

Briefing: BBC Scotland's decision to end River City and close its Dumbarton Studios

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee evidence session

Thursday 29th May

About Equity

Equity is the largest creative industries trade union with 50,000 members united in the fight for fair terms and conditions across the performing arts and entertainment. Our members are actors, singers, dancers, designers, directors, models, stage managers, stunt performers, circus performers, puppeteers, comedians, voice artists, supporting artists and variety performers. They work on stage, on TV and film sets, on the catwalk, in film studios, in recording studios, in night clubs and in circus tents.

Updates for Committee members on the key issues at play –

The BBC's Public Broadcasting Duty

- The BBC's Public Service Broadcasting duty is about more than chasing audience figures. Eg point 4 of the BBC Charter: **"To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom"** [Mission, values and public purposes](#)
- The four new and three returning dramas the BBC has commissioned to replace River City consist of: 5x **crime dramas** (Counsels, Granite Harbour, Vigil, Shetland, Mint); 2x **gang violence dramas** (Grams, The Young Team). These new shows will join a roster of very similar dramas on issues of crime and justice that are offered to viewers all the time. But River City is unique on Scottish television. Its plot lines and content are more varied and represent Scottish culture in a way that isn't replicated elsewhere. There are a significant number of license fee payers and viewers who want to watch River City, does the BBC not have a duty to these viewers too?
- Equity believes the BBC is sacrificing local, community focused drama such as River City in favour of comedy and 'high-end' drama series that they can resell commercially to global distributors. In a 2025 Comedy Economic Impact Report, **the BBC stated that it was selling (distributing) 13,000+ hours of comedy programmes overseas**, in particular focusing on audience growth in places like China.
- In December 2022, Tim Davie made a [speech](#) to the Royal Television Society where he made it clear that **commercial deals have to be done to fill the gap left by the drop in license fee**

funding, giving the example of partnering with Disney on Doctor Who. **It is clear there is an imperative to focus on productions that can be exploited commercially.** However, this does not relieve the BBC of its wider Public Broadcasting Duty. The needs of River City viewers are just as important and valuable as those of viewers that BBC can turn into commercial revenue. Perhaps more so because there is nothing else like River City currently on television.

- The number of programmed hours for Scottish audiences is less under the new proposals 33 hours of TV from River City – the three new shows, Grams, Counsels and The Young Team will produce 18 hours of TV – 15 less hours of TV.
- Audience demographics - how will the River City audience specifically (that blend of schoolchildren, families, grandparents) be served by the proposed new dramas?
- Are BBC Scotland more interested in monetising new short drama series for selling outside of Scotland? Their press release announcing the axing of River City implies this is the case. In it Hayley Valentine said: "this is the right time to invest in the next generation of high-impact drama series from across Scotland showcasing storytelling across the UK. Our goal is to grow Scotland further on the global drama map – with a slate of world-class productions that set the standard not just here but internationally too." Louise Thornton said: "Our three new dramas, alongside the returning drama favourites, reflect the increasing shift in audience demand for series rooted in Scotland which play to audiences across the UK...and beyond." [River City to come to an end in 2026 as BBC plans next generation of drama production in Scotland with three new titles](#)
- In the same press release, Louise Thornton said "the show leaves a tremendous legacy behind," but did not elaborate on what the BBC thinks that legacy is. What exactly does the BBC think the legacy of River City is, and therefore what is being lost?

Economic impact on Scotland & the Studios at Dumbarton

- In the BBC six year plan "[The BBC Across the UK – 6 year plan \(2022-2027\)](#)" they commitment to "**expand our physical studios operations in Glasgow**":

6. Production hubs and studios

We will expand the BBC Studios bases in Bristol, Cardiff and Glasgow, and create a new Children's commercial production base in Salford. We will expand our physical studios operations in Glasgow, and explore strategic partnerships in other UK cities, including Belfast. We will partner with local communities, councils and education providers to develop technical skills locally to operate our studios.

What has changed in in three years that left the BBC's six year plan so woefully out of date? Why is the BBC no longer investing in studio facilities in Glasgow?

Why have BBC Scotland spent over £1m fixing the RAAC issue in the studios roof, £1m of license payers' money, to then not renew the lease?

Training & Apprenticeships

- Has the BBC carried out an impact assessment into the how the loss of the Dumbarton studios will affect training, employment and the ability for their other shows to benefit from a permanent studios?
- What is the BBC's commitment to cultural infrastructure in Scotland, to ensure that the opportunities to work in and produce uniquely Scottish drama in Scotland remains available to workers in Scotland from all backgrounds?

Promotion & championing of award winning show

- Just three years ago, BBC Scotland was celebrating the 20th anniversary of River City with a special episode and an entertainment show called 'River City: 20 Year Celebration', plus a media release celebrating the awards the show has won [Celebrating River City - faces from the past and present mark the 20th anniversary of BBC Scotland's long-running drama - Media Centre](#). Why has that changed so markedly? Where's the investment, promotion and celebration of the show?

