



National Audit Office




REPORT

The BBC World Service's savings programmes

BBC

SESSION 2024–2026
19 NOVEMBER 2025
HC 1382



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National Audit Office

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed on 17 November 2025

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National Audit Act 1983 for presentation to the House of
Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

12 November 2025

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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



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The National Audit Office study team consisted of:


Colm Molloy, Esther Namukasa, Rachel Nash, Alice Stannard, Ashleigh Thorius and Tunmise Usikalu, under the direction of Simon Bittlestone and Louise Bladen.

For further information about the National Audit Office please contact:

National Audit Office
Press Office
157-197 Buckingham Palace Road
Victoria
London
SW1W 9SP

 020 7798 7400

 www.nao.org.uk

 @NAOorguk

Key facts

£358mn

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

£54.2mn

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

21%

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

£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 content¹

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.

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.¹ 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.² 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.

¹ 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.

² 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 2021.³ 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).

³ *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.

Part One

Why the BBC World Service needed to make savings and progress to date

1.1 This part of the report sets out:

- the role and purpose of the BBC World Service (the Service);
- how the Service is funded and why it has needed to make savings; and
- the Service's progress in making savings.

The role and purpose of the World Service

1.2 The Service is an international broadcasting service run by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and established under the BBC's Royal Charter. It 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.⁴ BBC Monitoring – which tracks, summarises and analyses local news and media sources around the world – is part of the World Service group, but operates separately from the Service.⁵ The Service supports the BBC's mission and public purposes as agreed by the BBC World Service Licence, but primarily contributes to the BBC's fifth public purpose, which is to reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world.⁶

1.3 Many stakeholders have emphasised the importance of the Service's role, especially in developing countries with repressed media, where people struggle to access reliable news. According to BBC research conducted in February 2025, media freedoms have declined in 149 countries since 2021.⁷ One of the Service's core objectives is to provide news in countries that have low media freedoms, with eight out of its top 10 markets lying in such countries. Changes in technology mean the news market is becoming more diffuse, with opportunities for individuals to create content for digital channels and social media. While this means audiences have more choice, much of this content risks being unverified and leading to the spread of disinformation.

⁴ This includes a pilot Polish language digital news offer which was opened in June 2025.

⁵ BBC Monitoring is governed within the BBC Public Service Group, with additional oversight to ensure that it is compliant with the BBC Monitoring agreement.

⁶ The BBC Licence is agreed by the BBC Board. It defines the characteristics of the World Service, including its remit and scope and how it contributes to the promotion of the BBC's Public Purposes. It also records (a) the objectives, priorities and targets for the World Service, and (b) the languages in which the World Service is to be provided, as agreed with the Foreign Secretary.

⁷ *BBC Global Impact and Influence Research 2025*, page 5. The Service told us that this information was derived from the Reporters without Borders annual press freedom index.

1.4 In many regions, the BBC is facing greater competition from Chinese and Russian media influences. The BBC estimates that China and Russia spend a combined £8 billion to £10 billion on overseas media, vastly higher than the Service's budget, and can replace the Service's output in places where it ceases to provide content. For example, when the Service closed its Arabic radio station in January 2023, the frequency on which it broadcast in Lebanon was taken over by Russian media. The BBC's research has found that users of Chinese and Russian state media are more likely to hold non-democratic views than BBC users. Stakeholders have said that the Service's importance is even greater following the US government's closure in March 2025 of the US Agency for Global Media, an independent federal agency that provided similar content around the world to the Service.

1.5 The Service's objectives, as set out in its licence, are as follows.

- **Reach:** To maximise the editorial impact and influence of the Service for UK and global audiences, including retaining the footprint of language services and strengthening valued reach in line with its remit and subject to value for money.
- **Quality:** To be the world's most trusted provider of accurate and independent international news and current affairs.
- **Impact:** To provide accurate, impartial and independent news and current affairs covering international and national developments, so that its audiences can engage in democratic processes as informed citizens able to resist disinformation, and to reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world.
- **Value:** To demonstrate value for money and transparency, and to seek alternative sources of funding where appropriate and in line with its remit.

The Service's operations

1.6 In 2024-25, the Service's average weekly audience was 313 million across its traditional broadcast radio and TV programming and its digital outputs. The Service has historically released most of its programming through radio and TV broadcasting. However, since the late nineties it has increasingly provided news and programming through digital outputs, such as its websites. By 2024-25, the average weekly digital audience was 131.2 million, a significant increase from 38.5 million in 2016-17 (**Figure 1** on pages 14 and 15).

Figure 1
World Service output types and average weekly audiences in 2024-25

The World Service (the Service) provides traditional broadcast radio and television outputs as well as digital outputs and programming

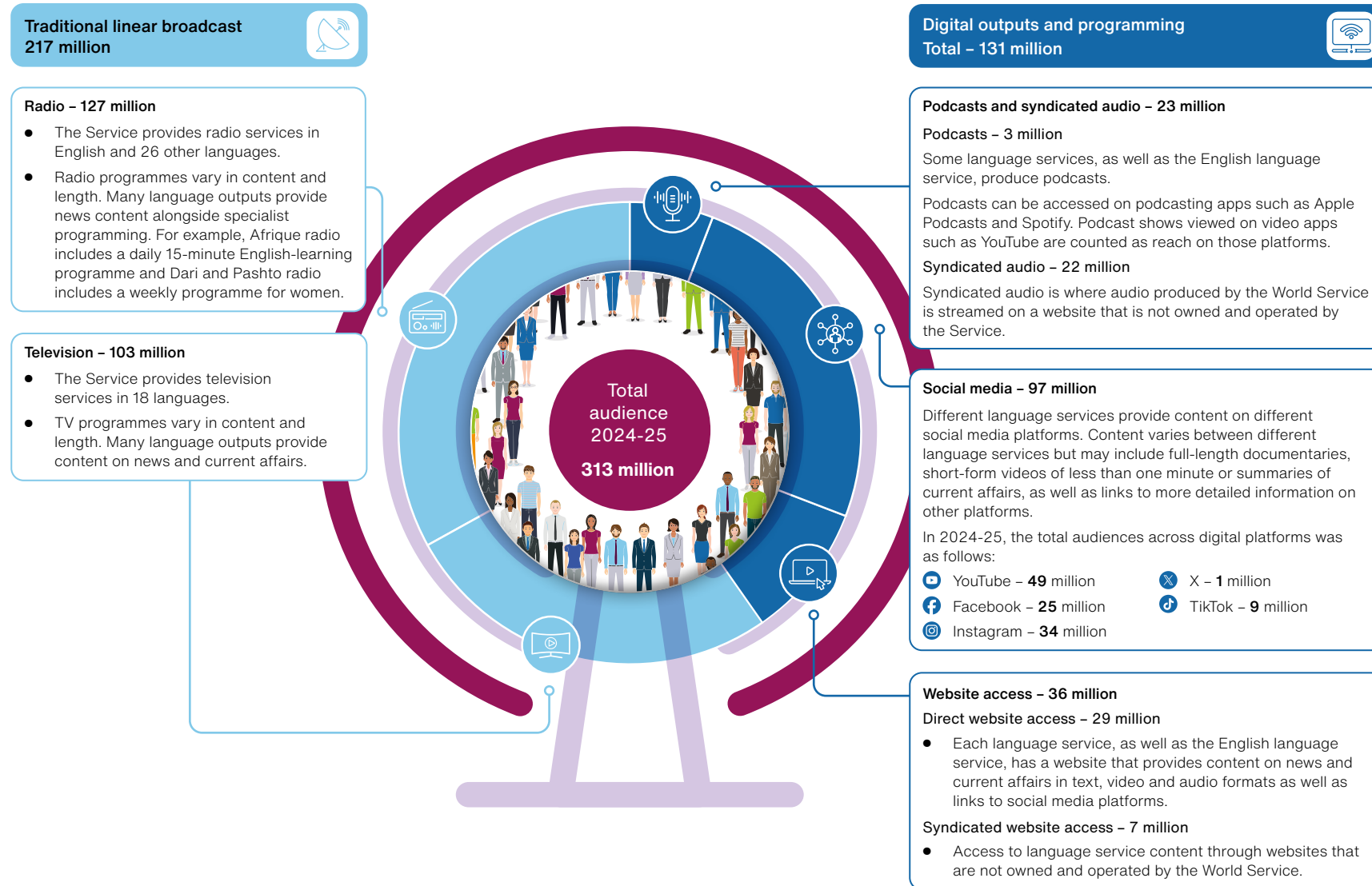


Figure 1 *continued*

World Service output types and average weekly audiences in 2024-25

Notes

- 1 'Audience reach' refers to the number of people who consume the Service in an average week.
- 2 Audience numbers for each individual platform are not deduplicated, and sum to more than 'total audience' due to some people consuming content on more than one platform.
- 3 Audience reach figures have been rounded to the nearest million.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data

1.7 The Service's offer and audience size varies significantly across its different language services. In 2024-25, its audience size ranged from 81 million for its largest service (World Service English) to 149,000 for its smallest language service (Igbo). The Service varies its offer in different languages based on factors such as the size of its audience, the extent to which the audience can access digital outputs and whether the audience has an increased need for access to independent journalism (**Figure 2** overleaf).

1.8 As of July 2025, the Service employed around 1,657 people – 42% (694) of whom were based in the UK, with the rest based in 67 locations across its six regions outside the UK (**Figure 3** on pages 17 and 18). Outside the UK, the region with the highest number of staff is Africa (353).

