



National Audit Office



REPORT

# The BBC World Service's savings programmes

BBC

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# **CORRECTION SLIP**

**Title: The BBC World Service's savings programmes**

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## **Correction one:**

Page 7, Summary, paragraph 9:

### **Text currently reads:**

It has also made further savings across all three of its savings programmes by, for example, reducing some of its productions, relocating some roles from London to other countries and reducing the size of some of its support functions. The Service had to ensure it met the requirements of its FCDO funding as set out in its licence, including agreeing any closures with FCDO and the BBC Board. It estimates that these changes have enabled it to reduce its workforce by around 480 posts by September 2025 (paragraphs 2.3 to 2.6).

### **Text should read:**

It has also made further savings across all three of its savings programmes by, for example, reducing some of its productions, relocating some roles from London to other countries and reducing the size of some of its support functions. The Service had to ensure it met the requirements of its FCDO funding as set out in its licence, including agreeing any closures of its language services with FCDO and the BBC Board. The terms of the FCDO's grant prevent closure of entire language services, unless agreed with the Foreign Secretary, meaning the Service needed to retain at least one of its TV, radio or digital platforms in each service. The Service estimates that these changes have enabled it to reduce its workforce by around 480 posts by September 2025 (paragraphs 2.3 to 2.6).

Date of correction: 8 December 2025

## Key facts

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**£358mn**

total World Service (the Service) funding (budgeted), 2025-26

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**£54.2mn**

cumulative total amount the Service aimed to save through its three savings programmes between 2022 and March 2026

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**21%**

real-terms reduction in the Service's funding between 2021-22 and 2025-26

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**£137 million** Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) funding for the Service in 2025-26, a 31% increase from the previous year

**£221 million** funding from the BBC licence fee, 2025-26

**480** estimate of the reduction in full-time equivalent posts across the Service due to the implementation of its savings programmes so far

**43** the current number of World Service language services including English. These Services offer a range of digital, TV and radio content<sup>1</sup>

**47 million** reduction in audience reach between 2021-22 and 2022-23 following TV and radio closures as part of phase one of its savings programmes. The BBC estimates that 30 million of this fall was due to output closures, while the remainder was caused by external factors over which it did not have control

**5 million** reduction in audience reach between 2022-23 and 2024-25. This meant audiences remained relatively stable, falling by 1.6% in this period

**18** number of digital-only language services following the savings programmes; an increase from 11 in 2022

**Note**

1 This includes a pilot Polish language digital news offer which was opened in June 2025.

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# Summary

**1** The BBC World Service (the Service) is an international broadcasting service run by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and covered by the BBC's Royal Charter.<sup>1</sup> The Service is primarily aimed at audiences outside the United Kingdom, to provide accurate, impartial and independent news and programming in English and other languages. It currently provides these services in 42 other languages.<sup>2</sup> In 2024-25, the Service had a weekly global audience of 313 million and, as of July 2025, employed around 1,657 people. As set out in its licence, the Service supports the BBC's mission and public purposes but primarily contributes to the BBC's fifth public purpose to reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world.

**2** The Service is part of the BBC's News division and funded by a combination of the BBC licence fee and grant funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). In 2025-26, FCDO provided £137 million to the Service, with £221 million coming from the licence fee. However, the Service's total budget has fallen 21% in real terms between 2021-22 and 2025-26, mainly due to reductions in contributions from the licence fee as part of the BBC's management of an overall reduction in licence fee income.

**3** As part of wider BBC savings, the Service has implemented its savings programmes in three phases to reduce its expenditure in line with reductions to its budget. Commencing in 2022, the savings programmes have seen the Service aim to reduce expenditure cumulatively by £54.2 million through workforce reductions, closures of traditional TV and radio broadcasts and other savings such as reducing the size of its business support function. At the same time as making savings, the Service intended to transform its offering to become more digitally based, aligning with the BBC's wider 'digital-first' strategy. This entailed the closure of broadcast TV and radio outputs while focusing on its digital outputs such as social media and websites. The Service aimed to acquire new digital audiences while also migrating existing broadcast audiences to its digital services. As part of this, the Service restructured its language services in 2022. This included moving from organising its language services by region to instead bringing together services that served audiences with similar market needs, such as comparable levels of internet access, consumption levels on traditional broadcast platforms, political stability and access to independent news coverage.

