OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 15 May 2025

Session 6

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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
16th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Paul Fleming (Equity)
Frank Gallagher
Lynda Rooke (Equity)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 15 May 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 08:31]

BBC Scotland

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the 16th meeting in 2025 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We welcome to the committee Jackie Baillie, who is joining us for this session.

Our first agenda item is evidence on BBC Scotland. Before we begin, I gently remind committee members that the committee has no role in the operational or editorial decisions of BBC Scotland. However, we do have a role in holding the BBC to account for decisions that impact the screen industry in Scotland, and that will be the focus of today's session.

We are joined by Lynda Rooke, president, and Paul Fleming, general secretary, both of Equity, and I offer a warm welcome to Frank Gallagher, actor and member of the "River City" cast. I will begin with a couple of questions, and then we will move to questions from the committee members.

In broad terms, what will the closure of the production site at Dumbarton and the end of "River City" mean for the TV sector in Scotland? Specifically, what is the impact likely to be on opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds who might pursue a career in front of or behind the camera? I ask Paul Fleming to start.

Paul Fleming (Equity): Thank you very much for having us. It is a very good question to start with. Equity is a trade union with a trade union interest in the survival of "River City", the survival of the studios at Dumbarton and the strategy of the BBC. Indeed, the reminder that you started with is very similar to our position: this is not an editorial question or a question of content; this is an industrial question for us as a trade union.

Lynda Rooke can speak more eloquently than I can about the role that soaps play in the general ecosystem and what the decision means for training and the voices that are allowed. Perhaps Frank Gallagher can talk specifically about the training that goes on at "River City", which is, frankly, outstanding and unique.

The point that I will make at the beginning is about the studios in Dumbarton. We have been consistently messed around by the BBC as to what the grounds are for the closure, which at the very least has been a series of mixed drinks, if not a complete elixir of confusing fabrications. At the heart of it is the line that the BBC has to close the studios at Dumbarton because of the behaviour or the desires of the landlord. There is an ambiguity about how true that is, but fundamentally, at the heart of that, we have to ask ourselves how committed the BBC is to cultural infrastructure production in Scotland if a private landlord can say at the 11th hour, "We don't want you here any more," and suddenly a major production and major facilities are lost overnight. Entirely separate from the soaps question, there is an infrastructure question about what this really means.

I will let Lynda Rooke and Frank Gallagher talk about "River City" and soaps more generally.

Lynda Rooke (Equity): I am an actor, and I have worked across a range of soaps—not "River City", but a lot of other ones, including "Brookside", "Coronation Street", "The Bill", "Casualty", and "Albion Market" if I can take you back to that one from back in the day. I am currently serving 20 years for perverting the course of justice on "Coronation Street", but, if Starmer lets me out early, I will be back in.

What I have witnessed over years of working across soaps is that they allow people who normally do not have easy access into the film and television industry to get in there. They become a training ground, both on screen and off screen. They allow people from marginalised communities, in particular, to enter the industry, which can be a very closed shop with a lot of barriers involved, especially outside London and the south-east. I have witnessed members working on screen who have gone on to have amazing careers. Would they have got there in the first place if they had not come in through soaps? There is a very good chance that the answer is no.

It is the same behind the scenes as well, for technicians and so on. Over the years, I have worked on a soap and then on another programme later—maybe something like "Endeavour"—and guess what? There was somebody in the crew who had worked on one of the soaps back in the day. They get career progression.

I will let Frank Gallagher speak now.

Frank Gallagher: I have been working down at "River City" for about 20 years now, and it is enjoyable—it is a great place to work with the people who run it. What I would say about it is that it is not just about the actors; there is a crew in there. There are all the technicians, the catering staff, the security staff, make-up and wardrobe. A lot of the time, people have found their way into "River City" through the training academy that was

set up to bring young Scottish people in, to give them a foothold, to let them work with seasoned professionals and to see how the job works so that, when they move on to their next job, they have an idea and are not going in cold. That has been working very well and has been very pleasing to watch over the past few years.

The main thing I would say about the youth element is that, if you had been there on the day when the bombshell was dropped in the canteen, you would have seen a look of astonishment and disappointment on those young people's faces. That is their way in, and there is nowhere else like it in Scotland. I am not even sure whether there is anywhere else like it in Britain. It brings people in specifically to train and to work in Scotland—that is what they are there for. These are people who want to work in their own business in their own country, and they want to hear their own voices in their own country.