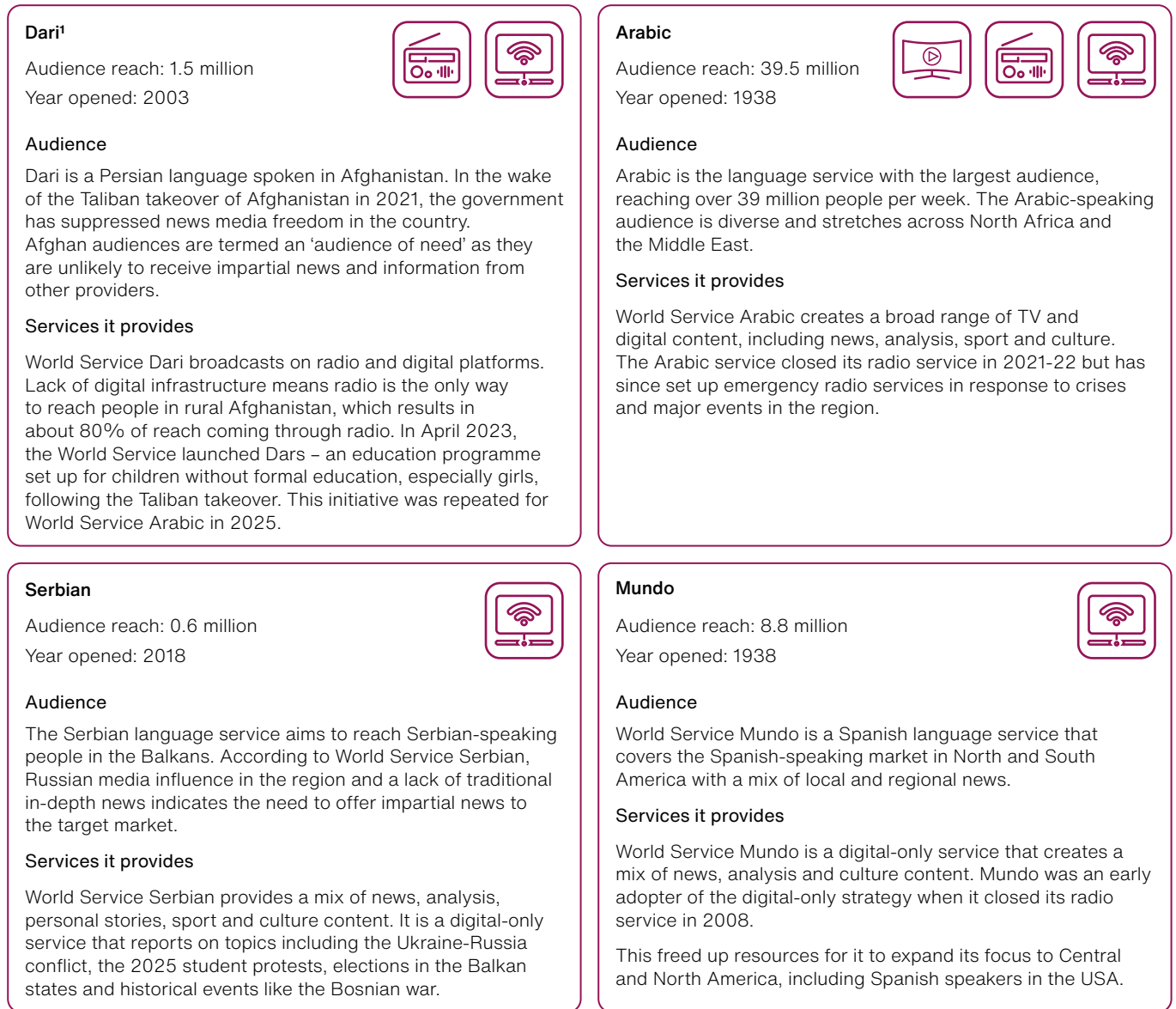
Funding the World Service

1.9 From 2016-17, the Service has been funded by a combination of the BBC licence fee and grant funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). Historically, the Service was funded mainly by FCDO grants, until this ceased in April 2014, with the Service subsequently funded by the licence fee. The government has provided grant funding from 2016-17 onwards, since which time an average of three-quarters of the Service's funding has come from the BBC licence fee, with most of the remaining funding provided by the FCDO.

1.10 Between 2021-22 and 2025-26, total funding for the Service fell in real terms by £95 million (21%) to £358 million. This fall was driven by reduced licence fee funding for the Service, exacerbated by the impact of inflation. Between 2021-22 and 2025-26, licence fee funding fell by £56 million (20%) in cash terms from £277 million to £221 million. However, the impact of inflation means that licence fee funding fell in real terms by £114 million (34%) (**Figure 4** on page 19).

Figure 2
Case study examples: Four World Service languages

World Service languages tailor each output to the needs of the market



World Service outputs provided



Notes

- 1 The World Service also provides services in Pashto to audiences in Afghanistan.
- 2 Languages were chosen to demonstrate the variety in type and size of audiences, and the content the World Service broadcasts to meet their needs.
- 3 'Audience reach' refers to the number of people who consume the Service in an average week.

Figure 3

Location of BBC World Service (the Service) staff and audiences as of July 2025

The Service has 1,657 members of staff employed within its six regions and the United Kingdom, where 42% (694) of staff are based. The Service also reaches audiences across the world, with the main audiences for its language services in central and south Asia and Africa

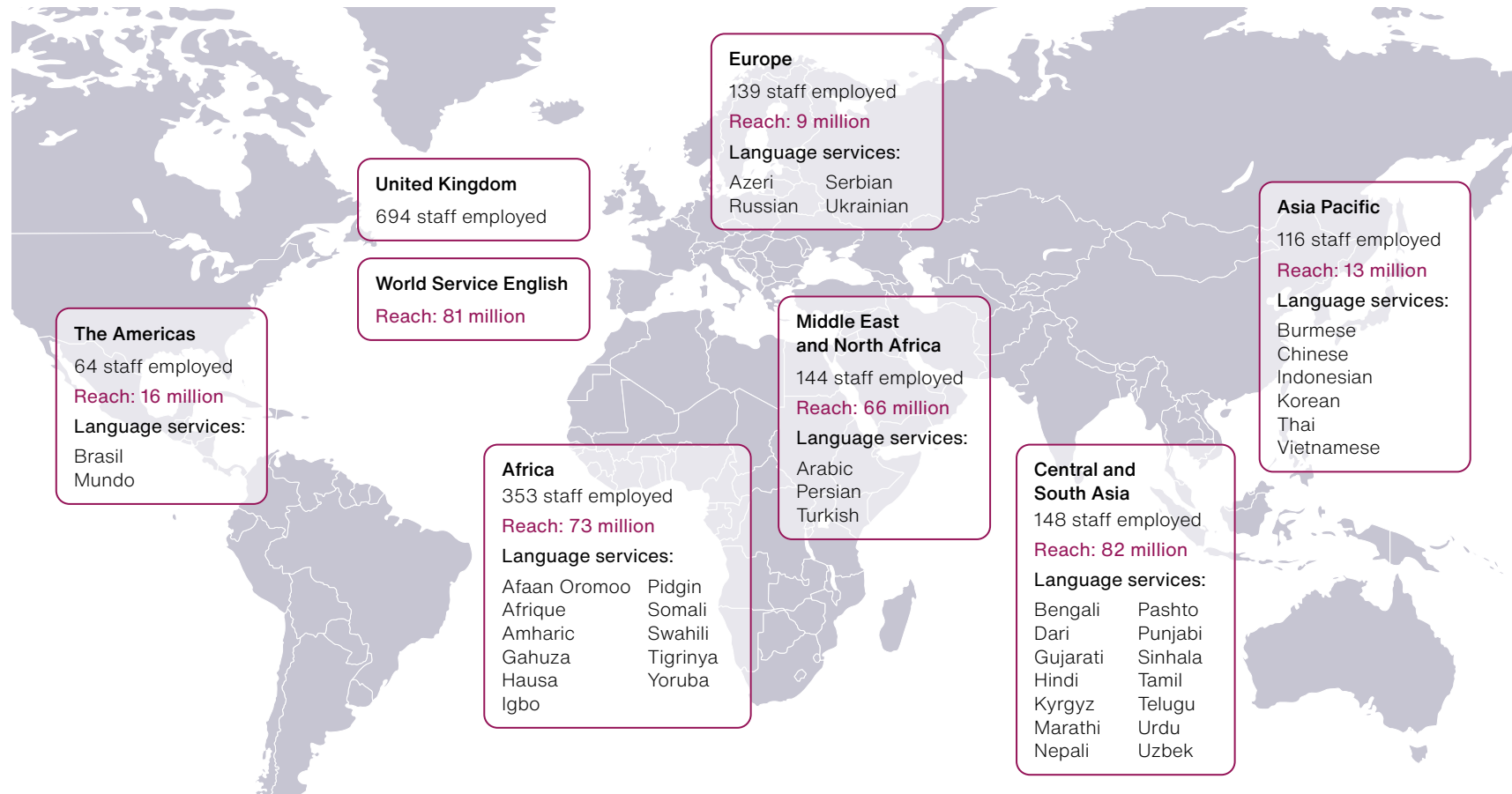


Figure 3 *continued*

Location of BBC World Service staff and audiences as of July 2025

Notes

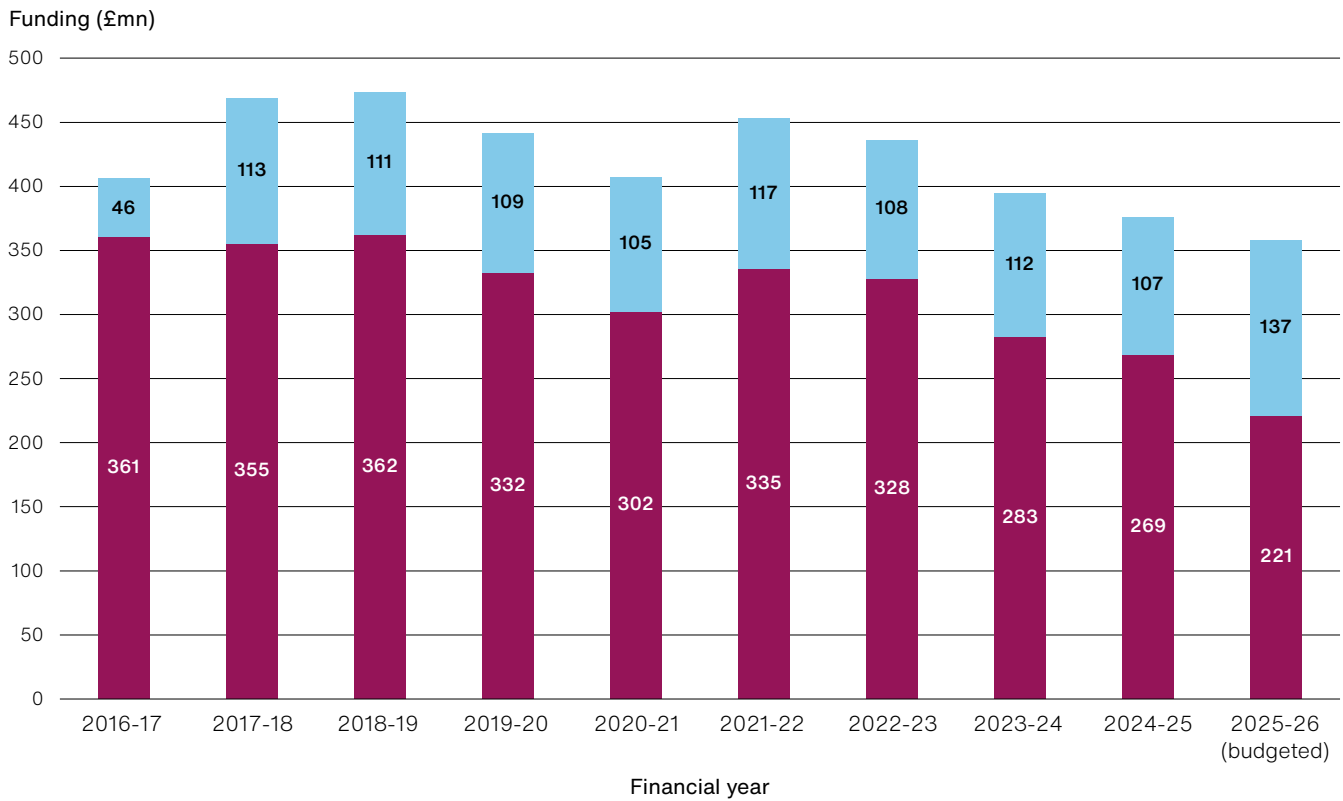
- 1 The map shows the total number of World Service full-time equivalent staff employed as of July 2025.
- 2 World Service staff may be employed in a region but work for language services outside that region.
- 3 'Audience reach' refers to the number of people who consume the Service in an average week.
- 4 Reach data refers to the languages assigned to each region as determined by BBC News for its international operations as at July 2025.
- 5 Reach for each region as presented in this map shows the sum of reach for each language produced in the region, not where the service is consumed. Languages produced in one region may be consumed in a different region.
- 6 Reach for regions has not been de-duplicated and sums to more than 'total reach' due to some people consuming more than one language service.
- 7 Sum of region staff does not equal total staff due to rounding.
- 8 World Service English is broadcast across the world and is not specifically assigned to one of the six regions within this map, as with other language services.
- 9 This map has been designed for information purposes only and should not be used for determining the precise location of places or features nor considered an authority on the delimitation of international boundaries or on the spelling of place and feature names.
- 10 The map does not include the pilot Polish language digital news offer which was launched in June 2025.
- 11 The Gahuza service broadcasts in two languages, Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, which are combined in the Global Audience Measure.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC audience and staff location data

Figure 4

World Service funding by source 2016-17 to 2025-26 (budgeted) in real-terms using 2025-26 prices

Between 2021-22 and 2025-26, World Service funding fell in real-terms by £95 million (21%)



- Funding provided through the BBC licence fee
- Funding provided through the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)

Notes

- 1 Real-terms funding refers to values that have been adjusted for inflation allowing for a clearer picture of purchasing power over time.
- 2 Funding adjusted for inflation using Office for National Statistics (ONS) Gross Domestic Product (GDP) inflation index.
- 3 Baseline for inflation set at 2025-26 prices.
- 4 Figures may not sum due to rounding.
- 5 The changes in licence fee funding between 2021-22 and 2025-26 (budgeted) do not match the total £54.2 million cumulative planned value of the savings programmes. This is for several reasons, including that the graphic above presents funding in real-terms while the £54.2 million savings are in cash-terms, that not all of the planned savings have been implemented to date, and that (alongside the planned savings programmes in these years) the World Service implemented other funding and budget movements, such as for one-off projects.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data

FCDO funding

1.11 The FCDO's grant conditions require the BBC to agree objectives, priorities and targets with the FCDO and report against these each year, covering audience reach, quality, impact and value (**Figure 5**).

