



**The Sandford
St Martin Trust**

Britain's Next Chapter: BBC Royal Charter Review Green Paper Consultation Response

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Submitted by

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About the Sandford St Martin Trust

- i. The Sandford St Martin Trust (SSMT) promotes thought-provoking, distinctive broadcasting that engages with belief and enhances the public understanding of religion. We believe the media have an increasingly important and challenging role to play in interpreting world events and that this cannot be done without acknowledging the complex roles religions play in both contemporary and historical human experience. Religiously literate media can promote greater understanding, increase tolerance, and foster stronger communities and cooperation at local, national and global levels.
- ii. SSMT advocates at industry, regulatory and government levels for the place of broadcasting about religion in a healthy and diverse media ecosystem. Our outreach work promotes religion as an important and rewarding subject for both content-makers and audiences. In recent years, we have produced events in partnership with the Wales Screen Summit, the Bradford Literature Festival, the Commission for Belief in Public Life, the Edinburgh International Television Festival, the Media Society, NUJ Training, Sheffield Doc/Fest and many more. More details can be found on our website: www.sandfordawards.org.uk
- iii. In addition to our campaigning and advocacy work, SSMT has made annual awards for the best broadcast and, more recently, online video and audio content about belief, religion, ethics and spirituality since 1978. The SSM Awards are the UK's most prestigious prize for religious broadcasting and are open to a wide range of genres – news, current affairs factual, arts, music, drama and comedy - as well as to 'traditional' religious broadcasting. Winners are decided by panels of media professionals. Radio Times readers also vote in their thousands for their favourite TV or radio programme exploring religion from a list published in that magazine.
- iv. SSMT is politically independent and is not affiliated with any media company or organisation. It does not proselytise on behalf of or promote any religion or faith, nor does it engage in religious activities itself. Our Trustees include people with many years' experience of production and broadcasting who represent a wide variety of perspectives and faith backgrounds.

Responses to “Britain’s Story: The Next Chapter BBC Royal Charter Review Green Paper and Public Consultation”

Question 1.

Do you agree or disagree that the BBC’s current Mission and Public Purposes should remain the same?

- Disagree - The BBC’s Mission and Public Purposes should change

FREE TEXT:

While we support the BBC’s core Mission and Public Purposes, we believe its remit should be updated to better reflect and respond to the challenges facing public service broadcasting and increasing community divisions in the contemporary media landscape. In particular, we recommend that the new Charter give the BBC a clearer mandate to address misinformation and disinformation, and to strengthen public understanding of religion and belief.

Given its reach and influence, the BBC is uniquely positioned to provide trusted, accurate, and nuanced information about religion and belief. We believe it should play a leading role in promoting greater tolerance, understanding, and cooperation both across and within the UK’s diverse faith communities.

Question 2.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the BBC should have a specific Public Purpose to support economic growth?

- Neither agree nor disagree – No opinion either way.

Question 3.

Which option, if any, most closely represents your feelings on whether the BBC should continue to provide a wide range of content and services that represent all audiences in a way that brings communities together, supports social cohesion, and helps build a unifying national story throughout the next Charter period?

- The BBC should do more to represent all audiences. The BBC should provide more content and services aiming to represent all audiences.

Question 4.

If you agree that the BBC should continue or do more to play this role, what options aiming to improve how the BBC reflects and represents all audiences do you support, if any? (Please select all that apply)

- Producing more content that is distinctive to the UK
- Covering genres which are less covered by other broadcasters e.g. arts, minority language broadcasting
- Sharing diverse voices and perspectives from all parts of the UK
- Improving on and off screen diversity
- Other, please specify [FREE TEXT; 50 words]

FREE TEXT:

Feedback from Sandford St Martin Trust stakeholders suggests that many people from faith communities feel the BBC does not fully or accurately reflect their experiences. This concern is especially pronounced among respondents from non-Christian traditions, who note that coverage often focuses narrowly on rituals, festivals, or purely factual documentary perspectives. Stakeholders consistently call for two main changes: a clearer acknowledgment of the diversity within faith communities, and wider representation across more genres — such as drama, comedy, arts, and history — rather than relying predominantly on factual or news output.