There is a lot of indignation sometimes about soap actors, as they are called. I have always said that I am not a soap actor; I am an actor who happens to be in a soap. Soap actors seem to be looked down on in a lot of ways, which I find incredible, because these people work incredibly hard. As I am sure Lynda Rooke knows, from working on soaps, it is the hardest business. The hours are the hardest you are gonnae do.

It is about looking for things for people to do afterwards. People come out of it saying, "I've had that piece of training, so I can take part in this industry now." I do not see why we should get rid of it. This is oor voice and oor culture we are talking about here. In my mind, Scottish accents in programmes are very quiet as it is. Do we want to silence them? There should be a place in oor own country for people that want to work here instead of waiting for dramas to be brought up, probably by some BBC production from London.

It is something that we all know about as actors but, as I say, it is not just about the actors. There is a whole industry here. If you ask viewers what their bugbears are, there are now times when you cannot find out when "River City" is on. If you are a regular viewer and you tune in on a Tuesday night, all of a sudden it has disappeared and something else has been put in its place. That does not help the audience. I do not think that it helped much to put it on the BBC Scotland channel either, because not a lot of people watch that channel, to be honest with you.

It is a very important part of the Scottish industry. If you have watched the number of people who have come through it over a few years, you will know that it is not just crew, but writers as well. There have been over 40 first-time writers on it in the last three or four years, and a big percentage of them are women. There is that to look at. Where do you go now if you want to speak in your own voice? That is my main point.

The Convener: Frank Gallagher, you opened up something that is of concern, and that has been of concern to the committee, about what constitutes a Scottish production for the BBC's fulfilment of its obligation to create content in Scotland. In your view, if "River City" is not there, how will the BBC fulfil that obligation? Can it fill the hole that will be left?

Frank Gallagher: I think that it will be very difficult to replace. It covers a place in Scottish television that nothing else really does. A lot of the productions that come up here are called BBC Scotland productions, but people laugh at that, to be honest with you. They think it is BBC Scotland only because it is basically using BBC Scotland's money, but you will find that a lot of the crew and actors come from down south. We need a voice up here that is ours, and there is no shame in it. I do not know why we are always putting ourselves down when we do home-grown things. We should be celebrating it and asking for it to get better.

Money is another issue. When we were asked to film four episodes in 10 days, which is two hours of television over 10 days, it became a health and safety risk because of the hours that people were doing. The BBC agreed to increase it to 12 days, but there was no more money forthcoming. Instead, they just cut the weeks that we were actually on screen. When that happens, anybody following a soap just loses their place, and you can see why people get upset when they do not know what is going on. If it is a continuous drama, it should be a continuous drama. I know that there are budgets everywhere to be looked after, but all we are asking for is a career—a crack of the whip.

The Convener: Lynda Rooke, would you like to come in on the production aspect?

Lynda Rooke: Absolutely. Frank hit the nail on the head when he talked about authentic stories. People come up here and use wherever they are filming—Scotland, in this case—for its fantastic scenery and great locations, but will those stories reflect Scotland in 2025? Will people who actually live in this nation be used? That is really important. If the streamers come in and dominate this area with whatever it is, that will not be the product that is made. There will be no guarantee that people like Frank—or anybody else based in this nation—will be used. I have witnessed that right across the United Kingdom, in all four nations. There is a bias towards London and the south-east—it will not be up here, for sure.

The Convener: Paul Fleming, would you like to add anything?

Paul Fleming: There is very little to add. The point has been made that it is very hard to do a bit of dodgy accounting in relation to soaps. The soap is made using a permanent workforce of actors, crew and beyond. It is clearly established, rooted in communities and rooted in storylines that are about a place. You cannot ship that off to somewhere else in the country. You have a permanent workforce there who can build sustainable careers and take other work around that. That is the core of why a soap is an easy way to fulfil that obligation.

Our concern, when the BBC says that it will replace "River City" with other productions, is that it is much easier to label those as BBC Scotland productions but not deliver that. It is a lot easier to be a Scottish actor who works in Scotland but lives in London—that is the truth. Without workplaces like "River City"—without soaps themselves—that will become more and more true.

