

Government publishes response to decriminalising TV licence evasion

Press release

Today the government has published its response to the public consultation on decriminalising TV licence evasion.



- Consultation showed significant opposition to criminal sanctions
- Decriminalisation remains under consideration and will form part of 2022-27 Licence Fee discussions
- Alternative licence fee enforcement schemes continue to be explored

The consultation asked whether the government should decriminalise TV licence evasion by replacing the criminal sanction with an alternative civil enforcement scheme. It looked at how far alternative schemes would be fairer or more proportionate, their cost and the challenges of implementation.

The government remains concerned that a criminal sanction is increasingly disproportionate and unfair in a modern public service broadcasting system. However, it wants to ensure that any future changes to the TV licence sanction or enforcement scheme are not seen as an invitation to evade the TV licence requirement, nor privilege the rule-breaking minority over the rule-abiding majority.

Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden said:

A criminal sanction for TV licence evasion in the digital media age feels outdated and wrong, and many who responded to our consultation agreed. Whilst the delivery of decriminalisation right now is problematic, we intend to keep looking at this as we negotiate the next Licence Fee settlement and push for the reforms at the BBC that the new leadership has recognised are needed.

The consultation received more than 150,000 responses from individuals, campaigners and stakeholders. Responses revealed that a significant number of

people are opposed to a criminal sanction with some highlighting the considerable stress and anxiety it can cause for individuals, particularly the most vulnerable in society, such as the elderly.

Many consultation responses noted changing the sanctions could have wide-ranging impacts for licence fee payers including significantly higher fines and costs for individuals who evade the licence fee.

Decriminalisation will be considered alongside the licence fee settlement negotiations that began in November. The negotiations will set the level of the licence free for a period of at least five years from 2022 and will provide the context within which any future decision on decriminalisation will be taken.

ENDS

Notes to editors

- The consultation opened in February and closed in April 2020.
- There were 154,478 responses to the consultation, including from 81 organisations including the BBC.
- Responses from individuals were split with 17,652 for decriminalisation and 19,199 against. From campaign groups, there were 18,869 for and 92,831 against.
- TV Licensing found 174,416 people watching TV without a licence in 2019/20.
- The TV licence evasion rate is currently between 6.5 and 7.5 per cent.
- As at 30 June 2020, there were zero people in prison for failing to pay the fine in respect of the non-payment of a TV licence in England and Wales.
- Around 91 people have been given custodial sentences for failing to pay fines in respect of the non-payment of a TV licence from 2015 to 2018 in England and Wales.

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[Decriminalisation of TV licence evasion consultation response](#)

The consultation invited views on whether the government should proceed with the decriminalisation of TV licence evasion by replacing the criminal sanction with an alternative civil enforcement scheme. It set out four criteria against which the issue of decriminalisation would be considered:

- whether an alternative enforcement scheme is fairer and more

proportionate;

- the cost and difficulty to implement any alternative scheme;
- the potential impact on licence fee payers, particularly the most vulnerable and those with protected characteristics; and
- the overall impact on licence fee collection.

The consultation closed on 1 April 2020 after receiving 154,737 responses from individuals, campaign organisations and other stakeholders. A summary of the responses is included in today's publication.

After carefully considering the responses received, the government remains concerned that a criminal sanction for TV licence evasion is increasingly disproportionate and unfair in a modern public service broadcasting system. The consultation responses showed that a significant number of people oppose the criminal sanction with some highlighting the considerable stress and anxiety it can cause for individuals, including for the most vulnerable in society, such as older people.

However, the government recognises that changing the sanction for TV licence evasion would have wide-ranging impacts for licence fee payers, including the potential for significantly higher fines and costs for individuals who evade the licence fee requirement under a civil regime. The consultation also highlighted significant impacts in terms of both the cost and implementation – particularly as the current system is very efficiently handled in the Magistrates Court – and challenges posed to the ongoing collection of the licence fee. The government remains determined that any future change to the TV licence sanction or enforcement scheme should not be seen as an invitation to evade the TV licence requirement, nor should it privilege the rule-breaking minority over the rule-abiding majority.

The government's consultation response, which we publish today, therefore sets out that the issue of decriminalisation will remain under active consideration while more work is undertaken to understand the impact of alternative enforcement schemes.

In particular, a future decision on decriminalising TV licence evasion would benefit from consideration in the context of wider reform to the BBC. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has a roadmap for reform of the BBC and this provides critical context for any future decision on decriminalisation.

The government will therefore take forward these considerations in the broader context of the next licence fee settlement, which will set the level of the Licence Fee for a period of at least five years from 2022, and where negotiations have recently formally begun.

HS2 Eastern Leg spot safeguarding

I am today publishing [additional safeguarding directions](#) for the High Speed Two (HS2) railway for the West Midlands to Leeds (known as the Phase 2b Eastern Leg) section of the HS2 route to reflect the latest design of the HS2 railway.

Please note that the final design of the HS2 Phase 2b Eastern Leg and its integration with Northern Powerhouse Rail will be determined by the government's integrated rail plan, that I aim to publish early this year.

The latest safeguarding update includes a site east of Leeds. The site required by the HS2 rail project would support the potential integration between HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail.

The developer of the site has been made aware of the safeguarding directions prior to their publication as has the local planning authority, Leeds City Council.

By protecting the site now, the government guards against potentially conflicting development, which could otherwise disrupt the construction of HS2, as well as the risk of increased costs of building the new railway.

This protects the public's interest in spending taxpayer money in a proportionate fashion. The government periodically reviews land requirements needed for the project and updates the extent of safeguarding accordingly.