Chapter 1: A trusted institution

Question 7.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the BBC is currently accountable to the public?

- Strongly agree - The BBC is almost always accountable to the public.

Question 8.

Which of the following options aiming to enhance the BBC's accountability, if any, do you support? (Please select all that apply)

- Requiring the BBC to use consultative forums, such as citizens' assemblies, so that decision-making represents the public's views and voices
- Requiring the BBC to hear regional perspectives through new consultative frameworks or other structures, representing each of the UK's nations and/or regions
- Enhancing how the BBC conducts audience research to help inform decision making
- Strengthening requirements of the Board to ensure the BBC engages with the public in a meaningful way
- Changing the structure of the Board to enhance its effectiveness and accountability
- Changing the Board's appointment process, this could include reducing the government's role in board appointments to appointing the Chair only
- Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of board members, this could include setting out duties for the Chair
- Enhancing the role of the independent board members and their ability to hold the BBC to account
- Other

FREE TEXT:

Political independence and accountability are essential for the BBC, especially in relation to religious broadcasting. Faith and belief are often deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and political issues, and audiences rely on the BBC to provide accurate, impartial, and nuanced coverage. Independence ensures that programming about religion and belief is not influenced by political agendas, commercial pressures, or partisan interests, allowing the BBC to explore sensitive topics—such as interfaith relations, ethical debates, or the role of religion in global events—honestly and responsibly.

Accountability to citizens reinforces trust in the BBC's religious content. Audiences need confidence that coverage of faith communities is fair, inclusive, and reflective of the UK's diversity. This helps prevent the spread of misinformation, challenges stereotypes, and encourages respectful public discourse. By remaining politically independent and accountable, the BBC can maintain its credibility as a source of trustworthy religious programming, supporting media literacy, social cohesion, and informed civic participation. In a society where faith plays a significant role in personal and public life,

these principles are vital to ensuring that religious broadcasting serves the public interest rather than narrow interests.

Question 9.

The government is considering targeted changes to increase transparency in the BBC to enhance BBC accountability over the next Charter period. Which options, if any, do you support? (Please select all that apply)

- Improving the way the BBC communicates important information so it is clear, concise and able to be understood by everyone
- Requiring the BBC to communicate more information about the process for selecting which programmes should be made and broadcast
- Other, please specify [free text limited to 200 words]

FREE TEXT:

Religious broadcasting in the UK has experienced a dramatic decline, with original content on religion and ethics falling by 85% at peak times between 2011 and 2022, and a 42% decrease in total hours across all Public Service Broadcasters. The BBC is now the primary provider of religious content for UK audiences, yet this is also in decline. Transparency around the commissioning of genres like religious programming (overall spend, hours, quotas) would enhance accountability.

Question 10.

Why, if at all, does the BBC's independence matter to you? (Please select all that apply)

- It allows the BBC to be free from government or political influence in the content it releases
- It allows the BBC to be impartial when reporting on elections, government policies, and political parties
- It allows the BBC to hold government to account and/or be critical of government
- It allows the BBC to be editorially independent and make the final call on what stories to cover and how to cover them
- It allows the BBC to pursue its own agenda, without interference, so it can provide content that serves audiences across the UK
- Other, please specify [Free text]

FREE TEXT:

In these politically and socially turbulent times, the BBC plays a critical role as a trusted provider of news and information. Its independence is particularly important when it comes to a balanced portrayal of religious communities, religious identity and the impact religion has on events and human experience whether these are political, social, economic or cultural.

Question 11.

What measures to increase the BBC's independence from government, if any, should be prioritised to support greater trust in, and engagement with, the BBC? In your response you may wish to explain your reasoning and provide relevant evidence.

