

BBC Faces Most Drastic Cuts Ever

By Kevin Sanson

4-5 minutes

Last month, the [British Broadcasting Corporation announced](#) a series of cost saving measures expected to claim 2,000 jobs across the United Kingdom. In all, the proposals would trim 20 percent (\$1 billion) from the annual budget by 2017. Much of the media attention focused on the specific nuts and bolts of the cutbacks: [what services suffered most](#)? Yet overall the cuts suggest that the public service broadcaster faces a tenuous future.

In a [letter to staff](#), Director General Mark Thompson called the cutbacks “the most significant change to the BBC in a generation.” The proposals conclude a nine-month review of operations and programming strategies (“[Delivering Quality First](#)”) launched after a “[bruising round](#)” of funding negotiations with the British government. In those talks (which generated [State-side interest](#), too), the BBC agreed to freeze its license fee—an annual fee paid by anyone in Britain who owns a television set—at the current rate of \$230 until 2017. It also agreed to assume financial responsibility for the World Service,

BBC Monitoring, and Welsh-language broadcaster S4C, at a total cost of \$530 million per year.

Since the majority of the Corporation's budget is derived from the license fee, the BBC needed to identify ways to cover its new financial commitments and offset the effects of inflation.

Here are the [headline proposals](#), now under public consultation until late December:

- Both BBC1 and the Corporation's news services emerge relatively unscathed. Children's programming is safe, too, but moves to digital channels.
- BBC2 loses original daytime programming. More than half of its schedule consists of repeats. Its original content commissioning priorities are refocused around factual programming—science, history, and the arts.

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BBC Director General Mark Thompson

Commissioning priorities for BBC3 and BBC4 are aligned more closely with BBC1 and BBC2 to “incubate” content for the flagship channels. BBC3 loses 10 percent of its budget, the largest cut of any channel. It also relocates to Manchester by 2016.

- Fewer commissioning hours and more cross-station collaboration reduces content spend at BBC Radio. National broadcasts replace local radio output. Asian Network loses 34 percent of its budget.
- Sports budget is slashed by 15 percent.

- Senior staff shrinks as management layers between Director General and junior staff members are reduced.
- BBC moves its West London operations to Manchester and the Birmingham production center is closed.

While the changes are designed to create a smaller, leaner, more focused BBC, they also risk making the broadcaster's output less diverse. With only [slight exception](#), it's a concern much of the media coverage seemed unwilling to address. Instead, [reactions](#) pondered the much more drastic savings expected from productivity changes—making work more efficient by cutting jobs, using technology, and revising terms and conditions for staff.

Dismayed at the employment-related cost savings, the media sector's leading trade unions issued a [joint letter](#) in which they outlined their grievances against the restructuring plans. Both [BECTU](#) and [NUJ](#) have launched full-scale campaigns against the BBC, and they are urging members to vote for strike action before the December holidays. Similarly, staff members at BBC Birmingham have launched "[Save BBC Birmingham](#)" in protest against plans to close it down.

In a telling admission, the [BBC Director General warned](#) the government, "We can't do this again. Another real-terms cut in the license fee will inevitably lead to a loss of services or diminution in quality or both. If [we are forced] to go for more real-terms cuts, the amount of road left for productivity savings is rapidly running out." It's a serious threat. As the broadcaster continues to navigate rising production costs, fragmented

audiences, and public-sector retrenchment, it will face [even more difficult decisions](#) in the future.