is not available in this area. Again the providers of cable TV services will not extend their Broadband Service to this area because there is insufficient demand in this rural community to justify the provision of this service. In any case the cable service is also very expensive and I could not afford this on my pension income.

(4). In sheer desperation in the last week I have attempted to obtain a digital satellite TV service and actually paid for a basic "Free to View Channels" contract with Sky for the supply and installation of a satellite aerial receiver dish and a set top box digital decoder by paying £120.00.

I specified to the Sky Sales representative that I only required the "Free to View Channels" and he assured me that all "Free to View Channels" would be available from the Sky digital satellite service.

I told the Sky Sales representative who arranged the installation contract that I did not want to pay any additional contract fees for any digital television services over and above the "Free to View Channels". For one thing I cannot afford a monthly subscription on my pensioners income and my review of the available TV programme material leads me to conclude that most of it is rubbish and not worth watching.

The Sky Contract Reference Number for the installation of the satellite receiver dish and the set top box digital decoder was . The contract was arranged on Wednesday 11 February 2004 if my memory serves me correctly - but about then. I was advised that an Installation Engineer would contact me on Saturday 14 February 2004 to arrange an appointment for the installation.

On Saturday 14 February 2004 the Installation Engineer would contacted by telephone me to arrange an appointment for the installation at between 1400 and 1600 on Saturday 14 February 2004. During this telephone call the Installation Engineer informed me that he did not have "a Card" to fit into the set top box Digital Decoder and asked me if I had one. I told the Installation Engineer that I did not have "a Card" and I did not need one because I was only paying for equipment installation and I did not have a contract to receive any digital television channels over and above the "Free to View" television services.

The Installation Engineer informed me that I would still need "a Card" to be able to receive the "Free to View" television services and that he did not have "a Card" to fit in the Digital Decoder. The Installation Engineer, (who should know what he is talking about), then informed me that without "a Card" fitted I would only be able to receive the BBC1 and BBC 2 television services. That was a long way short of "All the "Free to View" channels.

I checked the grey information leaflet on the Digital Television Services and found a section which informed me that I had to telephone 0870 243 8000 to arrange for the free issue supply of "a Viewing Card" to enable me to see all the "Free to View" television channels. I telephoned this number and was informed by a recorded message that issue of the "Free to View" "Viewing Cards" for the television channels ITV1 Channel 4 and Channel 5 had ceased . It had apparently ceased on 31 January 2004. No information was given as to how a "Viewing Card" could be obtained after that date.

I later discovered that until July 2003 the BBC was responsible for issuing the "Free to View" "Viewing Cards" but for some reason that issue ceased at that date. Now no organisation is accepting responsibility for the issue of these essential cards.

The Sky Installation Engineer noted my concern at the loss of services and said that he would contact his headquarters for advice. Shortly after this a female representative of Sky Sales named Fiona telephoned me to confirm what the Installation Engineer had told me. Fiona informed me that without a "Viewing Card" I would only be able to receive the BBC1 and BBC2 television channels.

I informed the Sky representative Fiona that at the time I arranged the Installation Contract 2188 2792 I had informed the Sky Sales representative that I only wanted to see all the "Free to View" channels and I did not want to pay more for additional subscriptions. I stressed the the Sky Sales representative had not told me anything different.

Fiona informed that I should have been informed that the "Free to View" service from Sky was now restricted to only BBC1 and BBC2. The Independent Television companies apparently did not see why they should provide the ITV1, Channel 4, and Channel 5 service free when it was available through subscription services.

Fiona also informed me the original Sky Salesman had been wrong to sell me the contract on the basis I had specified as he should have known that the ITV1, Channel 4 and Channel 5 programmes were not available via digital satellite in the "Free to View" service.

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Based on this information from Fiona from Sky Sales, and the advice from the Sky Installation Engineer, I decided to cancel the installation contract because it did not satisfy my specified requirements. Fiona apologised on behalf of Sky for the lapse in service and agreed to arrange the cancellation of my £120.00 installation fee.

I was entitled to change my mind about the installation contract in any case because it was within the 8 day cooling off period for telephone sale of the contract.

Subsequently I have checked with BBC Information on 0870 010 0222 about the availability of all BBC digital satellite channel transmissions and the other "Free to View" channels and they confirm that they are all available through the satellite channels. This information contradicts the information I have received from Sky. Who is correct.

The BBC will not make any arrangement to enable me to receive digital terrestrial television services and they do not accept any responsibility for making and modifications or installations at the local Cemaes Bay Television Transmitter. The BBC inform me that the responsibility for the provision of and modification of all television transmitting aerials is the responsibility of the Independent Television Commission.

The Independent Television Commission have no plans to install a new digital terrestrial transmitting aerial in Cemaes Bay or to modify the existing analogue television transmitting aerial to transmit digital signals.

When will the Cemaes Bay analogue television aerial be changed to provide digital signals. The Independent Television Commission appear to be ignoring their responsibilities in this respect because they also have the responsibility for installing or modifying 260 local analogue television transmitting aerials in the South Wales valleys alone.

There is now only 2 years to go to the 2006 deadline for the switch off of the the analogue television service. This means that if I own a television set at that time I will be paying a Television Licence Fee for which no television signals are available in Cemaes Bay. This is an unacceptable prospect and the Government must take drastic action to ensure that all the "Free to View" television services are available free to all who want them as soon as possible.

Someone has to take urgent and prompt action. Please advise me what the Minister of Culture, and the BBC, and OFCOM propose to do about this problem.

The government propose to switch off the analogue television service in 2006. Since from the above reports it is evident that no organisation, nor the Government, propose to provide a digital terrestrial television service in Cemaes Bay and all the other locations in the UK which currently have the same type of reception difficulty, in 2006 I estimate that some 2,000,000 people in the UK will have been disenfranchised from receiving digital terrestrial television.

Please note that there are some 230 local special television transmitters in South Wales alone. The problem is a very big one and this cannot be ignored in the BBC Charter Review.

This communication will be confirmed in writing by post as soon as possible

Yours Faithfully

Thomas Conway
Thomas Conway

31 March 2004