1.12 Since restarting part funding for the Service in 2016-17, the FCDO has set out its future funding for between one and four years at a time. This has included fully funding 13 language services. In 2025-26, FCDO's grant increased to £137 million, a 31% year-on-year increase on 2024-25 in cash terms (**Figure 6** on page 22), to continue funding these 13 services, with additional funding split across the remaining services. The FCDO has also provided additional funding at points since 2016-17 for specific purposes, such as £4 million over two years from 2021-22 for the Service to provide additional coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and to counter disinformation.

1.13 In January 2025, three Parliamentary select committees wrote to the FCDO and the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), following a joint inquiry into the Service. Alongside other recommendations (including rebalancing the relative contributions from the licence fee and FCDO) they recommended future funding rounds of at least three years to enable the Service to plan into the future.⁸ In their response, the FCDO and DCMS said that funding for 2026-27 onwards would be determined through the ongoing spending review process, but that in the difficult fiscal context it anticipated that the government and BBC would need to take difficult prioritisation decisions.⁹

⁸ *Letter* from Dame Caroline Dinenage MP, Chair, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Rt Hon Dame Emily Thornberry MP, Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee, and Sarah Champion MP, Chair, International Development Committee, to Baroness Chapman of Darlington, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Latin America and Caribbean), Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and Stephanie Peacock MP, Minister for Sport, Media, Civil Society and Youth, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, regarding the future of the BBC World Service, 30 January 2025.

⁹ *Letter* from Baroness Chapman of Darlington, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Latin America and Caribbean), Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and Stephanie Peacock MP, Minister for Sport, Media, Civil Society and Youth, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, to Dame Caroline Dinenage MP, Chair, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Rt Hon Dame Emily Thornberry MP, Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee, and Sarah Champion MP, Chair, International Development Committee, regarding the future of the BBC World Service, 3 March 2025.

Figure 5

The World Service's objectives, priorities and targets in 2024-25

The World Service (the Service) agrees its objectives, priorities and targets with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) each year

Objectives	Priorities 2024-25	Targets 2024-25
Reach¹ – Maximise the editorial impact and influence of the Service for UK and global audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retaining the footprint of the Service Agility and flexibility of language services to respond and adapt quickly to changes to maintain audience levels Focus on growing audiences to BBC owned or operated services Targeting underserved groups such as the younger generation and women, and countries where audiences cannot participate in democratic processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total reach: 306 million Television reach: 105 million Audio reach: 113 million Digital reach: 137 million Women as a percentage of total audience reach: 37% Young people as a percentage of total reach (15–24): 29% 35% of total reach for the Service that is from BBC services 29% of total digital reach that is via BBC digital services
Quality – Be the world's most trusted provider of accurate and independent international news and current affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively sustain its strong reputation as the most trusted international news provider globally Aim to be one of the most trusted news providers in countries where it operates 	<p>Rated higher than relevant international news competitors in the following categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliable Trustworthy Independent
Impact – Deliver impartial, independent news on global and national developments to help audiences engage in democracy resist disinformation and reflect the UK's culture and values	<p>Creating content that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informs, inspires and engages its audiences Aids understanding of the UK and its nations and regions Contributes to good governance and accountability by supporting informed, balanced public debate, including where there is a shortfall of high-quality news 	<p>Rated higher than international news competitors for a range of audience indicators on understanding of world events such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Helps me gain a more in-depth understanding" "Encourages discussion with others" "Helps me to understand what is essential to know, even if it's not of interest to me"
Value – Ensure value for money, maintain transparency and explore alternative funding sources where appropriate and aligned with its remit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure value for money in the provision of services Publish a range of performance measures and information on the Service for public scrutiny and in line with the Charter obligations to demonstrate the value it delivers Seek appropriate opportunities to access other sources of income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake regular annual and other reviews to assess efficiency, value for money and infrastructure requirements of the Service, benchmarking where appropriate Publish annual performance measures and information for the Service including digital reach for individual language services where possible and the impact of the transition to digital services on target demographics and audience groups Report annually on funding, including alternative sources of income

Notes

1 'Reach' refers to the number of people who consume the Service in an average week.

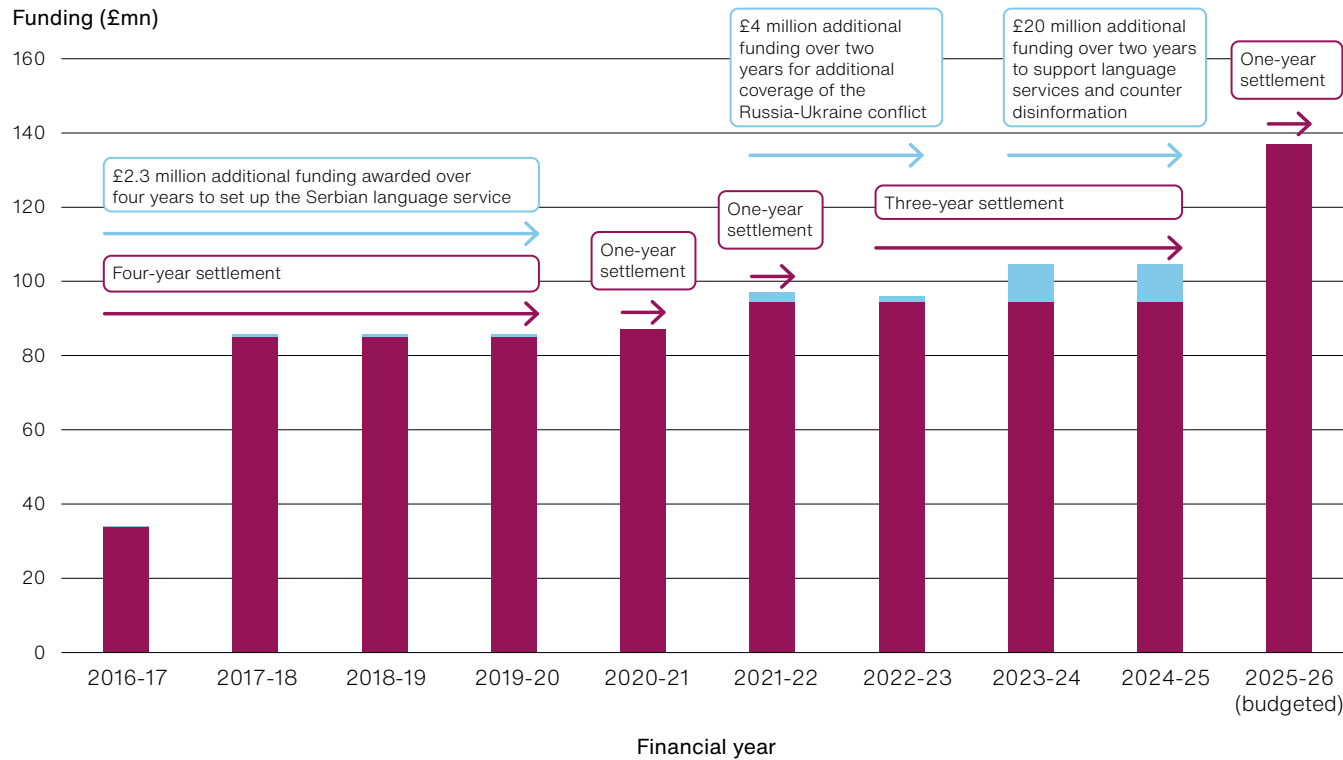
2 The FCDO contributes funding towards the World Service. Consequently, the World Service and FCDO agree (a) the objectives, priorities and targets for the World Service, and (b) the languages in which the World Service is to be provided.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC World Service licence

Figure 6

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) funding for the World Service 2016-17 to 2025-26

FCDO funding has increased and included short-and long-term funding settlements plus additional funding to deal with specific services and tackling disinformation



	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
FCDO funding	34.0	85.0	85.0	85.0	87.2	94.4	94.4	94.4	94.4	137.0
Additional FCDO funding	0.1	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.0	2.6	1.4	10.0	10.0	0.0

Notes

- 1 FCDO funding reported in cash-terms, not adjusted for inflation.
- 2 The FCDO part-funds the BBC World Service and has provided additional funding to respond to global events, such as countering disinformation in Ukraine during the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data and documents

Licence fee funding

1.14 The BBC has reduced its contribution to the Service's budget from licence fees as part of its wider measures to manage a real-terms reduction in its licence fee income. In January 2022, the government announced that its licence fee settlement, covering the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2028, would see the licence fee held flat in 2022-23 and 2023-24, followed by increases over the next four years linked to inflation. The government said that the settlement needed to take into account the financial pressures being felt across the nation and by individual households at the time. The BBC said that its income for UK services was already 30% lower in real terms than a decade before. It also reported that it would need to absorb the impact of inflation and make "tough choices". At the time, the BBC estimated that the settlement would lead to a funding gap of £285 million a year by 2027-28. The Service told us that this gap was subsequently £90 million greater, according to the BBC's own estimates, because the way the government calculated inflation for the licence fee increase in 2024-25 was different from what the BBC had expected.

1.15 Following the settlement and each decision over inflationary increases to the licence fee, the BBC's corporate finance determined the amount of savings required and communicated savings targets to each of its divisions, including the News division, to which the Service belongs. The News Board then agreed the proportion of the savings that needed to be met by each of its areas based on the totality of funding available, the cumulative and comparative savings to date and its strategic priorities.

The Service's savings programmes

1.16 In response to falling real-terms funding, the Service has been implementing its savings programmes in three phases since 2022-23, aiming to reduce its annual expenditure cumulatively by £54.2 million by March 2026. This is a 14% reduction in its expenditure in cash terms compared to 2021-22 (**Figure 7**).

Figure 7

The progress of the World Service's savings programmes 2022-23 to 2025-26¹

The World Service has achieved most of its savings in the first two phases of its savings programmes, but some savings are behind schedule

Phase	Initial timeframe	Targeted savings	Actual savings achieved to date
		(£mn)	(£mn)
Phase one	September 2022 to March 2023	28.5	28.5 (26.6 achieved by March 2023)
Phase two	April 2024 to March 2025	17.4	13.3
Phase three	February 2025 to October 2025	11.1 (incorporating 2.8 from phase two)	5.0
Total		54.2	46.8

Note

¹ The World Service has implemented savings programmes in three phases since 2022-23, which aimed to reduce its annual expenditure by £54.2 million

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data and documents

1.17 By September 2025, the Service had achieved £46.8 million of these savings, though some savings were achieved later than planned.

