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# **Report on the VLV survey of opinion among its members about free TV licences for people over 75**

**By Graham Mytton  
8<sup>th</sup> February 2019**

## Summary

This survey of VLV members' opinions shows the following main points. They are true about those who responded – 108 members out of a membership of 499, a response rate of 22%.

- Nearly everyone disagreed with the continuation unchanged of the free licences to all over 75s.
- There was however disagreement about whether all free licences should be discontinued. Just under half disagreed with ending free licences. And slightly fewer wanted all free licences to be scrapped.
- There was little support for raising the qualifying age to 80.
- There was little support for linking a free licence to receipt of pension credit for any age.
- But there was modest (55%) for free licences for those age 75+ in receipt of pension credit.
- There was opposition (56%) to the idea of discounted licence for the over 75s.
- The respondents come from a wide range of backgrounds, regions and social status.
- There was however a strong bias towards respondents from London and the home counties.
- Most of the respondents are retired. Probably a majority qualify now for the free licence. Oddly there seems to be confusion about whether one can actually refuse the concession. One resident writes that a cheque sent to the BBC was refused.

## The Questions and Answers

Questionnaires were sent to VLV members towards the end of 2018. This report is based on 108 responses received by email and post.

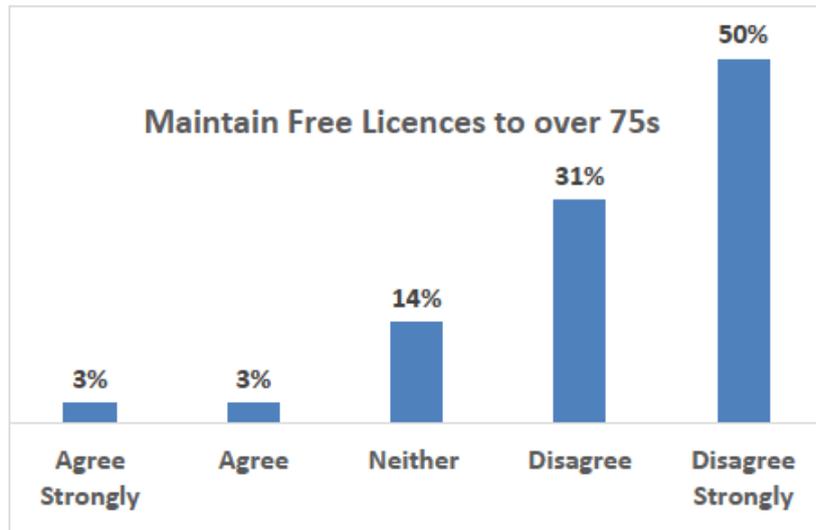
There were three main questions but the third was broken down into four alternative sub-questions. So there are therefore six questions that were put to respondents as statements. Members were asked to score these using a five- point set of options:

<b>Agree Strongly</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>
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With this instruction: "Please indicate your response in the box which most closely accords with your response to each question".

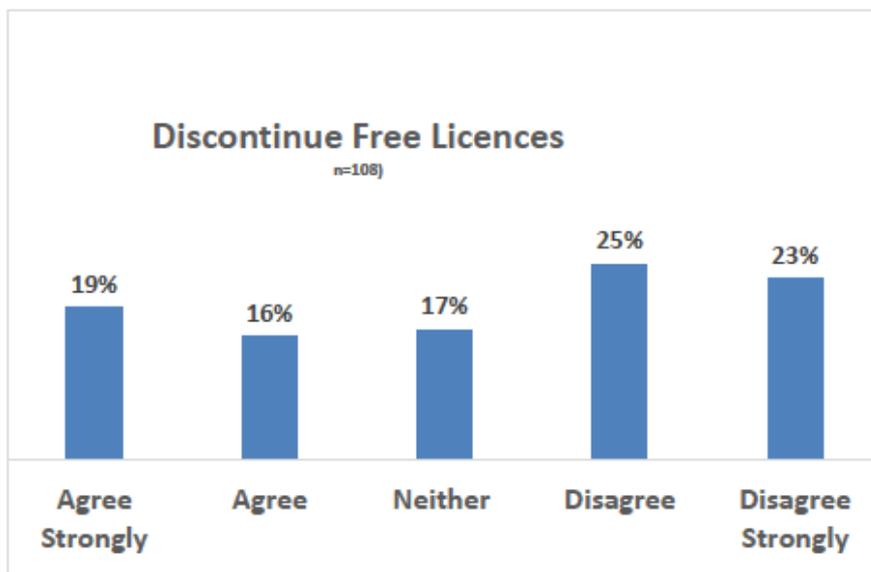
These were the questions as put and the responses:

**Q 1 Maintain the current concession to provide free TV licences to households which include at least one person who is over 75. There is a consequential loss to the BBC of c.£750m.**



This shows a clear result. 81% disagreed with the maintenance of free TV licences for households which include at least one person aged 75 or over, most of them strongly.

**Q 2 Free TV licences should be discontinued for all over 75s. The BBC thereby regains c.£750m pa of licence fee revenue**

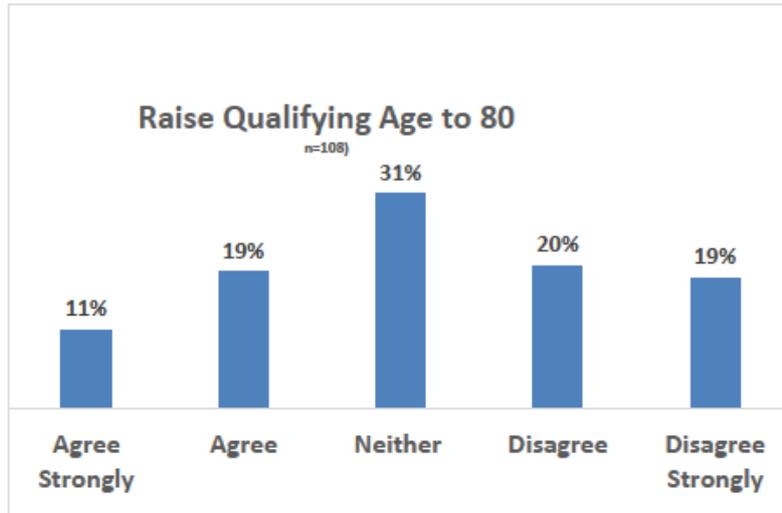


This is an interesting result. It shows that although nearly everyone disagrees with free TV licences for all households which include at least one person aged 75 or above, they disagree about a total abolition. We might have expected a similarly high level of agreement to match the disagreement with the first proposition. But whereas Q1 proposed the continuation of the present system unchanged, this one is the complete opposite with all free licences being ended. Many respondents in their other answers and in comments showed an interest in measures to reduce the impact on the less well-off including continuation of some free TV licences. Just over half respondents disagreed with this proposition to end all free licences. Looking further into the data, we see that among those who disagreed with the continuance of the free licence system as it is (Q1) just over half of them also disagreed with its total abolition. They seem to want some compromise or allowances.

Which brings us to the next four grouped questions. These were introduced with the following passage:

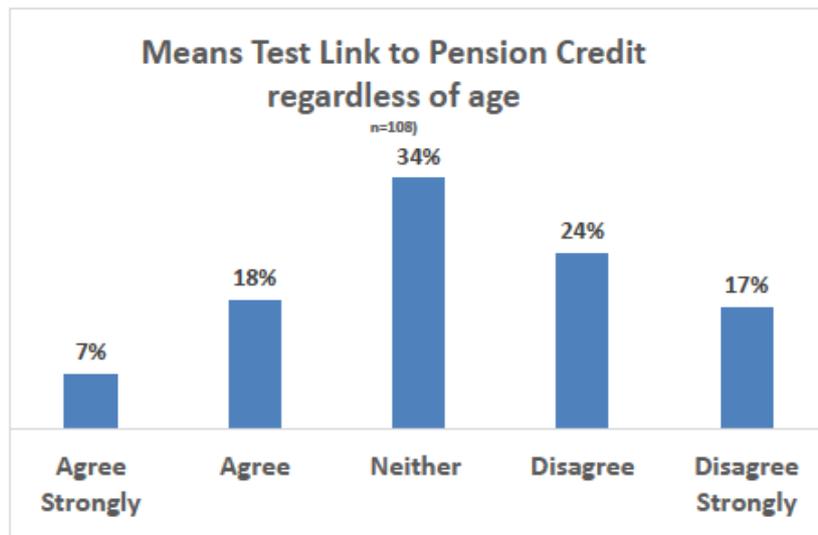
“Alternatively, if a free TV licence system is retained, it should be offered more selectively, taking account of the consequential loss of income to the BBC and costs of implementation. These are all examples of selective options”

Q 3.1 For example, given higher life expectancy today than in 2000, the minimum age for entitlement should be raised from 75 to 80. This would mean a reduction in income to the BBC of c.£480m.