FREE TEXT:

- **Prioritise religiously literate programming** as a core part of the BBC's public service remit. Ensure content across news, current affairs, factual, drama, and education reflects an informed and nuanced understanding of religion and belief in UK society.
- **Protect political independence** as the foundation of public trust in the BBC's coverage of religion and belief. Remove mechanisms that allow government influence over funding, governance, or editorial priorities.
- **Establish an independent funding commission** to set the licence fee based on evidence and public value, ending direct negotiations between the BBC and ministers and reducing the risk of political pressure affecting editorial priorities.
- **Introduce long-term funding settlements** to provide financial certainty and enable sustained investment in editorial expertise, specialist journalism, and programming that explores religion, ethics, and belief in public life.
- **Ensure governance structures support expertise in religion and belief.** BBC Board appointments should be independent and transparent, with consideration given to ensuring relevant subject-matter understanding at board level.
- **Investigate any allegations of inappropriate board-level interference in editorial matters,** with findings made public to maintain trust in the BBC's editorial independence.
- **Improve transparency around the Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee,** including how concerns are raised and reviews initiated, particularly in relation to issues involving religion and belief.
- **Protect programme-makers' editorial freedom,** ensuring commissioners and producers can develop thoughtful and representative religion-related content without political or governance interference.
- **Extend Royal Charter periods (e.g. to 11 years or more)** to reduce exposure to the electoral cycle and support long-term investment in specialist areas such as religion and ethics.
- **Establish a permanent, representative Citizens' Assembly** to advise the BBC Board, including voices from diverse religious and belief backgrounds, strengthening public accountability without increasing government control.

Chapter 2: Delivering services for the public good

Question 12.

What, if anything, should the BBC focus on to ensure AI is used for the public good, and for the benefit of the wider creative industries? Please select all that apply.

- Transparently explaining its own use of AI, for example, in the creation of content and services
- Having new requirements (for example, transparency obligations), to set the ethical standards for AI's use in public service media organisations
- Teaching audiences how to recognise where AI has been used, and to critically assess the reliability of information and content
- Find innovative uses of AI to drive efficiencies within the BBC and in the wider media sector
- Act as a bridge between AI companies and smaller public service media who have less time and money to negotiate, helping to support wider collaboration
- Other, please specify [free text limited to 200 words]

FREE TEXT:

To ensure AI is used for the public good and delivers wide benefits across the creative industries, the BBC and government should prioritise clear, fair and enforceable copyright and licensing frameworks. Legal certainty is essential to protect creators' livelihoods, maintain sustainable revenue models, and give businesses the confidence to invest and innovate.

The BBC should also focus on ensuring transparency and control for content creators as well as rights holders, including clear rules around how creative works are used to train AI systems and how resulting value is shared down the supply chain. Such measures are particularly important where religious content draws on specialist expertise, community voices, and culturally sensitive material.

While AI may support productivity and innovation, it should be deployed in ways that strengthen rather than replace editorial expertise in religion and belief. Religious programming requires careful contextual understanding, cultural sensitivity, and informed editorial judgement—qualities that depend on human expertise. The BBC should therefore ensure that the use of AI does not jeopardise the quality, nuance, or integrity of programming in this area. Any policies governing AI adoption should also support reskilling and professional development for those working in specialist fields, including religion journalism and factual programming.

Question 13.

What kind of programming, if any, do you think the BBC should make more visible on its platforms? (Please select all that apply)

- Arts, religious and international affairs programming (sometimes referred to as 'underserved' genres)

- Programming showing different voices and perspectives from across the UK
- Other, please specify [free text limited to 200 words]

FREE TEXT:

Specialist programming and content which reflects the UK's diverse belief communities and the complex roles religions play in human experience is critical to the BBC's civic mission and yet this content can be difficult to find and is rarely promoted either generally or by the BBC's algorithms. We believe making this socially valuable content prominent is key to the BBC meeting its public service mission.

Question 14.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the BBC should make greater use of third party platforms to share its content?

- Agree - The BBC should probably make greater use of third party platforms to share its content

Question 15.

Reflecting on your response above, please explain why you agree or disagree that the BBC should make greater use of third party platforms to share its content. Please provide relevant evidence, where possible.

- [free text limited to 200 words]

FREE TEXT:

While the BBC should make greater use of third-party platforms to ensure its content continues to deliver public value in a rapidly changing media environment, this activity must remain aligned with its public service mission. This should include making high-quality religious content and programming about religion and belief accessible to audiences wherever they consume media.