- **Phase one:** In December 2023, the Service estimated that it had delivered £26.6 million of its £28.5 million target by March 2023. The Service remained within its overall budget in 2023-24 despite not achieving its savings target, through short-term mitigations in other areas. According to the Service, the £1.9 million shortfall stemmed from operational issues, such as delays in staff exits. The Service subsequently reported that it had achieved all targeted savings by March 2024.
- **Phase two:** The Service reported that it had delivered £13.3 million in savings, below its initial target of £17.4 million. According to the Service, the shortfall was due to operational issues, such as delays in contract cancellations and staff exits, and slow movement of unused funds between divisions. Of the remaining £4.1 million, the Service expected to deliver £1.4 million as part of phase two, and had moved £2.8 million of savings into phase three.
- **Phase three:** The Service is delivering its phase-three savings programme later than planned. As of September 2025, the Service estimated that it had delivered £5 million of its £11.1 million savings target, despite its initial target to implement the programme in full by October 2025. 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 wider BBC News savings and transformation plans.

1.18 The rest of this report:

- sets out the approach the Service took to implementing its savings programmes (Part Two); and
- assesses the impact the savings programmes have had on the Service's objectives (Part Three).

Part Two

The World Service's approach to making savings

2.1 This part of the report:

- sets out how the World Service (the Service) made savings;
- assesses the Service's process for setting up and implementing the savings programmes; and
- explains the lessons the Service has drawn from its approach to its savings programmes.

2.2 In October 2025, the Service provided a brief update on its progress to date with its phase-three savings programme. This included an estimate of savings made to date, with a brief description. It did not include other supporting information at this point. Therefore, the remainder of this section's analysis does not include how savings were made during phase three unless otherwise stated.

How the Service made savings

Output closures, reducing commissioning and other support functions

2.3 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. This increased the number of digital-only services from 11 to 18.

2.4 The Service considered a range of factors when implementing its closures. These included the following.

- **Digital strategy:** The Service did not close any digital outputs in line with its strategic objective to grow into a 'digital-first' organisation. In closing its TV and radio outputs, the Service assessed whether audiences were able to access digital news and media, meaning they would be more likely to move across to digital news consumption if traditional broadcast services were closed.

- **Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) grant restrictions:**
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.
- **Audiences of need:** the Service considered whether its audiences were unlikely to receive impartial news and information from other providers if its output was to close. These language services tend to serve populations experiencing humanitarian crises or where there is a high level of media repression; for example, Tigrinya (a language spoken in Eritrea) and Dari (a language spoken in Afghanistan).

2.5 The Service also reduced its commissioning expenditure through ending the production of certain programmes. It focused on retaining programming that it distributes directly through the World Service, as opposed to through third-party outlets, and programmes that contribute to its core news offer. The Service has also made savings through reducing the expenditure of some its support services, such as its marketing and business development teams, and by reducing its distribution costs, including through decreased satellite usage.

2.6 We estimate that around half of the savings achieved to date in phases one and two stemmed from reduced staff costs. Closing broadcast TV or radio output has led to reductions in the number of journalists and editorial staff needed to run some services, while reducing the size of some of its support functions has led to further reductions in staff. Since 2022-23, the Service has reduced its full-time equivalent staff by around 390, saving £18.1 million. In September 2025, the Service estimated that it had made a further £4.5 million of savings in phase three through reducing the number of full-time equivalent staff by 90. In addition, it has made further savings by moving roles from London to the regions in which its language services operate.

Digital and restructuring

2.7 From the outset, the Service aimed to ensure its savings programmes would align to the BBC's wider aims of becoming a 'digital-first' organisation. In May 2022, the BBC announced its 'digital-first' ambitions, with the aim of achieving £500 million of annual savings and reinvestment across the organisation, through changes to content and services, efficiency savings and a drive to seek new commercial investment. In September 2022, the Service set out the importance of responding to changes in how audiences consumed news to ensure it was equipped for a rapidly changing digital age. It aimed to build on the high levels of growth it had achieved through digital platforms in 2021-22. It also aimed to shift resources from traditional to digital broadcast, focusing on its own platforms, with the intention of retaining traditional broadcast services only where these reached audiences of need. Similarly, it aimed to gain new audiences online, and for its existing audiences to switch from broadcast TV and radio services (including those closed through its savings programmes) to digital content, such as websites and social media.

2.8 As part of its savings programmes, the Service restructured its language services to further its aim of moving audiences to its digital offerings and to encourage its teams to share content more widely. Before the savings programmes, the Service managed neighbouring language services together, with editorial teams within the same geographical region working together to produce and share content that was specific to regional audiences. In August 2022, the BBC proposed a restructure of the Service to bring together editorial teams from language services serving 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. The changes would also see language services restructured under divisions for content and output that spanned across all the language services (**Figure 8** on page 30). The Service intended that this would result in editorial teams producing content that could be shared more widely across all regions, and would support the delivery of the 'digital-first' approach by developing market-specific strategies.

2.9 The Service's 2022 restructuring of its language services did not achieve all its intended outcomes and has since been superseded by a new regional international model for BBC News. While teams had migrated into restructured teams by March 2024, with a resulting increase in sharing and collaboration across services, the Service found at that time that elements of the new ways of working were not understood or embedded. In October 2024, the Service concluded that the structures had not met the needs they were designed to address and presented challenges that undermined effective delivery of strategic objectives. The challenges included:

- a lack of simplicity in the structure, which meant the Service could not respond quickly and effectively to changes and challenges;
- unclear remits and undefined boundaries between some teams, leading to duplication of processes;

- issues with putting the audience strategy into action, because no one was clearly responsible for it; and
- teams working in isolation, with no clear systems for making strategic, financial or business decisions.

2.10 In February 2025, the BBC announced that it planned a significant transformation of how it manages its News activities outside of the UK, including the Service, and it planned to move to a new BBC News international operating model (IOM). The IOM is a regional model that encompasses the international operations for BBC News, not just the Service, and includes more devolved responsibilities from London to the new regional groupings.

The Service's set up and implementation of its savings programmes

2.11 We have assessed the Service's set-up and implementation of its savings programmes in the following areas:

- business cases and planning;
- governance; and
- risk management.

Our assessment takes account of the need for the Service to implement its savings programmes quickly and in response to a series of decisions by the BBC and FCDO about its funding.¹⁰

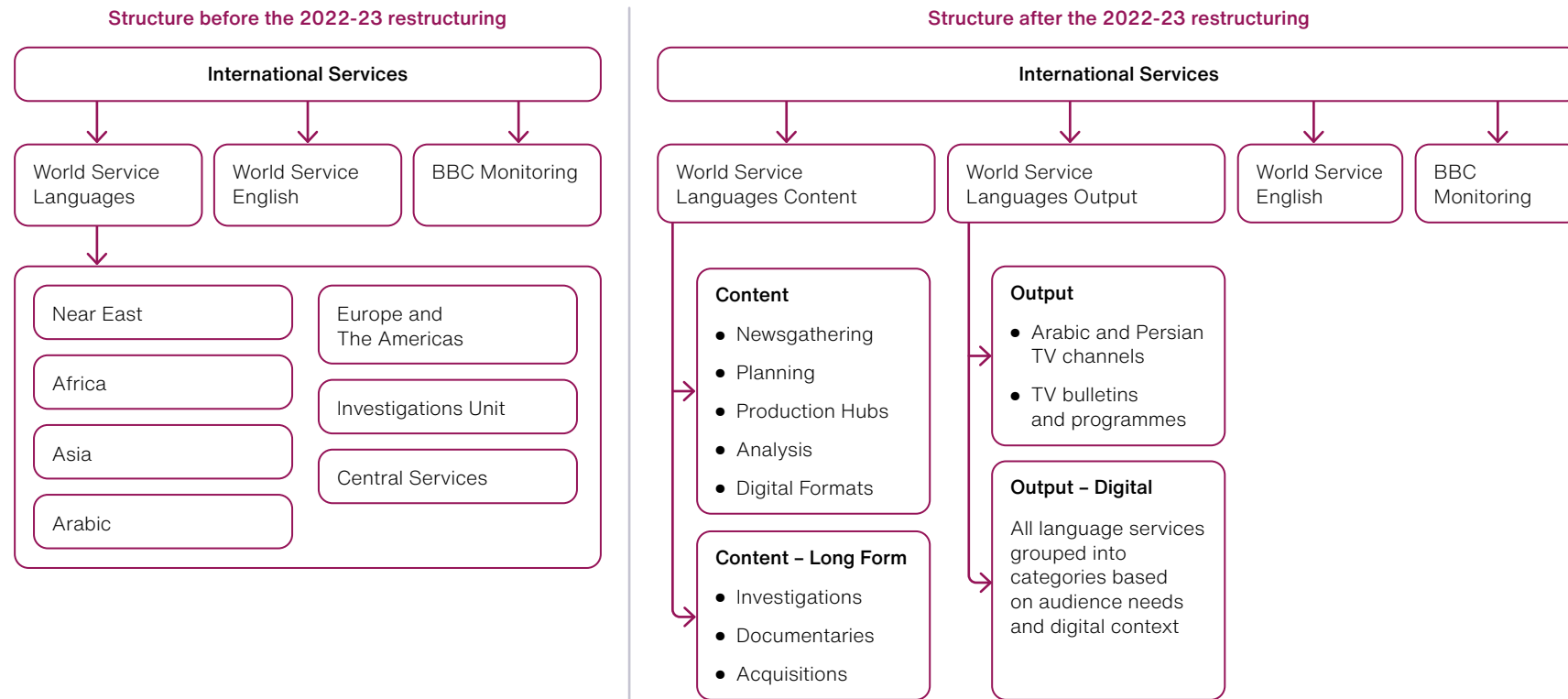
2.12 In November 2021, the Service began a strategic review to explore how it could better serve global audiences, especially through non-English content, by ensuring it was cost-efficient, high-quality and available on the right platforms. The aim was to create a comprehensive framework to assess value for money and support decisions on services, platforms and content. The Service told us that some work (like audience impact assessments) fed into its phase-one savings programme, but it did not complete the full review because the Service was asked to deliver savings before finishing it. Had the review been completed, it may have added greater value by identifying areas for improvement in how the Service managed its funding, performance and decision-making across its savings programmes.

¹⁰ Our assessment includes evaluation of the initial planning of the phase-three savings programme. However, we have not received documentation to enable us to assess how effectively the Service has implemented phase three to date. In October 2025, the Service provided a brief update on its progress with regards to its phase-three savings programme. This included an estimate of savings made to date and a breakdown of how these had been achieved. It did not include other supporting information.

Figure 8

Structure of the World Service before and after its 2022-23 changes

The World Service (the Service) moved away from managing neighbouring language services together. It brought together language services with similar audience needs, while producing and using more shared content across all language services



Notes

- 1 Prior to the 2022-23 restructure, the Service was structured to allow neighbouring language services to collaborate and share content with more of a focus on their regional audiences. From 2022-23, all language services shared content produced by centralised units with an increased focus on digital output based on market segmentation.
- 2 Arrows represent responsibility for subordinate structure elements.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC documents

Business cases and planning

2.13 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 were underdeveloped and did not meet our assessment of best practice, as they did not include the information needed to enable senior leaders to make effective decisions. Business cases are critical in supporting senior leadership in effective decision-making and ensuring the successful delivery of programmes. The Service had three overarching business cases, covering each phase of savings, in addition to local and regional cases for affected regions or locations. The Service's business cases set out a strategic rationale for the implementation of the savings programmes and set overarching financial objectives. However, they had the following weaknesses:

- a lack of options analysis setting out alternative approaches;
- poorly developed risk assessments;
- not setting out clearly what success would look like for its non-financial objectives and how this would be measured; and
- inaccuracies and inconsistencies.