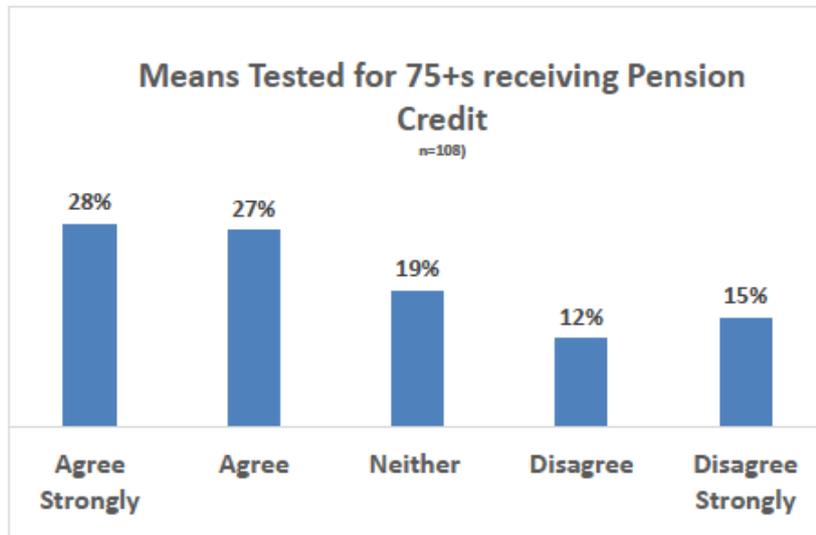
There is a fairly even spread of opinion here with a high rate of no opinion either way. Members who have an opinion tend to reject the idea.

Q 3.2 Alternatively, free TV licences should be means-tested and apply to anyone receiving Pension Credit regardless of their age. This would mean a reduction in income of c.£330m to the BBC.



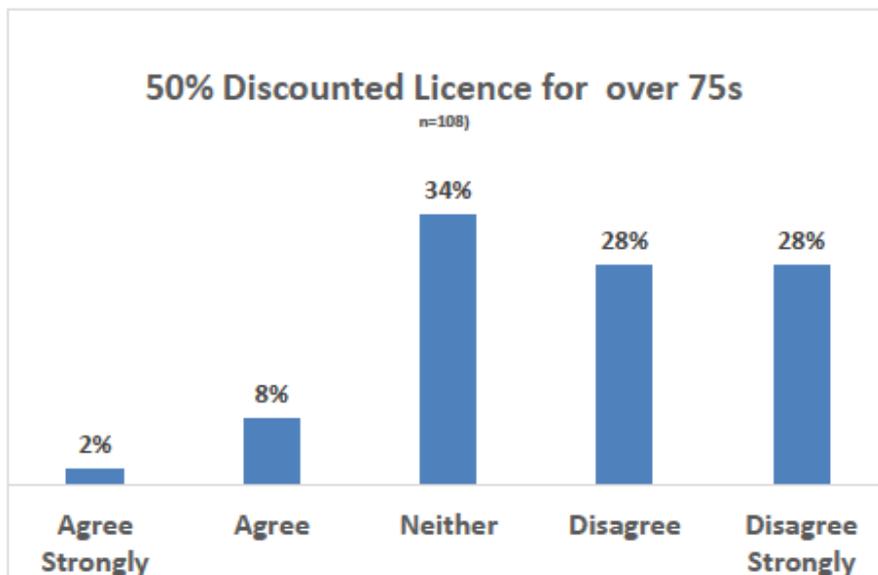
Linking qualification for a free TV licence to receipt of Pension Credit receives less approval than raising the age level. But more than one in three respondents could not express an opinion either way. Of those who expressed an opinion, most disagreed with this idea.