<sup>1</sup> The Royal Charter is the constitutional basis for the BBC. It sets out the BBC's Object, Mission and Public Purposes. The Charter also outlines the Corporation's governance and regulatory arrangements, including the role and composition of the BBC Board.

<sup>2</sup> This includes a pilot Polish language news digital offer which was opened in June 2025.

**4** The Service is implementing its savings programmes at a time when stakeholders have emphasised the importance of the Service's role, especially in developing countries with repressed media. According to the BBC's own research, levels of media freedom have declined in 149 countries since 2021.<sup>3</sup> In many regions, the BBC is facing greater competition from Chinese and Russian state media, which the BBC's research found results in users being more likely to hold non-democratic views than BBC users. The landscape of global news services has also been altered significantly by the US government's decision in March 2025 to close the US Agency for Global Media, which provided similar content to the Service globally.

### **Scope and purpose of the report**

**5** This report assesses the Service's progress with implementing its savings programmes and the consequent impact on its performance. It does not provide an assessment of the value for money of the World Service overall. We have drawn recommendations from our findings that we intend will support the Service, and the BBC more widely, when implementing future business change programmes, including savings programmes.

**6** The report covers:

- why the Service needed to make savings and progress to date (Part One);
- the Service's approach to making savings (Part Two); and
- the impact of the Service's savings programmes (Part Three).

### **Key findings**

#### Rationale for the savings programmes

**7** **The Service's savings programmes had a clear rationale that was strategically aligned with the BBC's wider aims.** The Service's savings programmes are part of the BBC's overall savings plans aimed at addressing a funding gap following the government's 2022 licence fee settlement, which meant the licence fee would be held flat in 2022-23 and 2023-24, with no links to inflation, followed by four years of increases linked to inflation. The Service's intention to transform its offer to become more digitally based is also in line with the BBC's overall 'digital-first' strategy, which it launched in 2022 (paragraphs 1.14 to 1.16 and paragraph 2.7).

<sup>3</sup> *BBC Global Impact and Influence Research 2025*, page 5. The BBC told us that this information was derived from the Reporters without Borders annual press freedom index.

## Progress of the savings programmes

**8 The Service achieved most of its planned savings in the first two phases of its programmes but is behind schedule with its third phase.** By the end of the planned deadline of March 2023, the Service estimated that it had delivered £26.6 million in planned savings compared to its target of £28.5 million. The Service remained within its overall budget for 2023-24 through short-term mitigations in other areas, despite not delivering all of its savings plans. It delivered the remaining £1.9 million by March 2024. By September 2025, the Service had achieved £13.3 million of further savings in its second phase, compared with an initial target of £17.4 million, with the remaining savings to be delivered subsequently. The Service planned to make a further £11.1 million of savings in 2025-26, with these initially planned to be delivered by October 2025. However, the Service reported that as of September 2025 it had only delivered £5.0 million of savings against this target. The Service told us that this was because it had begun to implement its savings programme later than initially planned, mainly due to the need to incorporate these savings into the wider BBC News savings and transformation plans (paragraph 1.17).

**9 The Service has made savings primarily through closures to TV and radio outputs, leading to workforce reductions.** In 2022-23, as part of its phase one savings programme, the Service closed radio outputs in 13 languages, including Arabic and Indonesian, and TV outputs in six languages, including Urdu and Somali. The Service considered a range of factors when deciding which platforms to close, including whether audiences had access to impartial news from other providers and how likely it was that audiences would move to its digital platforms if it closed TV and radio stations. It has also made further savings across all three of its savings programmes by, for example, reducing some of its productions, relocating some roles from London to other countries and reducing the size of some of its support functions. The Service had to ensure it met the requirements of its FCDO funding as set out in its licence, including agreeing any closures of its language services with FCDO and the BBC Board. The terms of the FCDO's grant prevent closure of entire language services, unless agreed with the Foreign Secretary, meaning the Service needed to retain at least one of its TV, radio or digital platforms in each service. The Service estimates that these changes have enabled it to reduce its workforce by around 480 posts by September 2025 (paragraphs 2.3 to 2.6).