It's anticipated that the land requirements for Phase 2b of HS2 for the Crewe to Manchester (known as the Phase 2b Western Leg) section of the route will be updated prior to the deposit of the relevant hybrid bill.

A copy of the safeguarding directions will be placed in the libraries of both Houses for record, and are publicly accessible online.

Two new UK Government Covid testing sites open in Fife

The UK Government has today, Thursday 21 January, opened two new walk-through coronavirus testing centres in Fife at Glenrothes Miners Charitable Society in Glenrothes (KY7 5NL) and Dell Farquharson House in Dunfermline (KY12 7DS).

The centres are part of the largest network of diagnostic testing facilities created in British history. In Scotland, this comprises of six drive through sites, 28 walk-through sites, 21 mobile units, plus the Glasgow Lighthouse

Lab which is working round the clock to process samples.

In Scotland, the UK Government is providing all Covid testing and test processing outside of the NHS. Around two thirds of all daily tests are provided by the UK Government, in support of Scotland's health services.

Tests must be booked in advance at [NHS Inform](#) or by calling 0800 028 2816. People should only book a test if they have coronavirus symptoms (a high temperature, a new and continuous cough, or a loss or change to their sense of smell or taste).

Health Minister Lord Bethell said:

To respond to the coronavirus, we have built a major testing and tracing system from scratch. We are constantly working to expand and improve it with new technologies and innovations so everyone with symptoms can get a test.

New walk-through sites like this one makes it even easier to get a test no matter where you live. If you have symptoms of coronavirus, I urge you to book a test today and follow the advice of NHS Test and Protect if you are contacted to protect others and stop the spread of the virus.

Baroness Dido Harding, Interim Executive Chair of the National Institute for Health Protection, said:

Walk-through sites offer communities better access to coronavirus testing, so everyone with symptoms can get a test. This new site is part of our ongoing work to expand our testing network across the UK which now has the capacity to process more than 700,000 tests a day. We will continue to expand capacity to improve test turnaround times and push forward testing innovations to make sure anyone who needs a test can get one.

Please book a test if you have coronavirus symptoms: a new continuous cough, a high temperature and a loss or change in sense of smell or taste, and follow the advice of NHS Test and Protect if you are contacted.

UK Government Minister for Scotland, Iain Stewart said:

The UK Government is doing everything it can to support people in all parts of the UK through the pandemic.

Testing continues to play an important role in how we manage the virus alongside the roll out of vaccines, helping to identify local outbreaks, slow down the rate of transmission and protect

communities. I would like to thank the public for continuing to do the right thing and come forward to be tested when they display symptoms.

The UK Government continues to provide the bulk of testing in Scotland, with these two new centres in Fife just the latest in our extensive network. We have also secured and paid for millions of doses of the Pfizer and Oxford vaccines for all parts of the UK.

Hope is on the horizon, but we can't let up on our efforts to contain the virus.

NHS Fife Director of Public Health, Dona Milne, said:

NHS Fife Public Health welcomes the introduction of two new walk-through coronavirus testing centres in Fife. The centres are run independently from NHS Fife, by the UK Government.

The two new centres will be located at the Glenrothes Miners Charitable Society in Glenrothes and the Dell Farquharson House in Dunfermline and will help to support local access and capacity for Covid-19 testing.

Simon Venn, Mitie Chief Government & Strategy Officer, said:

Our priority during the pandemic is to support the nation's efforts to fight COVID-19 and help keep the country running. Testing is a critical part of the UK's strategy to combat coronavirus and we're proud to support the UK Government with this vital task. A big thank you to all the NHS staff, Mitie employees and other frontline heroes in Fife, who are working tirelessly to keep us all safe.

Reporting COVID-19 incidents to court and tribunal staff and professional court users

All suspected incidents and / or confirmed cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) within our court and tribunal buildings in England and Wales, and tribunals in Scotland, are reported to HMCTS. If you have been in a court or tribunal building and later test positive, you should inform managers in the relevant building at the earliest opportunity, as well as NHS Test and Trace.

If you get a positive test, [NHS Test and Trace](#) or local authorities' own contact tracing teams will contact you and ask you to share information about any [close contacts](#) (as per GOV.UK definitions) you had just before or after you developed symptoms. This information is handled in strict confidence and will only be kept and used in line with data protection laws.

To assist this process, we ask everybody to use the contact tracing app and QR code in our buildings. Contact tracing should only be paused within our buildings in those areas defined in [NHS guidance](#), which includes when behind a fixed Perspex (or equivalent) screen and fully protected from other people, or if storing your phone in a locker or communal area.

Where we are notified of positive (or suspected) cases in any of our buildings – whether that be a member of our staff or other court users – we initiate our own contact-tracing alongside the NHS test and trace service. Where there are two or more cases, we conduct an investigation.

Updating staff and professional court users

We also update local stakeholders and court users of the situation, while maintaining the confidentiality of those directly affected. Updates may contain a combination of the following pieces of information, depending upon the circumstances of each incident:

- date we were informed of suspected incidents and / or positive cases
- date those involved were last in the building (only if it is not shared in a way/with other information which could lead to identification)
- areas of the building in which the individuals concerned have worked for a sustained period of time and/or where they are likely to have come into contact with the public (only if it is not shared in a way/with other information which could lead to identification)
- action taken, for example if a section 16 clean was completed, or if part or all the building will be closed temporarily

Any personal information we collect is only for sharing with public health authorities who may require it as part of any support they provide for complex incidents.

Local health protection teams

In line with what is required of us, we alert local authority public health teams whenever the threshold for reporting is reached and act on their advice. This means that our policies, and how they are implemented at an operational level, are repeatedly reviewed by multiple experts who are independent of HMCTS.