**3.3 Alternatively, the threshold should remain at 75 and be means tested: eg limited to those receiving Pension Credit. This would mean that BBC income loss would be reduced to c.£210m.**



This proposition seems, on the face of it, to be not very different from 3.2. However, it received far more approval. Overall, 56% agreed with it. However, several respondents pointed to the difficulties of means testing, especially the fact that it can be expensive to administer and sometimes unfair. Note the rather smaller numbers of those without an opinion on this one.

**3.4 Any household with a member over 75 years old should receive a 50% discount on the cost of the licence fee. This would mean a reduction in income of £400m to the BBC.**



There is a clear result here with very little support for this idea. One in three had no definite opinion either way. Even so, 56% gave this idea the thumbs down. It was notable that several respondents commented later that it was not fair that all that was needed for a free TV licence to be granted was for there to be just one 75+ year old in a household. Perhaps the wording of this question “any household with a member over 75..” prompted these comments and the relatively high rate of rejection of this proposal. Note also that many respondents to this questionnaire are either over 75 or are approaching that age. (See next page)

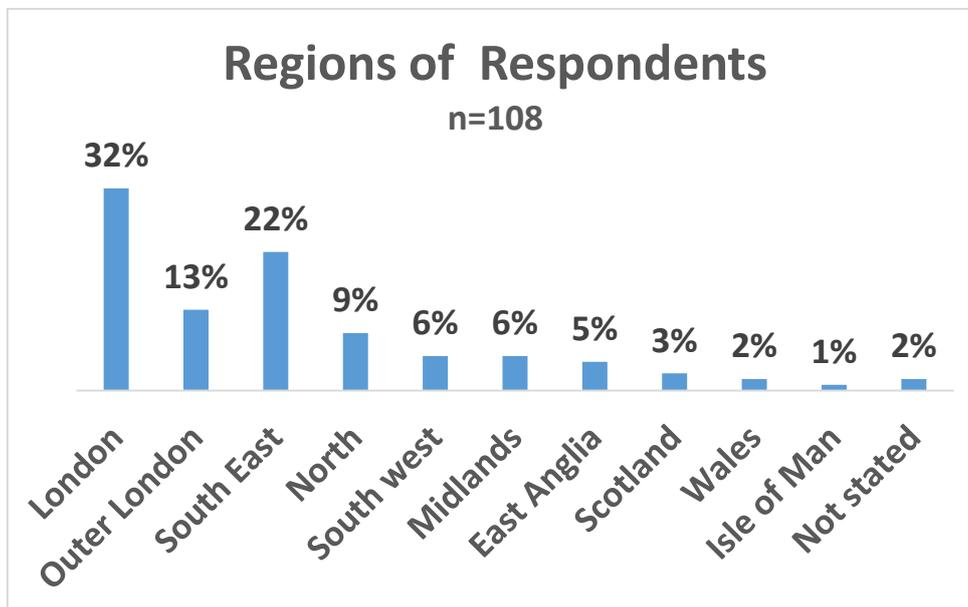
## Profiles of respondents

The respondents lastly were asked four questions about themselves – their gender, age group, occupation now or when they were working and the first two digits of their postcode.

- 47% were men, 43% women and 10% did not give their gender
- No respondent was under 35 years of age. 93% were over 60. 6% were between 35 and 60. Two respondents did not give their ages.
- They come from many professions and occupations from unskilled and semi-skilled occupations through to skilled, clerical, professional, business and academic.
- 15% had worked in media. 6% had been employed by the BBC.

The largest single categories were those who worked or had worked in the public service at central or local levels at 15%, 10% were academics, 9% were in business, 8% were teachers, 7% worked in the health service, 11% were in other semi-skilled or skilled occupations, 8% were other professionals and 9% said they were “retired”, not noticing we were asking what their occupation had been before retirement.

## Where they live



There is a rather strong bias towards London and the South East accounting for more than two in three respondents.

## Comments provided by Respondents

These were in many cases detailed and often precise. Many show evidence of knowledge of media policy, the situation of the BBC, the political circumstances that may have led to the free TV licence policy and other relevant matters. The comments are grouped and provided under seven headings beginning with the most frequent type of comment – about the oddness of the BBC providing a benefit that is not something that is its responsibility.