Audiences—particularly younger people—increasingly access news and cultural content through platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and TikTok. Failing to publish on these would limit the BBC's reach and relevance. If the BBC is to serve all audiences, it must ensure that important public service content—including programming that explores religion, belief, ethics and values—appears where audiences already spend their time.

Third-party platforms are also major sites for the spread of misinformation. This is especially true in relation to religion and belief, where stereotypes, misunderstandings and misleading narratives can circulate widely. The BBC's presence on these platforms can help counter misinformation by providing trusted, accurate and well-contextualised content. In doing so, it can play an important role in

improving public understanding of religion and belief and in promoting greater tolerance and understanding across the UK's diverse faith communities.

Question 16.

What, if anything, do you believe would improve the value and relevance of BBC news and current affairs to you? This includes all BBC news and current affairs content, including its TV, radio and online news services, and local, national and international news outputs.

- A renewed focus on accuracy and impartiality
- More clearly marking when content is news versus where it is opinion
- Robust and transparent editorial guidelines applied consistently
- Greater transparency when mistakes and errors are made
- Reporting more news stories which are local to you
- Reporting more international news stories
- Highlighting stories which are not reported by other outlets
- Other, please specify [free text limited to 200 words]

FREE TEXT:

Specialist religion correspondents would mean a better quantity and quality of religiously literate content would significantly improve the relevance and value of news and current affairs by enabling deeper, more accurate interpretation of events.

Too often religion is dismissed in the UK as a minority interest, a tendency reflected in declining attention from public service broadcasters. This narrow perspective overlooks how most of the world understands itself and others. From global conflicts to domestic debates on issues such as assisted dying, abortion and asylum, belief plays a central role. Religiously literate journalism equips audiences to understand these dynamics more clearly, making coverage more informed, globally relevant and genuinely reflective of lived experience.

Question 17.

Thinking about the next Charter period, what role, if any, do you think the BBC should have in ensuring UK citizens can recognise and access trusted and accurate information? Please provide any relevant evidence to support your response.

- [200 word text box]

FREE TEXT:

The Sandford St Martin Trust believes the BBC should play a prominent and proactive role in helping UK audiences recognise and access trusted, accurate information about religion/belief. In a digital media environment increasingly shaped by misinformation, media and religious literacy are essential to informed participation in public life.

This includes the ability to understand, question and interpret media critically, and to recognise how information is produced, whether it is reliable, and how platforms influence what people see and share. This is particularly important in relation to religion and belief, where misinformation, stereotypes and partial narratives can easily circulate online.

The BBC is well placed to lead this work through its existing media literacy initiatives and should continue to develop them. Projects such as *Share Take Care*, *News School Report* and *The Listening Project* have helped audiences—especially younger people—better understand how media content is created and presented. Expanding such initiatives could also support greater understanding of religion and belief, enabling audiences to engage more thoughtfully with coverage of faith communities and religious issues.

Question 18.

The BBC's international output showcases the UK, its culture and its values to a global audience. This includes the BBC World Service, which seeks to provide access to trusted news around the world in an increasingly challenging international environment. To what extent do you agree it is important that the BBC continues to perform these roles internationally?

- Strongly agree - The BBC must continue to provide this role internationally.

Further views

The points outlined above highlight the importance of the BBC in maintaining a strong commitment to high-quality religious content as part of its public service mission. The BBC is currently the primary provider of traditional religious programming in the UK, accounting for around 99% of all religious content broadcast by public service broadcasters in 2022, while Channels 4 and 5 have largely withdrawn from this area. This makes the BBC's role particularly significant in ensuring religion and belief continue to be represented in UK media.

Religiously literate broadcasting is vital in a diverse society. It supports accurate journalism, helps audiences understand the role faith plays in both everyday life and global affairs, and encourages informed and respectful public discourse. Thoughtful coverage of religion can challenge stereotypes and provide context for complex social, cultural and political issues, including those that influence international conflicts and community cohesion.