The Convener: Thank you. I move to questions from Mr Stewart, and then I will bring in Mr Bibby.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning. Thank you for your briefing note, and for your frankness and honesty so far in this session. You have already identified the crux of the matter: culture in Scotland is being eroded, or it appears to be being eroded, and this situation is another step in that process.

The broader picture is ensuring that BBC Scotland recognises that it has a public broadcasting duty to fulfil, as you have explained already. I think that most of us around the table get that and understand where you are coming from, but the issue is how to take that message further. You have identified the potential loss of opportunities for young people, including training and apprenticeships, in all parts of the process. The issue is how we ensure that we keep those opportunities—I think that that is where we are all coming from. That might be by showing how detrimental the loss of that would be to the sector.

My initial question is, how should we galvanise as a Parliament to provide support? We can bring people here, ask questions and probe—we can do all that—but, at the end of the day, if there is a campaign or a process to be carried out, where do we take that? How do we manage that to ensure that we achieve success? If we lose "River City", what is next to be lost and what will be lost after that?

08:45

Paul Fleming: Equity is also asking the question, "What is next to be lost?" As far as we are concerned, "River City" is the Rubicon that we are not prepared to cross. We think that, because of the passion that I know that lots of members of this committee have, we can hold the BBC to account not just on its behaviour in Scotland but for driving our members into greater precarity through the loss of soaps elsewhere in the country.

We have seen what happened with the loss of "Doctors" in Birmingham. We were told that an adequate replacement for that would be "MasterChef". In a similar way, we are told that the BBC is investing in Scotland through, for example, "The Traitors". That programme does not employ actors in a professional capacity; it is not that type of programme. It is a small, contained production brought up from London—it is a bit of a flash in the pan. If you look at the economic value that it creates, who is it engaging, who is it supporting and how is it growing an industry in Scotland? That is the question that the committee really needs to focus on when it speaks to the BBC. There can be a lot of smoke and mirrors when there is talk about protecting money for drama and protecting this money for Scotland, but the real question is what value it is delivering to Scotland and what value it is delivering to our members.f

It is critical to ask the BBC, "What is your commitment to cultural infrastructure in Scotland?" The ability to write on or act in "River City" gives someone the ability to work in a theatre. It gives them the ability to develop their craft and work elsewhere in the sector. It means that they can afford to raise a family in Scotland rather than being forced to move back to London or elsewhere, even as a Scottish actor, because work opportunities are more plentiful there.

That is the infrastructure that Scotland needs to build. If the BBC will not do it with soaps, we need to know how it will do it. The BBC might give the answer that it will produce more drama. However, this is not an artistic question about producing drama; this is a serious economic question about growth, infrastructure and a commitment to the people who live here.

Lynda Rooke: "Holby City" was based down in Borehamwood. There was a promise when that closed that a new programme would be made with production in the north-east of England. That never happened. Paul Fleming mentioned "Doctors". It was promised that more drama would be produced in Birmingham. What did we get? We got "MasterChef".

Having looked at some of the notes, I see that three productions could replace "River City". I think that your duty is to dig down and deconstruct exactly what those promises are. I can almost guarantee that the jobs, the infrastructure or any of those things that Frank Gallagher spoke about will not be replaced. I doubt that that will be the case when you dig down into it. For instance, "The

Traitors" is made by All3Media. If you look at who owns that, you will see that they are not in the UK.

The Convener: Frank Gallagher, would you like to add anything?

Frank Gallagher: I just think that it would be nice to get it out there what you are gonnae miss. People talk about "River City". I know better than anybody else that it is not everybody's cup of tea, but, as my friend said to me earlier, what is? I think that what has happened over the years is that we have let it become a bit of a joke. No matter how hard people are working—and they are working hard—the experience in the Scottish media seems to be that it is there to be laughed at. My understanding is that "River City" was getting more viewers in Scotland than "EastEnders" or "Coronation Street", but you would not know that through the Scottish media, because the show is basically a postage stamp up in the top right-hand corner.

It would just be good for people to understand what it is they could be losing here and what could replace it. Do you want more "MasterChef" or do you want more of "The One Show" at 7 o'clock on a Tuesday night? Would you not rather hear something that is in your own voice, even twice a week—just tuning in for half an hour to hear your own voice being spoken and your own culture? To me, it is important that we keep that in this country.