## BBC paying for this concession

1. Whichever system is adopted, the BBC should not be expected to pay for it. It was a government decision to provide free television licences and the scheme should, therefore, be funded by the government.  
Pharmacist, over 60, CH3
2. I believe that any concession should not be handled by the BBC. The settlement should not have included this concession which is not part of the role of a broadcasting authority but that of the DWP. If necessary the settlement should have only covered the work of the broadcaster.  
Engineer/civil servant, over 60, HA
3. If it is possible to restrict this to households with no adults under pension age and to limit this to those who receive pension credit, so be it. But it should be for government, not the BBC to fund.  
Newly retired, over 60, EH
4. As the free licence is a government policy, it should be funded by the government.  
Civil servant, over 60, NP
5. I think the Government should continue to pay for licences for the over 75's – TV and radio play an important part in combatting isolation – and high tax payers should pay for it.  
Lecturer, over 60, OX
6. There are many comfortably off pensioners who can well afford the licence fee. The BBC were hoodwinked into carrying the burden of this vote-winning government policy. The BBC must reduce this heavy financial burden by some form of means testing. Preferably 3.2 which would free up £400million for programmes.  
Former BBC Executive, over 60, W2
7. I still feel strongly that the cost should be covered by the Dept for Work and Pensions, not the BBC!  
Retired Archivist, over 60, SW,
8. The cost of covering the free TV licence system should revert to the DWP.  
HM inspector of Taxes, over 60, BD
9. The government created the licence fee concession and was wrong to devolve to the BBC the responsibility for deciding how the concession should be abolished or amended.  
Company director, over 60, CM
10. My suggested approach is that whilst free TV licences should be discontinued, a fund should be set up to help those who genuinely have trouble affording this. This should really be funded by the DCMS but could come from a source such as the National Lottery.  
Railway manager and consultant, 35-59, UB
11. The BBC should NOT have agreed to such an outrageous imposition in 2015. An extraordinary error of judgment. I have opted for 3.3 (my preference is 2) because it will mean less criticism of the BBC.

Public service, over 60, SW

12. Any subsidy to people on a limited income should come out of general taxation, not out of the licence fee which reduces the BBC's income.  
Customer services officer, over 60, CB8 – 45
13. I do not think the BBC should have agreed to take on a welfare responsibility and then claim they cannot afford it. There are other areas where they could save money.  
Public servant, over 60, GL6
14. Social welfare benefits are the responsibility of the government, not the BBC. It is iniquitous that the BBC should be put in a position where it is having to make decisions about subsidising the licence fee for the over-75s and where other licence fee payers are expected to bear the costs, which are unsustainable in any case. It would be a great mistake for the BBC to get involved in means testing or raising age limits.  
Civil servant, over 60, N2
15. It is not appropriate for a broadcasting organisation to determine government social policy. Public pressure should be applied on the government to reverse this element of the settlement. Government should continue to fund directly any future free TV licence fees for the elderly, if government believes this should be a public policy priority.  
Survey/market/audience research, over 60, TA4
16. The license fee should not be used as a tool of government social policy. If they think pensioners should have free TV licences then give them out, but don't hurt the very producer of programmes on that service.  
Self-employed consultant, over 60, SW.
17. I strongly oppose ending free TV licenses for those over 75 and believe that the BBC should be encouraged to stand firm and make it clear that it is the government and not the Corporation that is to blame for this proposal.... It is the job of the government, not the national broadcaster, to administer and fund the nation's welfare policy and, as a universal benefit, the free TV licence for over- 75s should be the responsibility of a government department such as the Department of Work and Pensions.... All of the suggested revisions in the BBC consultation will cause serious damage to the BBC and thus to our nation, democracy and cultural life. Rather than considering how it might deliver the free licence, the BBC and VLV should now argue that the Corporation should not have to pay a penny towards financing this important and valuable benefit.  
Over 60, university professor, NG
18. TV and Radio (and online PSB) services free at the point of reception are a lifeline for many older people who cannot afford subscription services. The quality and range of BBC output would be fatally damaged if it had to bear the entire costs of over 75s licence fees. In addition, those licence-fee payers who continued to have to pay for the BBC would be rightly incensed at the diminution in quality and value for money of services they were paying for.  
Broadcasting regulation, over 60, IP
19. I just don't think the BBC should be the tax collector not that old poor people shouldn't be helped  
Director, over 60, RH