Without clear and accurate information, there is a risk of senior leaders being unable to make informed decisions that represent the best value for money. The Service told us that the overarching business cases did not fully reflect the detailed work that had been undertaken in respect of options analysis and risk assessments.

2.14 The Service did not clearly document the reasons for important decisions. For example, the Service produced several documents setting out options for its TV and radio output closures, estimating the potential audience impact of these closures and considering these outputs against a range of factors. However, it is not clear from the Service's documentation how it ultimately made decisions nor whether a clear and consistent rationale was applied across its regions.

2.15 We have identified weaknesses in the Service's planning of its savings programmes. A plan should include analysis of how identified targets, milestones, deliverables and products will be delivered to timescales, costs and quality. Such a project plan would include deliverables to be produced, activities required to deliver them and when these activities will occur, resources and time needed for all activities and any need for people with specific capabilities and competencies, and dependencies between activities and associated constraints. However, the Service did not carry out adequate detailed planning in a timely manner for its savings programmes or for implementing digital growth.

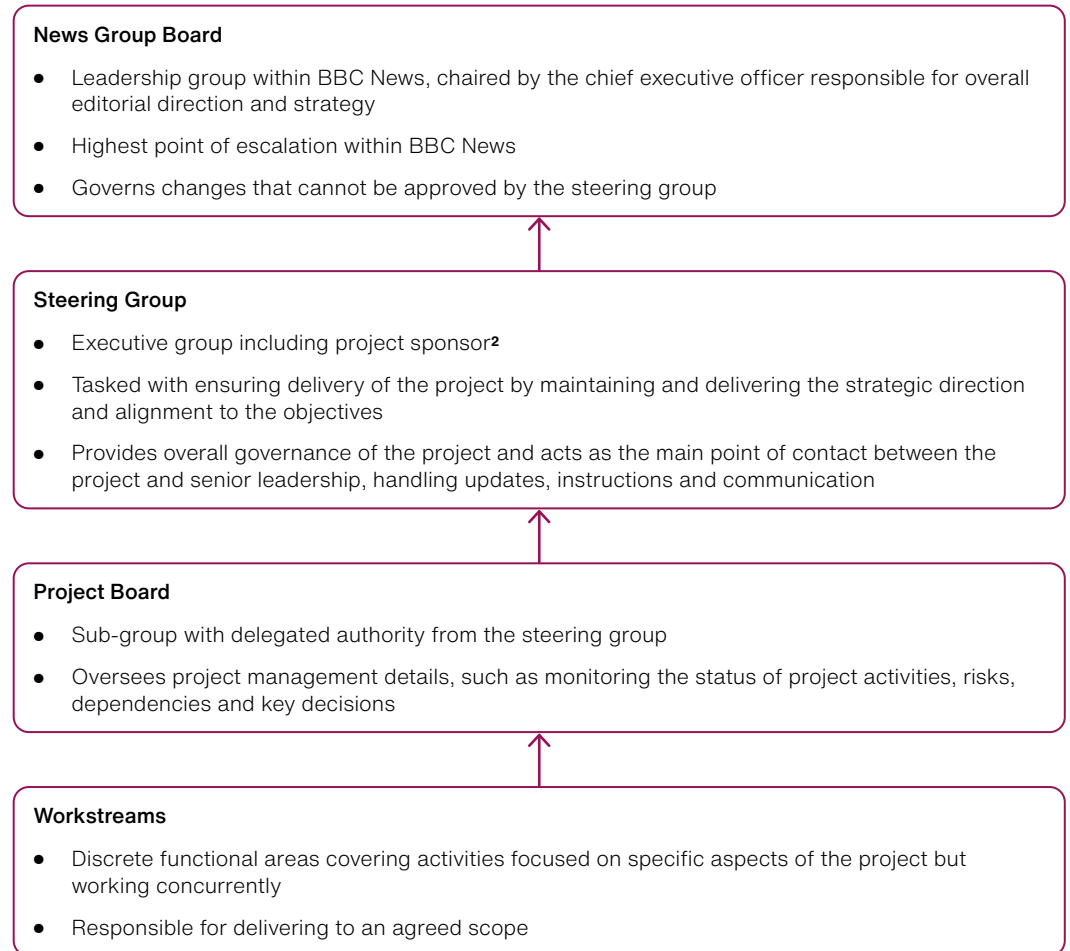
- **Savings programmes:** The Service carried out some planning for phase one, but the project management plan was prepared in February 2023, five months after the sign-off of the central business case. There was less-detailed project planning for the second and third phases of the savings programmes. The less-detailed planning means there are limited delivery milestones against which to track progress. Risk assessments remained under-developed and the feasibility of the savings programmes was not considered in detail, leading to a risk of optimism bias. This meant that the senior leadership signed off business cases that were not underpinned by a sound evidence base assessing whether the business case's objectives were feasible.
- **Digital growth:** The Service had a broad high-level strategy for implementing digital growth and managing its services through its savings programmes, but lacked a detailed plan to support implementation. In August 2023, it identified that beyond the high-level digital strategy, there was still no detail given to individual language services and less-senior staff on targets, remits or what each language service should be aiming for. One year later, while the Service was undergoing further changes during phase two, some teams remained unsure what good looked like in relation to the digital strategy. Despite the lack of detailed planning, we have seen evidence that some language services are focused on improving their digital output through upskilling staff and increasingly focusing their content production on digital and social media platforms.

Governance and monitoring of savings

2.16 The Service set out clear governance structures to oversee the implementation of phase one of its saving programme. Good governance sets the direction and provides the overarching structure for accountability and decision-making needed to ensure work is aligned to strategic goals and stays on track to deliver them. The governance structures that the Service introduced included a steering group, a project board and workstreams to oversee and support delivery (**Figure 9**). Each of these was given specific responsibilities, with delegated authority, escalation routes and the process for requesting changes clearly set out.

Figure 9Governance structure to support delivery of the savings programmes¹

The World Service put governance arrangements in place to oversee the implementation of its plans across the three phases, including workstreams and a project board



→ Flow of reporting³

Notes

- 1 The World Service has implemented savings programmes in three phases since 2022-23, which aimed to reduce its annual expenditure by a cumulative £54.2 million.
- 2 The sponsor is the project owner and is the single person responsible for ensuring the project meets its objectives and delivers its benefits.
- 3 Arrows represent the flow of reporting within the governance structure.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC documents

2.17 There were delays in establishing the governance structures, which contributed to delays to achieving savings. The Service did not put its governance structure for phase one of its savings programmes in place until December 2022, more than two months after its business case approval (September 2022), and the project board did not meet until January 2023. This meant that the project team was not fully operational until three months before it planned for the savings to be fully delivered, from April 2023. This placed significant pressure on the team, leading to a high workload at a critical time given the team's size. It also created unrealistic delivery timelines, which contributed to phase one having a shortfall of £1.9 million against its savings target, mainly due to slower-than-planned staff exits. The Service acknowledged that if the project team had been brought in earlier, they could have better supported the delivery of the savings programme. According to its own internal reporting, there was a risk that limited capacity meant the Service was unable to adequately prepare for phase two. This resulted in less-robust planning and delivery as reported in its phase two closure report. By April 2024, the governance for delivery of outstanding phase two savings was incorporated into governance for wider savings and transformation within the News division (known as the Greenfield initiatives).

2.18 The complexity of the Service's finance systems hampered its monitoring of savings. The Service set clear financial targets in its phase-one and phase-two business cases and reported performance against these on a regular basis. However, due to the complexity of the savings programmes and the use of multiple financial and management systems across different regions, the Service could not track savings on a granular level – for example, tracking which redundancies had been completed – and instead had to estimate progress. This meant there was a risk that the Service would not be able to identify areas of savings that were off track.

Risk management

2.19 The Service took a weak approach to managing the risks of its savings programmes. In general, effective risk management involves identifying risks, effectively assessing and evaluating risks, monitoring and reporting on risks that matter and taking appropriate action to address risks. We have seen limited evidence of all these elements of effective risk management in the Service's process across all three phases.

- **Identification and assessment:** Initial risk assessments set out in each of the three overarching business cases lacked detail and often did not include robust mitigations for identified risks. A lack of detailed risk assessments at an early stage can lead to over-optimism, resulting in underestimation of the time, costs and other risks to delivery. It can also make it more difficult for senior leadership to make fully informed decisions before signing off the proposals.

- **Monitoring and reporting:** The Service identified and tracked risks during phase one through a risks, assumptions, issues and dependencies (RAID) log, which it updated with risks across all its workstreams alongside actions, owners and updates as it went along. However, we have not seen any evidence of such a RAID log used to monitor risks during phase two. Similarly, risks, issues and challenges were regularly reported in programme board papers and steering group monitoring reports in phase one, but during phase two there was inconsistent reporting of risks at the steering group level.
- **Taking action to address risks:** Where the Service identified risks, it did not always take action to mitigate them. For example, In August 2023, during phase one of its savings programme, the Service recorded risks relating to ensuring that there was clear communication and effective embedding of the new structure. Although some actions were assigned – it is unclear whether these were actioned. The Service reported in August 2024 – a year later – that these issues had not been resolved.

The Service's actions to improve its approach

2.20 The Service identified issues with the governance and management of its savings programmes through its own lessons-learned activities and concerns raised to the NAO and BBC through whistleblowing. The Service carried out its own lessons-learned activity at the end of phases one and two of its savings programmes, as well as in August 2024 following the appointment of the new global director. It identified a range of areas where improvements could be made in future, such as the speed with which its project management team was set up (paragraph 2.16) and the quality of its planning. In addition, from May 2023, the NAO received reports, in relation to BBC Arabic, raising concerns including about poor management of the restructuring implemented during phase one. The BBC received similar reports raising concerns. In April 2024, following an investigation of these concerns, the BBC's whistleblowing team reported that there was insufficient documentation and analysis to support the Service's key decisions, compromising the integrity and robustness of the wider process, and made recommendations including incorporating options analysis and non-financial benefits in proposals.

2.21 The Service did not have a well-developed process for learning and applying lessons from implementing its strategy. Although the Service dedicated time to understanding how processes could be improved in future, it has been inconsistent in the timeliness and extent to which it has addressed these issues. 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.

2.22 As part of its wider restructuring, the Service is implementing changes that it intends will address some of the weaknesses in its approach to the savings programmes.

- **Tracking finances:** As part of its remaining delivery of phase-three savings, the Service intends to implement improvements to its approach to tracking implementation. The Service introduced a monthly exit tracking system to monitor savings arising from staff changes and exits. The BBC also intends that the wider restructuring of its international operations will enhance internal controls processes by providing improved international support functions, such as human resources and finances. For instance, the BBC is rolling out software to overseas bureaux for consistent accounting and is recruiting six regional finance leads to drive strategy and compliance. The BBC expects this to enable financial monitoring and review of performance, unlike during phases one and two.
- **Recommendations following whistleblowing:** The BBC is in the process of implementing internal recommendations made by the Whistleblowing team in April 2024 (see paragraph 2.20). By August 2025, the Service had implemented around half of these recommendations, although others (such as those on options analysis) remained open for future consideration. It expects that the outstanding actions will be addressed following the implementation of the new international operating model. Additionally, the outcomes of the recent BBC Culture Review and potential changes within the employee relations team may influence the timing of its implementation of some recommendations.
- **Changes stemming from new structure:** The BBC intends that its new international operating model, which incorporates the Service, will result in all BBC News staff within a region working more collaboratively regardless of whether they worked specifically for the Service or for the wider News division. It expects that enhanced regional leadership – through the creation of new regional director roles – will enable better decision-making and greater local accountability, and plans to implement consistent compliance and risk management processes across all international activities. In addition, it plans to improve support functions (such as finance, human resources and business and operations) within each region, and will enhance the employment offer for employees working outside the UK. The BBC has put in place new roles of transformation director within the News division and director of strategic planning and delivery within the Service, to support the delivery of these changes.