Alexander Stewart: You are calling for the budget to be ring fenced in order to support and save drama production. How likely do you think that is from the communications that you have had with the BBC? We have had the BBC here and, as you have said, there is a lot of smoke and mirrors when it indicates what it is trying to achieve or what its proposals are. When you scrape below the surface, things are not quite as rosy or as pleasant as it is trying to portray. If you were to have that funding in some capacity, do you believe that that would give you opportunities to develop and progress?

Paul Fleming: We are asking a good-faith question. The BBC's offer is that it will ring fence money for drama in Scotland. Okay. What does that mean for us as a trade union and for our members' jobs? What does it mean for production facilities in Dumbarton? What does it mean for the broader artistic community that is here? How will the BBC ensure that the people who are working on the new productions can have a sustainable career in the arts and entertainment industries? Those are the metrics by which we will hold it accountable on that commitment. Frankly, the BBC cannot deliver adequate answers to those questions.

One of our deep frustrations is the lack of consultation that we have had about what we are doing nationally with soaps. There is no doubt in our mind that that is important because of what is happening to "River City" in Scotland. If it were not "River City", it might be "Pobol y Cwm" in Wales. If it was not "River City", it might well be "Silent Witness" or a number of other long-running de facto continuous dramas elsewhere in the UK.

What is the strategy here? We all accept that viewer habits are changing. We all accept that there has to be artistic and editorial development, but what is the strategy to replace the employment and infrastructure that these things provide? The BBC could give us £9 million for three dramas tomorrow, but how long will those things last for? What happens if they are not popular? "River City" has a fan base; it has a clear, dedicated viewership. How are they brought along on this road? Who are those people? What are their demographics? Are we making drama to work for them? The BBC cannot adequately answer any of those questions.

Do we believe that you could do it? Yes. Does the BBC have to think very deeply about what a soap strategy is in every part of the UK, what a soap strategy looks like and what metrics you assess it by? Yes. However, the BBC just is not prepared to do that work. As Lynda Rooke said, there is a continued asset stripping of the BBC, as we see across the public sector, as a desire, essentially, to drive out one of the jewels in the crown of the welfare state. Part of the function of the BBC is to provide stable, high-quality employment to artists to ensure that they can exist outside of the productions that they are working on. Again, £9 million for three dramas for however long the director general of the BBC cares to give it to you is not really a deep intellectual commitment.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): We had BBC Scotland in front of us in January and there was no mention of this impending decision. Frank Gallagher mentioned that it was a "bombshell" and Paul Fleming just talked about a lack of consultation. Will you confirm whether Equity was consulted in advance of the decision being made?

Paul Fleming: No.

Neil Bibby: That was clearly a big shock for the cast and crew, Frank, as you said?

Frank Gallagher: It was a stunner, because we had all came into work that morning and it was unbeknownst to us that anything was going on. We were asked to meet in the canteen at 12 o'clock for lunch and a couple of statements were read out. We were basically told, "Now you all know. Thanks fur aw yer service, but move along now."

Neil Bibby: It is concerning if any employer takes decisions without consulting the union in advance—and, obviously, that applies to the BBC as well.

The BBC has talked a lot about the three replacement dramas and the £9 million being ring fenced. From what you have said already, it is clear that you do not think that that will fill the gap that "River City" would leave. My understanding is that the overall number of hours of production, even when you take into account those three dramas, will be less than the current provision under "River City". Is that your understanding as well?

Frank Gallagher: Sorry?

Neil Bibby: For the three replacement dramas, it is estimated that there will be 18 hours less hours of production overall compared with "River City".

Frank Gallagher: It is 18 weeks. When I first started, we were doing two blocks of 18 weeks, so 36 in total. Every year, it has got lower and lower until we get to the stage now of a block of 12 weeks. It was gonnae be shorter, but a health and safety issue came up about people taking ill through the hours that they were doing, so it was agreed by the BBC that we would make them 12-day shoots rather than 10-day shoots—so we got two extra days. There was no more money for that, so they decided just to put fewer episodes on. We had to split it up into three 11-week sections rather than it being on 52 weeks a year as it had been previously.