As audiences increasingly consume media through digital platforms, the need for accessible, well-informed content about religion and belief is growing. Promoting such content should remain a core element of public service broadcasting, helping ensure that UK media reflects the diversity of its communities and enabling audiences to better understand the complex roles religions play.

Chapter 3: Driving growth across the UK

Question 19.

What, if anything, do you value about the BBC being UK-wide? (Please select all that apply)

- Bringing people together from different communities across the UK, including its nations and regions
- Representing people from across the UK
- Telling local stories to a national audience
- Providing local news and information
- Money spent in local areas
- Stimulating local creative clusters (e.g. MediaCity in Greater Manchester, BBC's new headquarters in the West Midlands), including through supporting the independent production sector.
- Jobs and skills development for local people
- Other, please specify [free text limited to 200 words]

FREE TEXT:

The BBC's UK-wide structure is particularly valuable in ensuring that religious broadcasting reflects the full diversity of faith and belief across the country. Religion and belief are experienced differently across the nations and regions of the UK, and a broadcaster with a genuinely national reach is well placed to represent those differences while also highlighting shared values and experiences.

A UK-wide BBC can provide programming that reflects local communities while also making those stories visible to wider audiences. This helps ensure that religious life in different parts of the UK—across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as within diverse regional communities—is represented accurately and respectfully. Such coverage can promote greater understanding between communities and counter stereotypes or misconceptions.

This reach is also important for maintaining universal access to trusted information about religion and belief. As the BBC remains the primary provider of religious programming among UK public service broadcasters, its UK-wide presence helps ensure that content exploring faith, belief and ethics is accessible to all audiences, regardless of location. In doing so, it supports social cohesion, informed public discussion, and a better understanding of the role religion plays in contemporary British life.

Question 20. (1)

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the BBC should be required to spread more of its spending, activities, and decision-making across nations and regions of the UK?

- Neither agree nor disagree - No opinion either way.

Question 20. (2)

Which option(s), if any, would you support for spreading the BBC's economic impact and role supporting the production sector across the UK nations and regions? (Please select all that apply).

- Unsure or no opinion

Question 21.

What, if anything, do you think the BBC could do to fill skills gaps in the creative sector? Please provide any relevant evidence, where possible.

- [Free-text box; 200 words]

FREE TEXT:

The BBC can help fill gaps in the creative sector by:

- **Strengthening its commitment to diversity and representation:**
Ensuring the organisation is more diverse at all levels of commissioning and production, so content is created by and for more diverse and representative audiences.
- **Improving the quality of portrayals of religion:**
Developing more positive, nuanced, and authentic portrayals of religion and religious characters across a wide range of genres, including factual programming, drama, and comedy.
- **Broadening ownership and creative perspectives:**
Supporting a wider variety of voices and storytellers to reflect the internal diversity, complexity, and richness of the UK's religious communities, rather than relying on narrow or stereotypical narratives.
- **Increasing prominence of religious content:**
Commissioning a greater quantity of religious programming to counter the overall decline in the visibility and representation of religious communities across public service broadcasters, including the BBC itself.

Question 24.

If you represent an organisation in the creative industries, please share your reflections on your experience of the current market impact regulation process and how it could be improved. Please provide relevant evidence, where possible.

- What went well? [Free-text box; 350 words]

FREE TEXT:

SSMT’s experience of the current market impact regulation process suggests a growing tension between public service objectives and commercial pressures.

Through our advocacy for the place and prominence of content relating to faith, belief and ethics—and through the Sandford St Martin Trust’s annual awards recognising excellence in this field—we engage regularly with broadcasters and commissioners. BBC executives have consistently shown a willingness to engage with our organisation.

However, qualitative evidence, including stakeholder feedback, alongside quantitative indicators such as the number and range of credible award entrants, suggests that commissioning decisions are increasingly influenced by perceived performance on international streaming platforms. This shift risks reducing the emphasis on diversity, pluralism and the representation of important public interest genres, including religion and belief, in favour of audience reach and retention.