Part Three

The impact of the World Service's savings programmes

3.1 This part of the report sets out the impact of the World Service's (the Service's) savings programmes, including:

- how the Service measured impact; and
- the impact of the savings programmes on the Service's aims, including audience figures.

How the Service measured the impact of its savings programmes

Estimating audience impacts

3.2 The Service expected that its savings programmes, particularly the closure of some of its outputs and the reduction in its programming, would lead to a reduction in its audiences. The Service undertakes detailed measurement of its audiences at an overall and language service level (**Figure 10** on pages 38 and 39). The Service used this information to estimate the audience impacts of its savings programmes; however, the quality of its estimates and the supporting information available was variable.

- **Phase one:** the Service used audience data at a language service and output level to estimate that its phase-one savings programme would reduce overall BBC audiences by around 30 million due to the closure of radio and TV outputs. In addition, it estimated that these reductions may be mitigated by digital growth in the medium term, with estimates calculated at a language service level. However, the Service did not provide a set timeframe for its expected digital growth and was unable to provide us with the supporting workings for these estimates.
- **Phase two:** the Service estimated that overall BBC audiences could fall by 11 million "in the short term". However, it did not include a timeframe for this expected loss and was unable to provide us with supporting workings for this estimate. The Service told us that this estimate was based on expected losses following reduced distribution hours of Service content from FM and short-wave radio audio distribution.
- **Phase three:** the Service estimated that audiences would fall by 3.8 million. However, this was primarily based on the expectation that a TV output would close. The business case was subsequently updated to reflect that this service would not be closed, but the impact assessment was not updated on the same basis.

Figure 10
How the World Service (the Service) measures its audience reach

Accurately measuring the Service's global audiences has challenges

How the Service measures audience reach: The Global Audience Measure

The Service uses the term 'audience reach' to describe its global audience levels. The Service aims to count the number of unique individuals it reaches, not the number of times its different language services or outputs are accessed (see box on de-duplication).

The Service uses the Global Audience Measure (GAM) to measure audiences across the BBC, including the World Service. The GAM selects a set of countries each year and uses a representative sample across gender, age and education of over 200,000 respondents. The GAM uses surveys and ratings, where available, for TV and radio outputs, and data analytics for digital outputs, to estimate how many people are consuming the BBC each week across all outputs and in all 43 languages. This is the estimate for 'total reach'.

Key measures

The World Service measures and sets targets for audience measures including:

- 'Total reach' which measures unique average weekly users.
- 'Valued reach' which is reach that comes through BBC owned and operated services rather than BBC content broadcast by third parties.
- Quality and impact indicators: the Service aims to maintain its current rating as first for trust, reliability and independence compared to other relevant international news competitors
- Proportion of its audience which is young – aged 16–24.
- Proportion of its audience which is female.
- Individual targets for each of its language services.

De-duplication measures unique people reached

One person might use multiple services/outputs, which creates a risk that audience data is overstated. The BBC de-duplicates its audience numbers so a person only counts once in the Service's total reach calculation, no matter how many outputs or services they use.

Example of de-duplication

Remy listens to World Service Amharic radio, watches World Service Swahili TV and uses BBC.com.

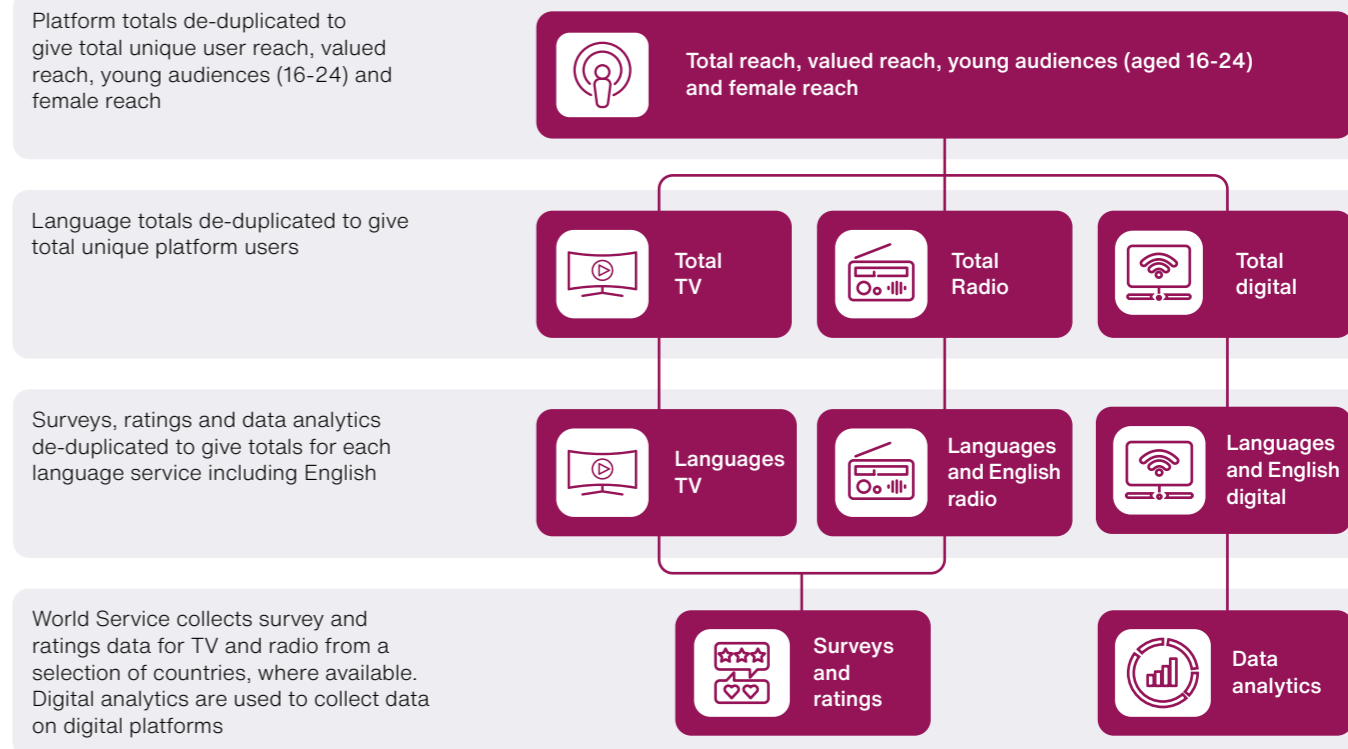


Remy will be counted in audience reach figures separately for Amharic radio, Swahili TV and BBC.com. However, he will only be counted once in the World Service's overall reach calculation.

Notes

- 1 Global Audience Measure (GAM) surveys and ratings data are conducted in line with standard industry practice.
- 2 Digital analytics are collected automatically as users access content.
- 3 GAM measures audience reach for all of the BBC, including the World Service.
- 4 'Audience reach' refers to the number of people who consume the Service in an average week.
- 5 'Total reach' measures unique average weekly users. One person consuming several platforms, devices or services is only counted once.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data and documents



Difficulties in measuring global audiences

Use of surveys

The World Service does not carry out surveys to estimate its TV and radio reach in every country that it broadcasts in every single year. This is because surveys are expensive to carry out and difficult to conduct in some regions which are hostile to news media such as Afghanistan. Therefore, it selects markets to update each year and uses the previous year's data for remaining countries. This means some data is out of date.

Difficulties in assessing the impact of the Service's strategy on audience reach

It is difficult for the Service to accurately estimate the extent to which changes it makes – such as investing in its digital services – impact on audience numbers.

This is because external factors, outside of the Service's control, can have a significant impact on audience reach at a global or local level. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a global increase in audiences for news broadcasters. At a more local level, events such as elections may lead to a significant short-term increase in audiences for a single language service.

3.3 Assessing whether the impact of the Service's savings programmes is in line with its expectations is limited by several factors.

- The lack of clear timeframes on some of the Service's estimated audience impacts means it is not possible to assess whether the audience figures to date are better or worse than the Service anticipated.
- Beyond its high-level audience impact estimates, the Service lacked measurable non-financial objectives to track performance against. This could have included, for example, the amount of new content that it produces or the quality of its output. Using balanced measures, which include aspects of quality and delivery alongside cost, is important for judging performance and an overall assessment of value for money.
- The Service has not linked changes to its inputs, including its spending, with impact on its outputs, such as the amount of content in broadcasts. As noted, the Service collects significant data on its audiences. However, it has not analysed how the changes it has made to its inputs through its savings programmes have impacted these outputs at an overall or language service level. Such an analysis would provide the Service with a greater understanding of the costs and benefits of its various initiatives and how these vary at a language service level, allowing for better-informed choices.

3.4 The Service told us that it is improving its monitoring as part of the BBC's wider international restructuring, which will result in a more balanced approach to monitoring performance. This includes governance forms that consider a fuller range of metrics while assessing investments and savings, and new quarterly business review meetings to monitor progress against a range of financial and audience targets, enabling an assessment of inputs (e.g. investments, spends, full-time equivalent staff numbers) against outputs (e.g. stories produced) and outcomes (e.g. reputation, reach, revenue).

The impact of the savings programmes on the Service's audience

3.5 In the following section, we have evaluated the Service's audience performance across its key objective areas (Figure 5), drawing out the impact of the savings programmes where possible.

Overall audience changes

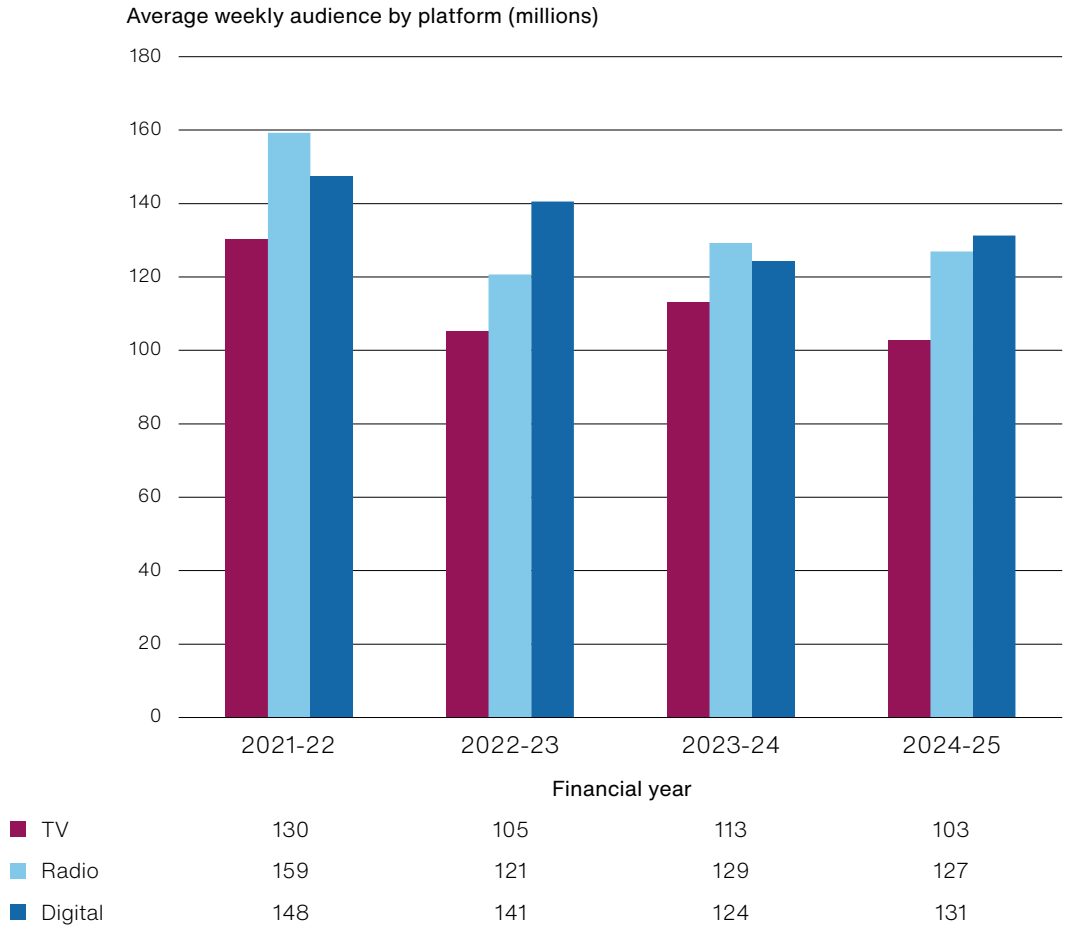
3.6 Between 2021-22 and 2024-25, average weekly audiences fell by 52 million (14%) to 313 million. Over this period, the Service saw decreases in audiences across all three of its output types. Television and radio audiences both fell by around a fifth, to 103 million and 127 million respectively, while digital audiences fell less sharply, dropping 11%, to 131 million (**Figure 11**).¹¹