Neil Bibby: Even with the current provision or the current hours of "River City", I think that the proposed replacements will be significantly less overall.

Frank Gallagher: I cannot see how you would replace it. You are talking about three dramas. We are on 33 weeks a year and you will not get close to that with just making single dramas or some series. Again, it is about why you want to take something down. It is there for people to use. It has been a great training ground for people to come through, and any one of them will tell you that. All of a sudden, you are looking at it and saying, "Well, we don't need that". Actually, I think that we need it in this country, because there are a lot of people who, with a bit of training, could be employed in this country.

Paul Fleming: If I could just pick up on the really good point that you made about the lack of consultation. When a trade union says, "There was a lack of consultation", it is incumbent on us to say what consultation might or might not have delivered. We cannot just sit here and say that we should have been consulted and then end up in the same place.

Let us look at what is happening on other soaps and productions elsewhere. The model that "Hollyoaks" is looking at, which is an online-first omnibus-style approach in which where everything is kind of box-setted together. The BBC is looking at how it engages with this new phenomenon of vertical drama—that is, drama that is primarily watched on your phone. We have serious misgivings about essentially moving "River City" to a secondary channel rather than putting it front and centre of BBC Scotland programming. We believe that probably more hours, more production and storylines that are intended to be watched in a different way from a weekly soap or drama might well deliver different outcomes.

The reason consultation would have been important is that there are lessons to be learned from the evolving face of soaps around the United Kingdom. We as a union have lots of answers as to how this good work, these good jobs and this important infrastructure could have been protected by different editorial behaviours on the part of the BBC. There is a very real possibility that that consultation would deliver a material outcome.

Another point to be made is that the demand of the union is very clear: we want to save "River City". We do not believe that you can replace soaps industrially. We do not believe that enough options and avenues have been explored to ensure that a really important part of the Scottish cultural infrastructure is sustained. However, the point has to be made that our members are sat there with the prospect of no redundancy payment from the BBC and no clear line on where their contracts end, which might well be a very different question from where the soap ends. Many of them have a relationship with their agents, but their agents have not been getting them work in the same way as they would do if they were entirely freelance. They are being jettisoned.

Again, what consultation does is that it allows us to have a dignified exit if that is what "River City" needs or if there is a reformulation of who is in the cast or a reformulation of storylines, as has been happening on "Hollyoaks" recently in the north-west of England, where we have been able to have those conversations. What is really frustrating with the BBC is that there is a high-handedness to its suggestion that consultation would not have changed anything because of viewer habits and the behaviour of a landlord.

We have questions about the behaviour of the landlord. We know that other producers are dealing with viewing habits in different ways and using established brands as ways to experiment with different and innovative ways to present this sort of drama content. It just has not been stress tested enough by the BBC, and the people who are suffering are working people. They are our

members, Bectu members, technicians and crew. There is also the wider infrastructure, as Frank Gallagher mentioned, including security staff, catering staff and other people who are a vital part of the drama-making process.

Lynda Rooke: There is the knock-on effect on the local economy around Dumbarton and all the things that come with it. I worked on "Hollyoaks" for three years around Childwall in Liverpool. What was an ex-school that Phil Redmond had attended became a centre and a hub for drama production. There was more than just "Hollyoaks"; "Brookside" was partly based there as well. It is really important.

09:00

On the things that Frank Gallagher was referring to, there is no guarantee that those three dramas that they are talking about will ever consider any of those performers who are in "River City". There is no guarantee because the commercial pressures that you will hear about will always be about doing something more like what the streamers want. If you look at the streamers' content, it always has, if I dare say it, an American influence to it. It will not be indigenous production. It will not truly reflect the stories, the narratives and so on of Scotland in 2025 or whenever it is that they decide to do it. I will put it this way: it will be a different take on it.

Neil Bibby: Paul Fleming, you mentioned the BBC talking about changing viewing habits in relation to linear television. Even with a reduction in viewing figures, there is still a sizeable proportion of the Scottish public who tune in to watch "River City" regularly. As Frank Gallagher has said, there have been changes: it has moved slots and moved channels. What more could the BBC have done or should do in marketing the programme? There have been some exciting storylines recently. The BBC should be shouting more about the show and publicising the storylines. There are also issues about some of the information on the website not being updated regularly. Can you say what more could and should have been done by the BBC to promote the soap?