20. The BBC should not be involved in any financial social policy of a government.  
Academic electronic engineer, over 60, SO17
21. I think there should be more analysis as to why the BBC agreed, apparently meekly, to inherit responsibility to fund the licence fee abatement. This was quite simply government sleight of hand. The BBC should not have agreed to get involved with this move. An analogy would be that the government shifted the winter fuel allowance to one of the independent energy suppliers. That would be inconceivable and so should shifting the responsibility for the TV licence fee be.  
NHS consultant surgeon, over 60, MK
22. I believe that anyone on welfare benefits (or no recourse to public funds) should be exempt from paying the licence fee altogether, but I think the shortfall should be made up by the Government out of general taxation.  
BBC TV producer, over 60, N8
23. Decisions on welfare benefits are the responsibility of government/parliament, not the BBC.  
Writer, over 60, SE
24. The requirement should never have been placed upon the BBC in the 2015 licence fee settlement. It was indirectly making the BBC responsible for policy on social security payments. It therefore has left the BBC in a very difficult position to justify changes in such payments which should be a political decision for the Government of the day.  
Retired civil servant, over 60, W5
25. I always believed this was a bad idea but if it is to continue, whether in current or modified form, it should be financed directly by the government. If that doesn't happen, then the BBC will have to grit its teeth and phase the concession out. At the same time Tony Hall needs to make sure that he does not allow unjustified salary increases for his senior staff, of whom one suspects there are still far too many. I am approaching 75.
26. I consider that VLV should not accept the premise of the 2015 TV Licence Fee Settlement. It is quite unacceptable that the BBC should be asked to take on the public social policy of free TV licences for the elderly. This is a matter of public policy and should be funded by the Government from taxation. VLV should make this point strongly in its reply to the consultation.  
Over 60, retired, EH
27. The government should pay this. It's a benefit. The BBC Charter requires it to make programmes and provide services, not cut the Government's deficit.  
Retired, over 60, N16
28. The BBC should not be in the business of welfare. That is a government responsibility. The BBC should announce that it is ending the concession totally: that its business is public service broadcasting and that the cost of any plausible concession would wreak significant damage to its output. ... The BBC needs to be robust on this, recognising that weakness will only invite further undermining of its finances by the perpetual enemies of public service broadcasting.  
Retired, charity trustee, over 60, N16

## The age question

1. I believe the age limit for free licences should be 80 or 85 to include the pre-welfare state generation only. Teacher over 60 HP
2. Remove concession from those [over 75s] living with families as their joint income is available to cover the cost. County principal social services officer, over 60, SS.
3. Only households where everyone is over 75 should get the free licence fee. BBC Picture editor, over 60, TW.
4. Since most pensioners are better-off than working-age people, I see no reason for a blanket free licence fee for over 75s. Doctor, over 60, BS.
5. For many old, living on small pensions and no longer able to drive, the BBC is a life line, keeps their brains stimulated and in touch with the world, helps them to stay well. Retired gardener, over 60, RH
6. This is a question of fairness – balancing the important need for the BBC to survive with the needs of poorer people who might find it difficult to pay. There is considerable evidence that many people over 75 these days do not need a concession and could afford to pay. However there are significant numbers of over 75s who are poor and lonely. VLV should not underestimate the importance of the television as a comfort and companion for both for single people living alone or as carers (both of which conditions bring extra living costs in themselves). VLV need to find a solution to balancing the needs of a high quality (and therefore expensive) BBC with those members of our society who are less fortunate. Public sector director, over 60, EC

## Means testing

1. Means test, but disqualify only those paying higher rate tax. Getting older is very expensive in extra heating, transport, food, care, medical expenses (despite the NHS) and people can struggle on £12,000 to £13,000 a year. Many lonely and isolated people rely greatly on TV for companionship and contact with the outside world. But I still feel strongly that the cost should be covered by the DWP not the BBC. Archivist, Over 80. SW
2. Means testing is very expensive to administer and to keep up year after year. Government has a duty to its elderly and should pay the fee. Speech therapist, over 60 PH
3. Means testing would be most unfair to people like me. I pay my own living costs, including carers 4 times a day, domestic, housing costs and repairs, council tax etc. Information officer over 60, CR
4. We should be aware of the administrative difficulties of means testing. The date of entitlement springs to mind as one problem. Which organisation is going to negotiate disputes? It could be an expensive nightmare. Civil servant, over 60 E4
5. As the cost is to be borne by the BBC, means testing, although not ideal, seems to be the fairest. I think the threshold [*should*] be 80 and lined to pension credit. Civil servant, over 60 SE