¹¹ TV, radio and digital viewing sum to more than total viewing as some audience members will access the BBC World Service through multiple output types. The BBC eliminates the impact of this multiple access in its overall audience figures through a de-duplication process to avoid double counting (see Figure 10).

Figure 11

World Service weekly audience reach¹ by output² 2021-22 to 2024-25

Weekly audience reach has fallen less sharply for digital than TV and radio



Notes

- 1 'Audience reach' refers to the number of people who consume the service in an average week.
- 2 The sum of digital, TV and radio audiences each year are greater than total audience reach in that year due to some people consuming more than one output.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data and documents

3.7 Between 2021-22 and 2022-23, audiences fell by 47 million, accounting for 90% of the total fall in audiences between 2021-22 and 2024-25. The Service's overall audience remained relatively stable between 2022-23 and 2024-25, falling by 5 million (1.6%).

3.8 The Service estimated that its platform closures accounted for around 30 million of its audience fall in 2022-23. The Service estimated the remainder of the audience reduction was due to factors outside of its control, including the following.

- **Declining news appetite following the COVID-19 pandemic:** Between 2019-20 and 2021-22, the Service's audience increased from 351 million to a peak audience to date of 365 million, in part due to increased news interest due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to higher audiences for many international broadcasters. Audience reductions since 2022 are likely to be partly because of the easing of restrictions and reduced news focus on COVID-19.
- **Facebook deprioritising news:** The Service's internal analysis found that in 2022-23, Facebook updated its algorithm to deprioritise news content. Between 2021-22 and 2022-23, the Service's reach on Facebook fell by 10 million (17%), to 46 million.
- **Declining media freedom:** in 2022-23, the Service lost significant market access in Afghanistan and Myanmar due to media restrictions. The Service estimated that this led to a fall in audiences of around 12 million.

Language service level performance

3.9 There has been significant variation at a language service level between 2021-22 and 2024-25 (**Figure 12**).

- Eight out of 41 language services increased their reach.¹²
- Out of 41 language services, 33 saw their reach decrease. Of these, 19 saw their reach fall by 20% or more.

Our analysis has not identified any individual factor that is clearly correlated with the change in audiences, such as the size of service, type of audience or whether the service experienced a closure of its radio or television output. The Service did not carry out work to assess whether the estimated impact of its savings programmes was in line with its expectations. For example, it did not assess whether language services' digital growth following phase-one closures was in line with its estimates (see paragraph 3.2). It also did not carry out any evaluative work to understand whether any common factors were leading performance to be above or below expectations. These assessments may have supported the Service in identifying areas where its savings programmes had a lower impact than expected and where the Service may be more resilient to future savings.

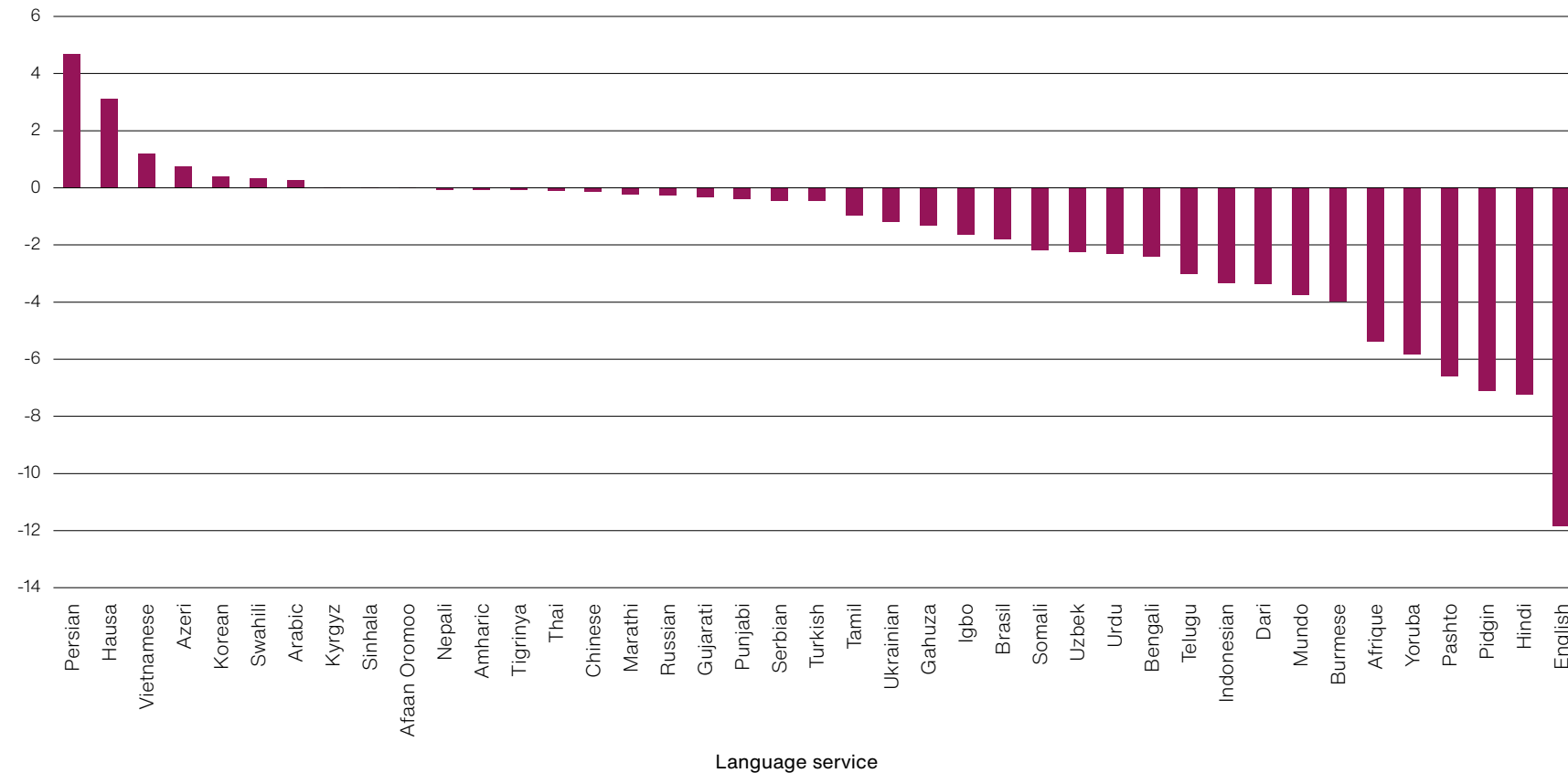
¹² BBC World Service currently broadcasts and/or publishes in 43 languages (English plus 42 other languages). The BBC's data at a language service level for the period 2021-22 to 2024-25 includes 41 languages. This is because the pilot Polish language digital offer was not opened until June 2025 and therefore data are not included in our time range. In addition, the BBC provides two language services in Gahuza: Kinyarwanda and Kirundi. Kinyarwanda and Kirundi are closely related, mutually intelligible and share significant amounts of vocabulary and grammar, but have developed slight differences due to their separate national identities and history. The BBC's audience data combines Kinyarwanda and Kirundi services.

Figure 12

Change in audience reach¹ by language service 2021-22 to 2024-25

Out of 41 language services, 33 saw their reach decrease between 2021-22 and 2024-25²

Audience change (millions per week)



Notes

- ¹ 'Audience reach' refers to the number of people who consume the service in an average week.
- ² This figure represents the 41 languages included in the Global Audience Measure data in 2024-25. The survey does not include World Service Polish, a pilot language digital news offer, which launched in June 2025. The Gahuza service broadcasts two languages, Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, which are combined in the Global Audience Measure data.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data

Digital audiences

3.10 The Service's digital audiences have recently begun to increase after significant reductions since 2021-22. Between 2021-22 and 2023-24, the Service's digital audiences fell 23 million (16%), to 124 million. Between 2023-24 and 2024-25, digital audiences grew by 7 million (6%), to 131 million. The Service estimates that around two-fifths of this growth is due to changes in how it measures its digital audiences.¹³ However, the Service considers that most of the remaining increase is due to its focus on digital growth across its website, social media and podcasts.

3.11 Language services that became digital only in 2022-23 have not been successful in migrating audiences to digital platforms. Across the seven language services that became digital only in 2022-23, audiences fell overall by 63% between 2021-22 and 2024-25. These falls are in part explained by the loss of audiences following the closure of broadcast outputs. However, the language services that have become digital-only have seen a significantly greater fall in their digital audiences (39%) than other language services (14% for language services that experienced no closures, and 1% for services that closed either radio or TV but retained some broadcast content) (**Figure 13**). Most of this fall is due to significant decreases in the three Nigerian language services that 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 has not carried out analysis to understand the extent to which the performance of its digital-only services has been impacted by the implementation of its savings programmes and digital strategy.