Frank Gallagher: I think that it could be trailed more when stories are building up so that people know that there is a story worth tuning into at that particular moment. There is also the fact that it would be nice if the press talked the show up sometimes instead of talking it down all the time. As I said before, it is not everybody's cup of tea but it is there for a significant number of people who have a regular date with it every week. You blank them out as well. Our demographic is quite wide and there are a lot of people who cannot sit up until 10 o'clock at night to watch it on the BBC channel or they do not have the wherewithal for iPlayer and things like that. They know that it is on at 7 o'clock on a Tuesday and 7 o'clock on a Thursday—except then it is not, and something else has come in and the show has been moved to 11 o'clock that night. It is about steadying the ship a bit and giving the show the credit it is due.

Neil Bibby: Do you have any thoughts on marketing, Paul Fleming?

Paul Fleming: The point that Frank Gallagher makes about the habit of the BBC to do down its own content or, indeed, to do down its own success is an endemic problem. As you said, viewer habits are changing, but there is a core viewing audience for "River City". The loudest supporters of the BBC, the licence fee and the infrastructure providers across the UK are the American streamers. Why is that? They are here because they essentially want to piggyback on the back of the taxpayer or on the back of the licence-fee payer and use the infrastructure that the BBC creates. That is no bad thing because what you have is the ability to attract production from around the world because of "River City"—it is a bedrock that means we are able to offer a place here for Netflix or anybody else.

Let us remember that the BBC is overwhelmingly the most watched streaming service, not just in the country but in the whole of Europe. In excess of 75 per cent of households across the UK consume more than eight hours of BBC content a week. That is an extraordinary success story. There is nothing else quite like it in the world, but the BBC tells us that it is failing, it is losing audiences and that things are difficult in order to justify the sale, essentially, of intellectual property—things that rightly belong to licence-fee payers in Scotland and elsewhere—to American streamers. That is not an acceptable way of doing things.

If the BBC viewed "River City" as something that is of vital intellectual and artistic importance to it, of structural importance to it, and, indeed, as part of a broader strategy to attract investment into Scotland, its marketing behaviours would be very different.

Lynda Rooke: Yes, I absolutely agree on marketing and what Frank Gallagher and Paul Fleming are talking about. For instance, "Hollyoaks" was known as hangover television: it was in the Sunday morning slot and had the double thing that everybody would get up and watch it bleary-eyed. That was a guaranteed thing and it worked for audiences. However, for those other three dramas that you are talking about, I ask the question: will they be sold as BBC Scotland content or will "BBC Scotland" just be a little line at the end of the credits when the show has gone up? Will it really identify this nation with that programme? I think not.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. It is great to see everyone. Lynda Rooke, when I heard you talking about the many soaps and dramas you have been in, I thought of my wee maw who used to love every soap known to man and beast. She would watch every one. It got even more confusing for my father as the years went on and the telly could automatically turn over because he lost control of which story was which, especially with many of your work colleagues appearing in different dramas at the same time.

The whole point is that that is the core audience, is it not? Those are the people. When you start messing about with schedules, that is a classic case of a production company losing faith in a product and not doing what Frank Gallagher says and trying to advertise it more and move it on. The minute you mess with schedules, that is almost a death knell for any show.

Is it not a case of maybe having a wee bit more confidence in the product and pushing it more? I am all about our voice being heard. Lynda, you have appeared in some of the dramas that were crucially important for the north-east of England: "Brookside" and "Coronation Street". When it came out in the 1960s, "Coronation Street" was revolutionary. The whole idea is that when you start messing with the schedules, that is a problem. The BBC has lost faith and it is messing about with the actual core audience. Is that not the case?

Paul Fleming: Definitely. I think that the point Frank Gallagher makes is that if you move the channel and you move the times, you create confusion. The artistic model of a soap is supposed to be that you know when it is on and you sit down and watch. We are all told that linear television is dead, but everybody watches a football match and everybody is dependent on linear television for live news. Look at the way a lot of the American streamers now package their big products: they will release in batches in order to create a moment that you talk about with your colleagues, on the bus or in the pub. There are lots of ways to make the continuing drama format work and grow its audience as well as making sure that there is a regular slot on the television that people can sit down and watch to see stories that reflect them.