**10 The Service's 2022 restructuring of its language services did not achieve all the intended outcomes and has since been superseded by a new regional international model for BBC News.** The Service expected its restructuring to allow teams to share ideas and journalism more widely. However, by October 2024, the Service found that the new structure had not achieved all its intended outcomes and presented challenges that undermined effective delivery of its strategic objectives. In February 2025, the BBC announced its plans for a new regional international operating model across its international operations, including the Service. The BBC expects that this new model will allow for greater collaboration across staff in each of its regions, as well as enhanced regional leadership and accountability, with more responsibilities devolved from London to the new regional groupings (paragraphs 2.8 to 2.10 and paragraph 2.22).

## The Service's approach to making savings

### **11 There were weaknesses in the Service's approach to setting up and implementing its savings programmes.**

- The Service used BBC business case templates for redundancy and restructuring for its savings programmes, and obtained relevant approval for the business cases. However, these business cases did not meet NAO-identified good practice. They lacked options analysis, had poorly developed risk assessments and in some places contained inaccuracies. They also did not set key performance indicators against which to measure progress for non-financial objectives, such as the impact on content production. The Service did not clearly document its decision-making process for which TV and radio stations to close, so has not been able to show evidence that it ultimately applied a clear and consistent rationale (paragraphs 2.13 to 2.14).
- The Service's planning for both its savings and digital ambitions lacked sufficient detail to ensure that its aims were achievable. While the Service did undertake some planning for the first phase of its savings, the project management plan was prepared in February 2023, five months after the sign-off of the central business case, partly because of delays in establishing governance arrangements. There was less detailed project planning for the second or third phases. The Service also lacked a detailed plan for how its high-level aims to achieve digital growth would be achieved at an individual language service level, with teams left unsure on what good looked like (paragraph 2.15 and paragraph 2.17).
- The Service took a weak approach to managing risks. Initial risk assessments lacked detail and there was inconsistent monitoring of risks during phases. There is also limited evidence that the Service took action to manage risks (paragraph 2.19).
- The Service's monitoring of its savings progress was hampered by the complexity of its finance system. It therefore relied on estimates instead of actual information, meaning there was a risk that it would not be able to identify areas of savings that were off track (paragraph 2.18).
- The Service did not complete a planned strategic review to develop a framework for assessing value for money and guiding decisions on services, platforms and content, due to the urgent need to implement savings, which may have contributed to some of the weaknesses observed (paragraph 2.12).

**12 The Service has already identified and begun acting on some of the above issues with the management of its savings programmes, although its process for making improvements where issues are identified were not well developed.**

The Service has dedicated time to understanding how processes could be improved in future through lessons-learned activities. In addition, the BBC's Whistleblowing team identified issues with poor-quality documentation and analysis to support key decisions in phase one of the Service's savings programmes. This followed concerns being raised with the NAO (and internally within the BBC) in relation to BBC Arabic, with regards to the management of its restructuring as part of its savings programmes. However, the Service has been inconsistent in the timeliness and extent to which it has addressed issues identified. For example, the phase one lessons-learned exercise identified that its planning had not been as effective as it could have been and that this had impacted the effectiveness of its delivery. Despite this, the business cases for phase two and three lacked detailed plans and further reduced the level of detailed planning compared to phase one (paragraphs 2.20 to 2.22).

The impact of its savings programmes

**13 The Service's monitoring means it is not possible to make a balanced assessment of the impact of its savings programmes.** The Service's monitoring of its savings programmes has focused on financial metrics without considering the impact on non-financial objectives, such as the impact of those programmes on the amount of new content that it produces. The Service also has not linked costs, outputs and outcomes in a way that enables a clear assessment of the impacts of the spending programmes on different aspects of its business. The Service collects significant data on audience-related metrics. However, it has not adequately tracked how its changes to inputs through its savings programmes – such as reducing traditional broadcasting and investing in digital platforms – have impacted on outputs, such as the amount of content it produces and broadcasts, or on outcomes, such as audience levels at a language service level (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.3).