Performance against other audience measures

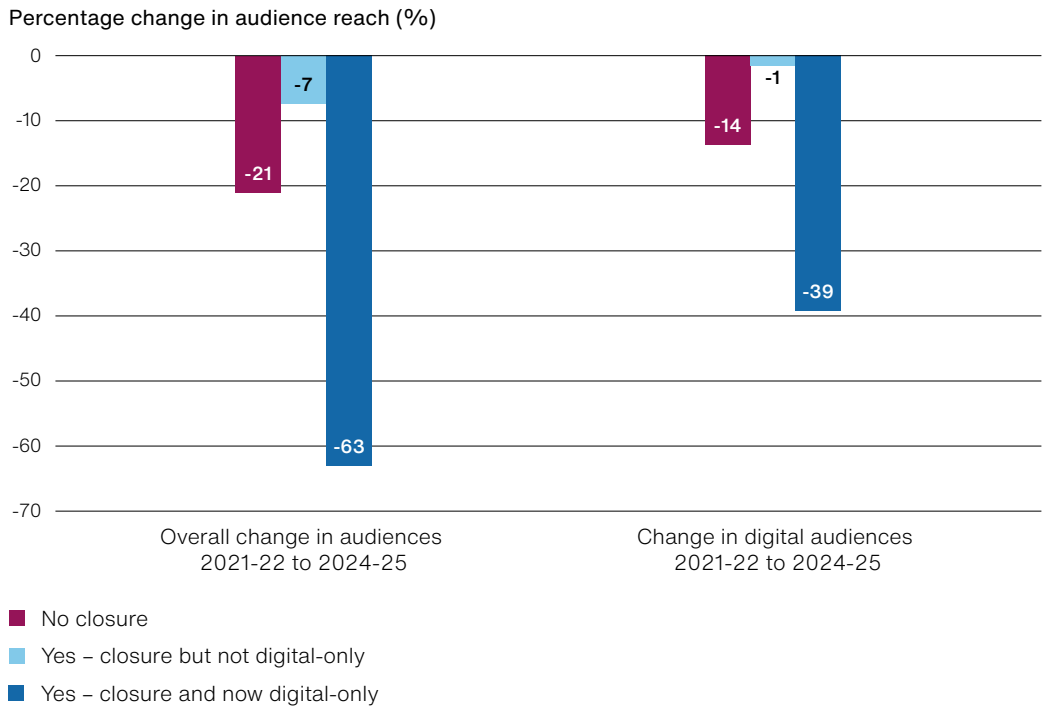
3.12 The Service has continued to achieve its qualitative objectives around trust, reliability and independence, according to the BBC's own research. The BBC aims to be rated higher than relevant international news competitors for reliability, trustworthiness and independence and for a range of indicators on audience understanding of world events. The BBC's 2024-25 global audience survey showed the Service maintained first position in all categories in 2024-25, although the percentage of positive responses was lower than in 2021-22 for all categories (**Figure 14** on page 46). The Service's own analysis shows that international news competitors have seen similar falls in positive responses.

¹³ In 2024-25, the BBC, including the Service, updated its methodology for measuring some digital audiences. The new methodology updates from 30 seconds to 10 seconds the duration that a short-form video on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok needs to be viewed to count in audience reach figures. The Service told us that this change brought the BBC in line with the industry.

Figure 13

Overall and digital audiences by type of closure from 2021-22 to 2024-25

Services that became digital-only saw the greatest fall in overall and digital audiences



Notes

- 23 language services had no closure.
- Seven language services had closures to TV and/or radio and became digital-only.
- 10 language services had closures to either TV or radio and did not become digital-only.
- TV or radio service closures occurred in 2021-22.
- 'Audience reach' refers to the number of people who consume the Service in an average week.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data and documents

3.13 The Service has not met its targets for increasing the proportions of its audience that are women or young people (aged 16–25). In 2024-25, it did not meet its target for either category, with 35% of its audience being women (versus a target of 37%) and 23% of its audience being aged 16 to 25 (compared to a target of 29%). The Service told us that reaching young people and women is a priority but that societal, cultural and economic factors impact the BBC's ability to reach these audiences, particularly in countries of extreme need. The Service told us that it is working to overcome these challenges through delivering content in multiple ways and providing content such as Dars, which seeks to reach children, primarily girls, excluded from school in Afghanistan, and Arabic-speaking children (Figure 2).

Figure 14

The World Service's ratings for trust, reliability and independence between 2021-22 and 2024-25

The World Service (the Service) has maintained first place in 2024-25, but scores are lower than before the closures in 2021-22

Metric		2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Trust	(%)	86	83	80	81
	(Rank)	1st	1st	1st	1st
Reliable	(%)	87	85	82	82
	(Rank)	1st	1st	1st	1st
Independent	(%)	83	79	76	77
	(Rank)	1st	1st	1st	1st
"Helps me gain a more in-depth understanding"	(%)	70	69	65	67
	(Rank)	2nd	1st	1st	1st
"Encourages discussion with others"	(%)	64	65	61	62
	(Rank)	1st	1st	1st	1st
"Helps me to understand what is essential to know, even if it's not of interest to me"	(%)	38	37	34	37
	(Rank)	1st	1st	1st	1st

Notes

- 1 The BBC and the Foreign Secretary must agree on Objectives, Priorities and Targets (OPTs) for the World Service.
- 2 These OPTs relate to reach, quality, impact and value, and must contribute to the fulfilment of the Mission and the promotion of the BBC's Public Purposes.
- 3 The World Service is ranked against international news competitors.
- 4 Survey data on trust, reliability and independence is gathered as part of the BBC's Global Audience Measure (GAM).

Source: National Audit Office analysis of BBC data

3.14 The Service has slightly increased the proportion of its audiences that use BBC owned and operated platforms, although total audiences accessing the BBC through these routes have fallen. Between 2021-22 and 2024-25, the proportion of the Service's reach that was through owned and operated platforms increased from 29.5% to 33.0%. However, as overall audience levels have fallen, we estimate that the number of people reached through platforms owned and operated by the Service fell by around 10%. This fall was significantly lower than for the number of people reached on platforms not owned and operated by the Service, which we estimate to have fallen by 23%. This reflects the Service's focus on protecting audiences accessing the Service through owned and operated platforms over syndicated content.

Appendix One

Our audit approach

Our scope

1 Since 2016-17, the World Service (the Service) has been funded by a combination of the BBC's licence fee (£221 million budgeted for 2025-26) and a grant from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) (£137 million budgeted for 2025-26). FCDO provided grant funding from 2016-17 primarily to fund expansion through 12 new language services, greater centralisation of content commissioning and production, and enhanced news-gathering and digital capabilities.

2 As part of wider BBC savings, the Service has implemented 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 efficiency savings. 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.

3 We set out to evaluate how well the Service has managed its digital transformation to support future transformation. We framed our inquiry into the Service's effective transformation in line with its strategy using the following audit questions.

- Does the Service have a clear, evidence-based strategy with a practical delivery plan in place for delivering its change and savings programmes?
- Is the Service delivering planned changes from 2022 onwards, and achieving forecasted targets and impacts?
- Does the BBC have the mechanisms in place to ensure that the Service continues to deliver intended outcomes and respond to changes in the future?

In structuring our findings, we organised the report into three main parts, covering:

- why the Service needed to make savings, and progress to date;
- the Service's approach to making savings; and
- the impact of the Service's savings programmes.

4 We reached our independent conclusions on the Service's effective management of its digital transformation programmes following analysis of evidence collected primarily between April and September 2025. In forming our conclusions, we drew on a range of study methods and evidence sources, which are set out in the paragraphs below. We also worked closely with colleagues from relevant financial audits and our Analysis Insights Team colleagues.

5 Our work did not examine BBC's creative or editorial decisions, the FCDO in terms of whether it achieves value for money from its funding of the Service, total value of funding – that is whether the balance of funding between the BBC and FCDO for the Service is appropriate – or the whistleblowing process including whistleblowing complaints. We also focused on the Service's main areas of activity: its English language service and its services currently in 42 other languages. We did not cover its smaller business area, such as BBC Monitoring.

Our evidence base

Interviews with the BBC

6 We interviewed BBC staff involved in various aspects of the Service. The people we spoke to were selected based on their roles and responsibilities with regards to:

- the management and governance structure of the Service;
- the Service's savings and restructuring plans;
- the external environment in which the Service operates;
- future risks and opportunities for the Service; and
- the Service's audience measurement and trends.

7 We carried out the interviews online between May and June 2025, and the subject of each interview was informed by our audit questions and tailored to the officials involved. We used the information from the interviews to develop our understanding of all the topics that related to our audit questions and to inform our evidence requests. Findings from the interviews helped inform our key findings and validate conclusions drawn from document review.

Interviews with other stakeholders

8 We carried out online interviews with a range of external stakeholders to understand the context in which the Service operates and, where relevant, their views on the Service's savings and restructuring programmes. The stakeholders we interviewed included:

- the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO);
- the National Union of Journalists (NUJ);
- the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU);
- Ben Bland - Director of the Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House;
- Professor Linda Yueh – Fellow in Economics at St Edmund Hall, Oxford University;
- Professor Martin Scott – Professor of Media & Development, School of Global Development; and
- Professor Patrick Barwise – Emeritus Professor of Management and Marketing, London Business School.

These interviews helped strengthen our understanding of the key issues and support findings presented in this report.

Document review

9 We reviewed a range of published and unpublished documents from the BBC to develop our understanding of the Service's operational context. The documents included, but were not limited to:

- BBC annual report and accounts;
- key World Service strategy documents, including business cases for each savings and restructuring programme;
- regular update papers monitoring the progress of savings;
- BBC Board papers and minutes;
- BBC Audit and Risk Committee papers and internal audit papers; and
- funding agreements and related documentation between the BBC and the FCDO.

10 We assessed the contents of the documents against our detailed evaluative criteria. We used the review to inform further discussion and follow-up with BBC, and to determine audit findings and triangulate findings drawn from other sources, such as interviews. We sought expert advice from within the NAO to support our document review, including support from our Analysis and Major Projects Insights Teams in reviewing business cases, and the BBC financial audit team, who provided and supported in the review of financial audit papers.

11 We also reviewed a variety of published and unpublished documents from third parties to understand the external environment in which the Service operates and consider the performance and approach of the Service compared to international comparators. The documents included the following.

- Published documents and data from international comparators such as the annual reports and accounts and performance reports of the DG8. The DG8 is an informal umbrella group of publicly funded international public media organisations from democratic countries. It currently has eight members: ABC International, BBC World Service, Deutsche Welle, France Médias Monde, NHK World-Japan, CBC/Radio-Canada, Swissinfo.ch, and the U.S. Agency for Global Media.
- Academic papers relating to the global news environment, including how it has changed and risks and opportunities going forwards.

12 We also reviewed past NAO outputs setting out good practice in areas such as risk management.

Field visits

13 We visited the World Service bureau in Serbia in July 2025. The visit included meetings with the interim regional head for Europe and the Head of the Serbian service, and observations. The purpose of the visit was to gain insight into how a digital service operates, how the savings and restructuring programmes have been implemented in an international bureau and the experiences of staff members during this period. We also had a virtual session with staff from the Nairobi bureau in August 2025 to discuss the impact and their experience of the savings programmes, as well as challenges and opportunities.

Quantitative analysis (data and financial analysis)

14 We used the BBC's audience data to understand the extent to which the Service has met its audience targets throughout the period of savings and transformation, and the impact these programmes have had on the Service's audiences. Our analysis focused on trends from 2021-22 to 2024-25. We chose this period because it covers the year before the savings programmes began – to serve as a baseline – and the years in which the savings programmes took place: 2022-23 to the most recent available data in 2024-25. We supplemented our analysis with evidence from our interviews and document review to understand the main reasons behind the trends.

15 The other quantitative data we analysed included:

- performance against financial and non-financial key performance indicators over time;
- the Service's staffing – including total numbers, location, language and platform, to understand how the BBC's savings and restructuring plans have changed the Service; and
- the Service's content offer – disaggregated by language, platform and region, to understand the impact of the savings programmes.

Financial data

16 The main sources of financial data that we drew on were the BBC's:

- annual reports and accounts; and
- unpublished financial data.

17 We used this information to understand the overall trends in funding in real terms for the Service over time. Where financial data have been converted into real terms, we used the GDP deflator series published by Office for National Statistics in June 2025.

18 We do not include commercial income in our financial analysis in this report. Each year, the Service receives a very small amount of commercial income. Between 2021-22 and 2024-25 this generated an average net income of £7.3 million per annum. In addition, the Service receives a share of revenue from commercialisation activities carried out by BBC Studios. We have not included this in our analysis, due to its immaterial size and to enable the report to focus on its primary funding streams.

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