These concerns are supported by research published in 2025 in collaboration with the University of Leeds, the International Broadcasting Trust and the Campaign for the Arts. The report, *Behind the Screen*, identified significant shortcomings in how UK public service broadcasters ensure that key interest genres—including religion and belief, the arts and international issues—are visible and accessible on streaming services, and made recommendations to strengthen public service principles in a more market-driven digital environment.

What could be improved? [Free-text box; 350 words]

FREE TEXT:

Improvements to the regulatory framework should strengthen public service values while enabling innovation, including protecting the place of religious broadcasting and programming about religion and belief.

Regulation should support the BBC in adapting to a competitive, multi-platform environment without diluting its civic and cultural role. While innovation is important, the BBC’s public service mission must remain central to its strategy. This includes maintaining a broad range of public service genres—including religious content—and developing new ways to engage audiences with this material across broadcast and digital platforms. Transparent metrics for measuring the success and reach of such strategies should be publicly available.

Government and regulators should also encourage the BBC to promote a wider range of genres and subject areas on its online platforms, recognising the civic value of audience discovery and the risks of algorithm-driven silos. Religious programming and content exploring faith, belief and ethics should form part of this mix, ensuring audiences can easily find material reflecting the UK’s diverse communities.

Greater collaboration between the BBC and other public service broadcasters—particularly through sharing innovation and best practice—could further improve audience access through enhanced search functions, better content categorisation and clearer signposting of public service content.

Chapter 4: Sustainable and fair funding

Question 25.

To what extent do you agree that the licence fee should continue to fund a wide range of services and output that aim to inform, educate and entertain audiences?

- Strongly agree - The licence fee should definitely fund a wide range of services and output that aim to inform, educate, and entertain.

Question 26.

To what extent do you agree that the BBC should use the funding it receives through the licence fee to deliver a broad range of benefits to the UK? This could include objectives such as investing in the nations and regions to drive growth across the UK, and developing skills that support the creative economy.

- Strongly agree - The BBC should definitely use the licence fee to fund a broad range of benefits to the UK and the creative economy.

Question 27.

To what extent do you agree that the scope of the licence fee should be reformed to support the BBC's long term sustainability, which could involve requiring more households to pay but with each paying less?

- Agree - The licence fee should be reformed to support the BBC's long term sustainability.

Question 28.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that BBC content or services should carry advertising, bearing in mind how this could provide a new income stream for the BBC, how it might impact the audience experience and the impact on other broadcasters?

- Unsure.

Question 29.

Would you be willing to pay for a BBC top-up subscription service focused on premium and entertainment content, in addition to your licence fee, assuming it was a similar price to other popular video-on-demand subscription services?

- Disagree - I would not be willing to pay for a BBC top-up subscription service focused on premium and entertainment content.

Question 30.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that new concessions for households facing significant financial pressures should be introduced?

- Agree - The government should introduce new TV licence concessions for households facing significant financial pressures only if there are no negative impacts on the BBC or higher costs for other households.

Question 31.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that technology should be used to support compliance, for example by requiring households using BBC iPlayer to enter details from their TV licence?

- Agree - Technology should be used to support compliance, for example the BBC iPlayer login system should require households using the service to enter details from their TV licence.

Question 32.

Do you have any other views on the BBC's funding model that you wish to share? In your response, you may wish to explain why you agree or disagree with the potential changes above or suggest a different funding model.

FREE TEXT:

Any changes to the BBC's funding model must safeguard the core public service values of universality, diversity and independence, including in the area of religious broadcasting.

The Sandford St Martin Trust believes BBC services should remain free at the point of use, without subscriptions, paywalls, or barriers arising from digital or equipment limitations. Universal access is particularly important for religious content, ensuring that programming exploring faith, belief, and ethics is available to all audiences. This access supports a shared national culture, provides trusted and impartial information about religion and belief, and helps counter misinformation and stereotypes.

Maintaining universality in religious broadcasting ensures that all citizens—including older audiences, vulnerable groups, and those outside major urban centres—can engage with content that reflects the UK’s diverse faith communities. By doing so, the BBC can continue to promote social cohesion, foster interfaith understanding, and support informed civic participation, while preserving its vital role in democracy and public life.