**14 Audience numbers have fallen since the Service implemented its savings programmes, although some of this reduction is due to factors outside of the Service's control.** In 2021-22, the service reached its peak audience to date, – 365 million – in part due to increased news interest during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2021-22 and 2024-25, following the implementation of its savings programmes, audiences fell by 52 million (14%) to 313 million. The BBC attributes the majority of its audience reduction to output closures, but estimates that some of the reduction is due to wider market factors, such as a decline from peak levels of news consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic and declining media freedoms in some countries. There has been significant variation in performance between language services over this period. While eight language services increased their audiences between 2021-22 and 2024-25, 33 language services saw a decrease, 19 of which experienced a decrease of more than a fifth of their audience levels. The Service used its audience data to estimate the expected audience loss from the closure of radio and TV outputs during phase one of its savings programmes. However, it did not set out clear timeframes or provide supporting calculations for its estimates relating to expected digital growth during phase one of its savings programmes or expected audiences losses following the implementation of phase two. Therefore, it has not been possible to conclude whether the falls in audiences between 2021-22 and 2024-25 were better or worse than it anticipated (paragraphs 3.3 and 3.6 to 3.9).

**15 The audiences for the Service's digital content have reduced, indicating that it is yet to achieve a switch in audiences from TV and radio outputs.** The Service's overall digital audience has fallen by 11% since 2021-22, a smaller fall than its TV and radio services, which have fallen by around a fifth in the same period. In 2024-25, the Service's overall digital audiences increased for the first time since the start of its savings programmes, which the Service has assessed as partly driven by its focus on digital outputs. Language services that have become digital-only have seen a significantly greater fall in their digital audiences than other language services. Most of this is due to significant falls in the audiences for three Nigerian language services which became digital only: Igbo, Yoruba and Pidgin. The Service told us that these falls in audiences were primarily due to changes in Facebook's algorithm to deprioritise news content. The Service expected that audience losses due to closures of TV and radio outputs would be partly mitigated by some audiences migrating to its digital platforms; however, it has not reviewed its audience data to determine whether it indicates that these expectations have proved to be accurate (paragraphs 3.10 to 3.11).

**16 The BBC's 2024-25 global audience survey showed that the World Service continued to be perceived globally as the most reliable, trustworthy and independent international news provider.** The Service aims to be rated higher than relevant international news competitors on measures of reliability, trustworthiness and independence. The Service has maintained first position in all categories in 2024-25, although the percentage of positive responses for each was between 5 and 6 percentage points lower than in 2021-22. The Service's own analysis shows that its international news competitors have seen similar falls in positive responses (paragraph 3.12 and Figure 14).

## Conclusion

**17** The BBC World Service plays a vital role across the globe at a time where there is an increasing amount of misinformation and curtailment to press freedoms in many countries. Its most recent survey showed that it continued to hold a reputation for independence and trustworthiness. Wider funding pressures have necessitated spending reductions and while it has achieved most of these, primarily through output closures, its later phases of savings are behind schedule. Clear gaps in its approach to the savings programmes are likely to have contributed to these delays but also mean it may have missed opportunities to make savings in a way that resulted in better outcomes, such as greater migration of audiences to its digital platforms. The Service has not tracked costs and savings in a way that enables it to demonstrate how the savings have affected outputs and audience outcomes. This makes it harder for the Service to draw lessons to feed into its latest restructuring as part of the wider changes to the BBC's global news operation. It will be vital for the Service to learn from its experiences implementing savings to consider where taking a more structured approach could enable it to reduce expenditure in a way that ensures it maximises value for money.

## Recommendations

**18** The Service's long-term future funding model will be considered as part of the government review of the BBC's Royal Charter, which is due to conclude at the end of 2027. It is likely, however, that the Service will continue to operate with a degree of uncertainty over its funding, which means that future savings programmes could be necessary. In this context, we recommend that the BBC World Service should:

- a** consider how it can make better use of its extensive data on audience reach, such as the insight this can provide into audiences switching from traditional to digital platforms, to refine its assumptions about audience behaviour and ensure examples of good practice and learnings can be applied across multiple language services;
- b** ensure that future savings and transformation programmes have clear non-financial metrics, or set out why it is not appropriate to do so, from the outset, which are then tracked during implementation;
- c** review the level of documentation and options considered by key decision-makers to ensure that planned changes being reviewed are likely to represent best value for money and provide sufficient clarity for why decisions were made; and
- d** update its cost and monitoring systems to enable better linking of cost information, outputs (such as amount of content produced) and audience outcomes to support a more granular picture of value for money across the World Service portfolio.