If there was a consultation and a proper soap strategy, the BBC could be ahead of the game on all those things, but it is not. It is going down a very reductive route of managed decline. It is a managed decline of not just soaps but the entire BBC infrastructure that is so important for our members and, frankly, the economy as a whole.

George Adam: Another thing that you have mentioned before is that you cannot replace an on-going drama with anything else. It is just impossible. The BBC says that people do not watch television in the way that they used to, but if you look at it that way, "EastEnders" is only getting 4 million or 5 million in a good week and nobody is talking about "EastEnders" going. That used to be a monster of a show that had 20 million to 25 million viewers in its heyday.

There seems to be a situation. We had the BBC director general here. He said, "We are not trying to game the system"—he did sound a little bit like a geezer when he said that. Yet, at that same time, where there was Scottish content, it is now thousands of hours of snooker. The thing is that it is about our voices and about what we do. Surely there is a way that the BBC can work with you to try to find a way out of this. This drama cannot be replaced.

Frank Gallagher: I agree completely. What are ye gonnae bring in? If you take a regular series away, it will take a long while for it to be replaced by anything. Does the BBC think that it is Netflix or Amazon? The kind of programmes that it is talking about doing are the things you would usually find on those services. Is that the demographic that the BBC is talking about now? In contrast you will get all ages—kids at school to pensioners—watching "River City". If that is taken away, we lose a part of our own voice. You lose the fact that you can listen to that voice twice a week. It might make you laugh or it might not and it might make you angry or you might think it is absolute rubbish, but at least you can tune in and hear your own voice and hear what is happening in the country. Some of the storylines are fantastical but, again, that is what people like to watch. As long as they are hearing their own voices in the show, it makes a big difference.

Lynda Rooke: We are here as Equity and as Equity members and I think that you also have power. You have power to pull in the BBC and call it to account. We have a way of doing it as well by speaking to the BBC, and we have collective agreements with it. Our members work for the BBC. I would say that we should do a joint project: we should come in from both angles, put the pressure on, ask the real questions and get the answers. You are powerful people.

George Adam: Thank you very much.

The Convener: Do not let it go to your head, George. I will bring in Patrick Harvie next.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Good morning, everyone. I put on the record my thanks to the production team for letting me come and visit the set recently with one of my colleagues and for welcoming us there. As Jackie Baillie knows very well, I grew up about 10 minutes' walk away from where that set is based. When I was growing up and getting involved in am-dram at the

Dumbarton People's Theatre, if I had known that 10 minutes' walk away there was a place where young people were getting their first opportunity in that career, I might never have bothered the Scottish Parliament. If things had worked out differently, who knows?

George Adam: It is just a different drama, mate. [*Laughter.*]

Patrick Harvie: A very different drama. We have less explosive plot lines, but there we are.

The aspect that I want to talk about is the sense of there being an ecosystem in which there are those first opportunities for people to start their careers. That has been talked about very clearly. The BBC and public service broadcasting used to be the bulk of production because there was nothing else. Now the BBC is a player in a much more diverse market that is dominated, as Paul Fleming and others have been saying, by some of the big streaming services, which will never have a self-interest in investing in that ecosystem. How do we get public service broadcasting—and the way it is funded—to recognise that it still has that on-going responsibility to invest in the ecosystem and the infrastructure rather than just to produce individual bits of content to put out into a market for viewers?

Paul Fleming: When people talk about car manufacturers or steel, they talk about it in terms of a broader economic impact. Why is steel so important? Because of the things you produce with steel. You cannot have a green industrial revolution if you do not have adequate domestic production. When we talk about energy, we do not talk about energy for the sake of energy itself; we talk about energy and how we manage the economy and manage growth in a broad sense.

The BBC is never challenged with those questions. It is never treated like an economic actor. It is never treated as the most appealing reason that the United Kingdom has for continuous investment here. You can offer all the tax breaks in the world, but it is the regular employment that the BBC gives to our members, and indeed to technical staff, that essentially creates a platform on which the streamers can build. That is never talked about; the BBC is never challenged and held to account as to what role it is playing in economic growth. That is a very trade union answer to give, but it is true.