6. Means testing is often regarded as time consuming and expensive, but it would be worth examining how this is achieved in other countries like Germany. As I understand it, computer software has made the system relatively simple and fool-proof. I also believe that the BBC should make it crystal clear that free licences have always been subsidized by Government and not the BBC who shouldn't be blamed for this policy reversal. Retired, over 60, N6.
7. The best option – completely discontinuing this very badly targeted concession – may not be politically feasible. On that basis, the most realistic option is 3.3 [*limited to those 75+s receiving Pension Credit*] combining this with means testing to retain concessions for the real hardship cases. Professor, over 60, NW.
8. I feel strongly that the licence fee should be means tested and thus payable by those who can afford it – regardless of age. 90 year old, DE
9. Of the options being considered, easily the best is to limit the concession to those in receipt of Pension Credit. This is far from a perfect solution because many households receiving Pension Credit are likely to have higher income (per capita, after housing costs) than many younger households. But it can be implemented at relatively low administrative cost (it involves no new means testing) and, in my view, strikes the best balance. Economist, over 60
10. It seems unreasonable that other members of an elderly resident's household should benefit from fee exemption. A fairer system would be payment of the fee by individual through HRMC collection with exclusions only for those with pension credits. The licence fee would then become a hypothecated tax, to be assessed independently of Treasury or government pressures. Businessman, over 60, TW

## Universality

1. The basic reason why the BBC should charge the full licence fee to everyone is to try to guarantee that the BBC retains full independence from any political interference. The free licence for over 75's, initially, was a political decision taken with, presumably, the purpose of encouraging more votes for that particular government. To remove the free licence for some people would be seen as an attack on "pensioners". Obviously, therefore, it would be extremely difficult to introduce. To avoid any possibility of "political blackmail" a reduction of the licence fee for any particular group should be seen, clearly, to be funded by the Government; not the BBC. To my knowledge, only two PSB's operate in the British Isles. The other PSB is Radio Manx Limited (Manx Radio). Recently, yet again, it has been the subject of a Select Committee investigation. In an appalling Interim Report, which last week was consigned to the waste bin by Tynwald, an attempt was made to introduce gross political interference in its operation. Fortunately the attempt failed. Retired former chairman of radio station, over 60, IM
2. All [these options] mean a lowering of the amount that the BBC receives. I think there should be one fee for all. More is needed [for the BBC]. I receive pension credits. Driver, over 60, TW.
3. I think everyone should pay the same. Older people often have more money, watch more television and watch more BBC content than younger viewers. There are other benefits available for those on the bread line.  
Bank official, over 60, ME

4. Since most TV and radio users are probably the 'older' generation and therefore to keep PSB going the BBC cannot afford to lose money so my preference would be – no free licences, however this will almost certainly lose customers so provided the BBC doesn't have to pay to administer any 'selective option' 3.3 would be my second choice!  
Retired medical laboratory scientist, over 60, HA
5. Carry out research to establish which specific services it might have to cut under each option and to assess licence fee payers' reactions to the specific proposals. As a next step, I recommend some urgent (deliberative and/or qualitative, then quantitative) research to establish the public's preferences for the different options - and for each option, which (combinations of) services they would cut or save - once they understand the trade-off. Clearly, there are likely to be large demographic differences in people's preferences (not least driven by how the concession affects them personally). The research should be designed to measure these. That is perfectly feasible.
6. It seems beyond parody that a BBC licence fee the public think is being used to provide BBC services for them could be used instead to give people free licence fees. It's also ironic that the loss of income would affect that sector of society that uses and cherishes the BBC most – the elderly and the infirm. The license fee should not be used as a tool of government social policy. If they think pensioners should have free TV licences then give them out, but don't hurt the very producer of programmes on that service. Self-employed consultant, over 60, SW.
7. I thought that, to stop the BBC losing money, free licences should be stopped for all over 75s. (I am over 75 myself, by the way.) Age does not necessarily mean very low income. On reflection I do feel however, that it would be harsh to discontinue free licences for those on the lowest incomes. Examination board administrator, over 60, CO
8. The VLV should make it clear that the original concession was a welfare payment and thus paid out of general taxation. There is no logic in transferring this burden to licence payers. One suggestion would be that the additional burden should be clearly hypothecated – that is added to the licence fee which would be stated as, for example:
 