Job losses and Trade Union consultation

- The BBC told Equity members in their 18 March meeting that the new shows being commissioned would offer job opportunities for work in the sector who are losing long term roles at River City. Indeed, in the BBC's press release announcing the axing of River City, Louise Thornton said "...the new productions we've announced will offer further opportunities." However, many of the shows already have writers and production companies assigned, and the three recommissioned dramas already have major parts cast, with writers and production in place. What opportunities therefore does the BBC think it is providing to those losing their jobs on River City?
- On 18 March the BBC convened a meeting of cast and crew at River City at 1pm to inform them of the axing of the show and that they were at risk of redundancy. However, the press release announcing the cancellation and the replacement shows was also issued at 1pm. This left family members finding out about this huge change to their livelihoods through the news, and they were left to try and contact cast and crew whilst in the meeting. Does the BBC believe this is an appropriate way to treat the workers for whom they have a duty of care?
- The BBC claims that the need to speak to those working on River City first, was the reason they did not inform the CEEAC committee about the plans to axe River City during their annual report to the Scottish Parliament in January. However, the circumstances in which they released the news of River City's cancellation before the cast and crew were told

suggests the BBC was more concerned with managing public affairs than their duty of care to those working on River City.

- Has the BBC carried out an equality impact assessment on how staff at risk of redundancy will be affected by the closure of the Dumbarton Studios?
- Employers have a duty to consult with their employees at the earliest opportunity when there is a risk of redundancy. Employment law is clear that this must happen whilst redundancy and restructuring plans are still in “a formative stage”, as consultation with employees must be meaningful.¹ Announcing redundancy plans once they are fully worked out is in breach of employment law. Limb B workers (e.g. River City cast members who are freelancers) are not entitled to this, but any permanent or fixed term employees on the show and at the studios are entitled to this.
- Does the BBC believe it complied with the law and entered into consultation with its workers in a “meaningful, real, and in good faith” manner as required by law?²
- What, if any, changes to the BBC’s plans have been suggested by those affected by the redundancy process, and has the BBC accepted any of these changes, thereby demonstrating that the consultation is ‘meaningful’?

Charter renewal 2027 and the Scottish Government’s consultative role

- Equity is calling for significant additional funding for the BBC, to restore the 30% real terms cuts to its budgets by the Conservative government in Westminster. Alongside additional funding, we wish to see the Charter Renewal process advance an agenda of devolution and democratisation, ensuring that BBC production better serves license fee payers across the four nations and the regions of the UK, and that the workforce, communities and audiences have a stronger role in governance and decision-making.
- Equity urges the Scottish Government and Parliament to take advantage of the current consultation over the 2027 Charter renewal to press for further devolution of BBC decision making to Scotland and more importantly, for commitments to investment and spending decisions that support good quality jobs in Scotland, and that require consultation with trade unions before decisions of this nature are made in future.³

¹ (*R v British Coal Corporation ex p Price* [1994] IRLR 72)

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³ The BBC’s Charter ends on 31 December 2027. The Scottish Parliament, along with the Scottish Government, has a formal consultative role in the process of reviewing the BBC charter. The Smith Commission requires that the following happens: • DCMS consult the Scottish Government on the draft terms of reference for the Charter Review in advance of their publication (1st half 2025) • DCMS consult the Scottish Government throughout the process of reviewing the Charter • The Scottish Government lay the draft Charter and Framework Agreement before the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Parliament can do a ‘take note’ debate

‘Decline’ of linear television?

Ofcom’s most recent *Media Nation Scotland* report⁴ provides important evidence for the maintenance of TV continuing dramas in Scotland, including:

- People in Scotland watch the most broadcast TV on TV of any nation in the UK, with an average of 2 hours 48 minutes spent watching each day.
- This had only fallen by 13 minutes per day since 2022.
- The final episode of BBC One’s drama *Happy Valley* was the most-watched programme in Scotland in 2023, with an average audience of just under 1 million viewers.
- In 2023, the main five PSB channels accounted for a combined 51.1% share of the total broadcast TV audience in Scotland.
- Before the *River City* cancellation, seven in ten PSB viewers in Scotland said PSBs overall performed ‘well’ 5 in providing ‘programmes made for UK audiences’ (70%), ‘appeal[ing] to a wide range of different audiences’ (69%), and ‘a wide range of different types of programmes, such as drama, comedy, entertainment or sport’ (69%), all broadly in line with the other nations.

on the content (2027) • DCMS consult the Scottish Government before recommending to His Majesty in Council that the draft Charter is granted (2027) [taken from Scottish Parliament CEEAC/S6/25/3/3 [Paper-3--23-January](#)]

⁴ OFCOM, Media Nations Scotland Profile 2024, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/multi-sector/media-nations/2024/media-nations-2024-scotland.pdf?v=373802>