

The elderly face visit from the TV licence fee police

BBC 'outreach' teams will call on over-75s who fail to pay

By Anita Singh, Arts and Entertainment Editor

OVER-75s face a home visit from a television licence "outreach team" next year to ensure they pay up, the BBC says, in what MPs say could be a "traumatic" experience for elderly people.

Pensioners who fail to set up payment for a licence, or to send in evidence that they receive pension credit, will be pursued for the fee.

They could receive what the BBC describes as a "support visit" by members of the new team. Up to 3.7 million older people who currently receive free licences, which cost £154.40, will have to pay from next summer.

Clare Sumner, the corporation's £170,000-a-year director of policy, told MPs on the digital, culture, media and sport select committee that the visits would be carried out "as sympathetically as possible".

Asked by Brendan O'Hara, the SNP MP, if the BBC would be "vigorously pursuing non-payers" using the same methods as they do for everyone else, Ms Sumner said: "We are recruiting a specific group of people who will pay support visits to this group and help them understand what the system is and help them apply. They will be a different cohort to people who enforce the licence fee."

Mr O'Hara said that sounded like "the same tactics but with different faces coming to your door", and asked: "A licence fee person comes to your door and you are a poor pensioner who simply can't afford to pay it – that will be pretty traumatic, don't you think?"

Ms Sumner replied: "They won't be coming to your door in quite the way you imply." She said that over-75s would have fair warning of the changes as they had already received one letter informing them that the free universal concession would end next year.

They will receive another letter next February, allowing them time to “set up a payment plan” and “establish eligibility” by proving receipt of pension credit.

Ms Sumner said that projections showed an expected non-payment rate of 8 per cent among over-75s as many struggled to adjust to the new system. The national average is 6.5 per cent.

Caroline Abrahams, Age UK’s charity director, said: “The more we hear about how the BBC proposes to run its new scheme from June 2020, the more filled with foreboding we are becoming.

“Unfortunately, these comments today certainly don’t correct the impression we are gaining that it’s going to be chaos at best and deeply upsetting for some of our oldest people at worst... this situation has all the makings of a slow motion car crash, with many older people inexcusably getting hurt.”

Ms Sumner appeared before MPs alongside Lord Hall of Birkenhead, the BBC director-general, and Sir David Clementi, the corporation’s chairman.

In an often bad-tempered appearance, Lord Hall said responsibility for the scheme had been forced on the BBC by the Government in 2015. When told of the Treasury decision, he recalled saying: “Well, that’s nuclear.”

Lord Hall said he had hoped that the BBC would have more money in the pot to cover the scheme, but “things have not turned out as we expected”.

But Julian Knight, MP for Solihull, accused him of “whingeing” and said: “You are no different than a chief executive who has got their numbers wrong and is now issuing a profit warning.”