For the BBC's services:	£150
Support for older viewers:	£30
Total:	£180,

 ITV programme executive, over 60, SO.
9. Very many people are unaware of possible changes to their free licence fee. There needs to be more publicity somehow. Retired, over 60, S10

### **People want to continue to pay**

1. I have just had my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday and am, fortunately, comfortably off. I see no reason why I and others like me should receive free TV licences (or free anything else for that matter) and shall continue to pay my licence fee as usual. At a cost of about £3 per week the Licence Fee is incredibly cheap – I don't know how the BBC manages it! Local government officer, over 60, SO.
2. I would gladly pay for a licence. Journalist over 60, PO.

3. Could it be done voluntarily? I would be more than willing. Teacher, over 60, BN.
4. My husband is 79 but I would not dream of claiming a free licence. Retired, over 60, NW
5. I can afford the licence and as a largely housebound person would be willing pay it for the window on the world it gives me. I live alone and benefit hugely from the news, politics, documentaries and light entertainment the BBC makes available.  
Teacher, over 60, SO
6. The present option of not claiming the free licence should remain in place. Alternative levels of discount should be considered. The BBC needs to look hard at its spending on “star performers”, senior management and other projects with limited benefit to the audience.  
Electrical engineer, over 60, SP.
7. I am fortunate that my income in retirement (I am 89) is sufficient to allow me to pay for a licence. In fact, when the Government decided to extract money from the BBC income (“to pay for the World Service” and also of course to reduce competition for the commercial channels and their lobbyists) I sent a cheque to the BBC to pay the full licence fee. Sadly, the “government’s” regulations prevented the BBC from taking my money! Industrial physicist, 89, PO.

### **General points about the BBC**

1. The level of the licence fee should be increased to compensate for the disastrous below-inflation increases, and freezes imposed on us in recent years. Music recording producer, over 60, UB
2. The question is how to reduce the growing threat from the commercialisation of British television. Netflix, Sky and even the publicly owned Channel 4. Architect, Over 60, RH
3. I believe that the government’s policy is to cut spending everywhere on principle. Most importantly, the government wishes to damage, and ultimately destroy the BBC by any and all means at its disposal. The Tories have always contained members violently opposed to the BBC. Local government clerk, over 60, S.
4. The BBC is an important part of the national culture and must be protected from the hostile actions of those who wish to see it dismantled and its influence on national life weakened.  
Head Teacher, over 60, TN.
5. I strongly feel that the BBC licence should continue in order to ensure that it survives in a very commercial market and remains advert-free. Retired, over 60, SV.
6. For what the licence fee covers, the BBC’s costs are good value and worthwhile, without continuous breaks for adverts which is a bonus. I am happy to pay for that privilege. Teacher, over 60, B.
7. The relationship between the BBC’s revenue and the television licence fee is far more attenuated than the questionnaire implies. The whole legal system needs revising. It is the Secretary of State for Digital Culture Media and Sport in association with the Treasury who ultimately decides the size of the BBC’s Annual Grant-in-Aid. Moreover, the Grant-in-Aid also requires the BBC to spend part of its Grant-in-Aid on non-UK broadcasting or online activities,

which are properly the responsibility of the Foreign Office, such as the World Service, the Monitoring of overseas broadcasts, and supporting the British film industry. The BBC should lobby the Government to introduce a more transparent and fiscally progressive taxation system for funding the BBC. Professor, over 60, PO

8. Recent news about the costs of renewing the set of East Enders is not encouraging with regard to the BBC's approach to its spending and management. The BBC needs to be seen to be keeping its own house in order and to save costs where possible. Clerical officer, over 60, SP.
9. I am MOST unhappy about the BBC bias in favour of Brexit and now prefer Sky News. BBC World is still OK. Radiotherapist, over 60, SA.

## **Other comments**

1. Hotels and care homes with many TVs should require more than one license.  
BBC Staff, over 60, NW
2. It is important that this is not seen exclusively in economic terms. Access to public radio and TV is a significant factor in the social inequality debate.  
International civil servant, over 60, MK