

**Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee**  
**Thursday 15 May 2025**  
**16th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)**

## **BBC Scotland**

1. The Committee has agreed to follow up on its [23 January 2025](#) meeting with the BBC with a further meeting with the Director of BBC Scotland and her colleagues on 29 May 2025, and a meeting this week with the performing arts and entertainment trade union [Equity](#).
2. There was a [member's debate on 24 April 2025](#) on “BBC Scotland's Decision to End River City and Close its Dumbarton Studios”, informed by motion [S6M-16978](#), lodged by Neil Bibby MSP on 27 March 2025.
3. The wider context of scrutiny of the Parliament's scrutiny of BBC Scotland can be found in a [cover note and SPICe briefing paper for the 23 January 2025 meeting](#), there was an article on the BBC Culture section of its website in 2022 on the question of [Are soaps in danger of extinction?](#), and BBC Scotland issued an announcement on [River City to come to an end in 2026 as BBC plans next generation of drama production in Scotland with three new titles](#) on 18 March 2025.
4. The Committee recognises that the Parliament has no role in the operational or editorial decisions of BBC Scotland.
5. The Committee will hear evidence at this week's meeting from—
  - Lynda Rooke, President, Equity
  - Frank Gallagher, Actor and member of the River City cast
  - Paul W Fleming, General Secretary, Equity
6. Attached at annexe A is a written submission from Equity.

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**May 2025**

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

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee evidence session

Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> 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.

### Key points for Committee members

- On 18 March 2025 the BBC Scotland announced its decision to decommission River City, Scotland's only homegrown continuing drama series, with the final episodes planned to air in September 2026.
- River City has been on air for 23 years. It currently has a core cast of 28 actors and provides work for dozens of Scottish actors every year. This follows the decommissioning of BBC continuing dramas Holby City and Doctors.
- Equity is concerned that the BBC omitted to inform the Scottish Parliament's Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture (CEEAC) committee of its plan to close River City during its Annual Report to parliament on 23 January 2025. BBC Scotland is obliged under the Charter to update the Scottish Parliament annually on its activities.<sup>1</sup>
- BBC Scotland had stated that the lease for the River City production site would come to an end in September 2026, and had told cast and crew in a meeting announcing the cancellation of the show that the landlord had other plans for the site, and that this was a major factor in their decision to

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<sup>1</sup> Following the Smith Commission, a Memorandum of Understanding was agreed between the BBC, the UK Government's Department of Media, Culture and Sport, the Scottish Government and (through a motion agreed on 23 June 2015) the Scottish Parliament. The MoU committed the BBC to lay annual reports and accounts in the Scottish Parliament and to submit evidence and/or appear before Committees of the Scottish Parliament on matters relating to Scotland in the same way it does for Committees of the UK Parliament. This arrangement was subsequently incorporated into the BBC's Charter. *[taken from Scottish Parliament CEEAC/S6/25/3/3 [Paper-3-23-January](#)]*

end River City. However, It was recently revealed that the landlord of the site where River City is filmed was keen to extend the lease to BBC Scotland.

- Equity notes that this decision will lead to job losses, including the core cast of 28 actors and dozens of other parts for Scottish actors each year. It will undermine the ability of Scottish actors to sustain their careers in the Scottish labour market, reducing skills, capacity, education and apprenticeship opportunities nationally. Together this will disproportionately affect the lives of Scottish performers, including those from working class backgrounds.
- It will also remove a key continuing drama focused on the lives of working-class Scottish communities. A report for Ofcom found that soaps and dramas offer *“a rich territory for diverse representation and portrayal, especially big soaps and popular dramas, which provide visibility, tackle difficult issues, and help inform and educate others.”*<sup>2</sup>
- River City currently has 33 broadcast hours of television per annum, reduced from 38 hours in 2023.<sup>3</sup> The three new replacement shows announced by the BBC together total only 20 broadcast hours of television, a loss of 13 hours content. There are no guarantees from the BBC on how much of the production of these new series will be based in Scotland, or of minimum Scottish staffing requirements.
- Equity is calling on BBC Scotland to ringfence the £9m River City budget for drama and scripted content in Scotland.
- As the UK government engages in BBC Charter Renewal, this cancellation also raises deeper questions about how Scotland's national needs are addressed. As a public service broadcaster, the BBC (and BBC Scotland) should be investing in and nurturing their in-house productions which employ homegrown talent and sustain thriving television production hubs outside of London.

## Topics that the panel would be keen to discuss on 15<sup>th</sup> May

- Why River City is so important to Scottish performers.
- The importance of consulting with trade unions in advance of these decisions.

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<sup>2</sup> Kantar Media, *Representation and portrayal of audiences on BBC television* (25 October 2018) [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/124252/kantar-bbc-qualitative-research.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/124252/kantar-bbc-qualitative-research.pdf) [accessed 6 March 2019]

<sup>3</sup> [Scottish soap River City to change formats - with fewer broadcast hours per year](#)

- The impact that the cancellation of the programme will have on who can find work as a performer in Scotland.
- The impact of this decision on the performing arts and entertainment landscape in Scotland.
- Whether this decision can be justified by a decline in linear television.
- The inadequacy of the proposed replacement programmes.
- Equity's campaign to save River City.
- What guarantees the BBC should be providing in the aftermath of this decision.
- Equity's wider demands in relation to the BBC and BBC Scotland.

## **Further background**

### **The important contribution of River City**

- River City provides an important route into TV for many Scottish performers, who report getting their first job on River City. It acts as a as a training ground for those starting out in the industry
- The £9m annual budget for the programme was excellent value given the hours of programming produced throughout the year.
- River City is well-loved by Scottish audiences and enjoys strong ratings, but it is also critically lauded, having won Best Drama at the Royal Television Society Scotland 2023 awards for its 20th anniversary episode. Over 10,000 people signed Equity's petition to save River City within four days of the BBC's announcement.
- Continuing dramas offer an unusual level of job security in an industry that is otherwise characterised by precarity. As a result, they provide important opportunities to working-class performers, who would otherwise be unable to sustain themselves in an industry defined by short term project-based, precarious work.
- River City and the BBC Studios at Dumbarton currently offer a number of apprenticeships and skills retraining programmes to support access to the industry for a diverse range of groups. One such programme based at Dumbarton is the Electrician Conversion Programme which supports retraining

of electricians into the TV & film industry. The BBC has not explained how it will fully replace these programmes.

### Equity's campaign to 'Save River City'

- Equity is lobbying for BBC Scotland to revisit its decision to end River City and close its Dumbarton studios.
- BBC Scotland must recognise its public broadcasting duty and explain how its current proposals to replace River City will provide the same number of good jobs, training opportunities and apprenticeships to performers in Scotland.
- Scotland's Culture Secretary Angus Robertson has backed Equity's 'Save River City' campaign, alongside Jackie Baillie, Neil Bibby and Pam Duncan-Glancy who all visited the set of River City and signed placards saying 'I back the Save River City campaign' on 26 March. 37 MSPs from all major parties now back the Scottish Parliament motion — S6M-16978.
- Equity is calling on BBC Scotland to ringfence the £9m River City budget for drama and scripted content in Scotland.
- More broadly, 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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 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 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](#)]

## **‘Decline’ of linear television?**

Ofcom's most recent *Media Nation Scotland* report<sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>5</sup> 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>