We are not talking about training opportunities or whatever just because it is nice or because it gives young people a voice. Very often, arts and cultural opportunities are treated as pathways to something else: people say, "We should have more drama in schools so kids are more articulate at giving a corporate presentation". That is not the function of such training. We want people to have access to the training in order to work in our industry. Why? First, because we think that it is a great social good and secondly, because the proof of the economic growth that it delivers is astounding. We were in the north of Ireland the other day talking about how, over there, for every pound invested in live performances, an extra £1.27 is returned to the local economy. That is the level of return that you get if you are directly investing in arts and culture.

When you start looking at the BBC and what it can produce by having an infrastructure here, attracting streamers and then all the ancillary economic activity that happens around that, the figures are extraordinary. You do not do that without actors. How on earth do you have actors living and working in Scotland, telling Scottish stories, if you do not have regular employment for them? The BBC's response—saying that £9 million is ring fenced or that there will be three more Scottish dramas—shows that it does not feel that it has to be held accountable on that front.

One of our great worries is that 95 per cent of the production of scripted content in this country is made on our collective agreements. We are one of the largest entertainment unions in the world. We have agreements with Netflix, we have agreements with Amazon, we have agreements with Apple—all the big players. However, 30 years ago, the BBC agreement represented about 50 per cent of the work that our members undertook. Now essentially the only work that is produced under the BBC agreement is the soap operas around the country. They are the only way in which those quality terms and conditions are communicated because the BBC has outsourced all other forms of production.

For the licence-fee payer, there is a duty on the BBC to explain why we are paying into this system and who is taking out of it. It is Netflix and Amazon. How on earth is that a sensible economic strategy if the BBC's function is to provide infrastructure and growth?

09:15

Patrick Harvie: Do you agree that it is also not really in the long-term interests of the BBC because, fundamentally, it weakens the political argument for sustaining the licence fee and the principle of public service broadcasting altogether?

Paul Fleming: Absolutely. The "River City" debacle is a distilled example of the BBC's bizarre self-loathing and desperate desire to undermine itself. It is an incredible shame and audiences as well as artists are losing out as a result.

Patrick Harvie: I put one more question to Frank Gallagher, as someone who has been involved in the "River City" production for a long

time now. BBC Scotland decided to take a punt and make “River City”. It took a risk and invested in it and now we are seeing the plug being pulled, without consultation—it was a bombshell announcement. Can I ask about the period in-between? Has the BBC ever come to the production team, or the crew or the cast or anybody involved, and said, “Look, we need to make some changes to make ‘River City’ viable for the long term. What positive changes could we make?” Has it had a conversation at any point about what positive changes—whether that is experimenting with the format, investing in aspects of how the show develops or the way in which it is promoted—might be possible that would give the show a stronger future in the BBC’s eyes?

Frank Gallagher: That would be a bit above my pay grade. I know that, basically from 2010, it was getting cut back every time. As I said, first, we done two 18-week blocks, then it was two 17-week blocks, then it was 16 weeks and then 14 weeks and now it is down to 12. You were always thinking, “Is the writing on the wall here?” But each time we got cut, the programme came back punching well above its weight again, so you felt comfortable in your own place down there and confident that you were producing stuff that people could watch, even though the budgets were getting stretched so tight. That was a defensive mechanism. It was almost like people were on the battlements, saying, “We are determined that this will go on no matter what the financial situation is at the moment”. You keep hoping it is gonnae get better but, with the way that the world is, generally it does not.

A lot of young people who come into the production do not just come and do the training and disappear. There have been people down there who started as a runner or a driver, who have ended up being first assistant directors on some major dramas. There is a particular boy there, Ryan, who started off as a camera assistant and is now one of the top cameramen on “River City”. There is a way to move through “River City” itself. It is not just saying, “Here is a wee shot ae this and off ye go”; it is saying, “There is a place here for ye, if we’ve got the place, but ye can get yersel prepared for other places”.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Thanks, panel. I am conscious that last night I paid my licence fee and I should also confess that I am a sporadic viewer of “River City”. It is one of those things that I have dipped into and watched sometimes. I know a number of people who have worked on it, including members of the cast and at least two of the writers who have been involved in it. The point has been made that much of its value is to do with it being almost a media cultural college for Scotland. It is a central pillar of media in Scotland.

I understand the point that has been made about the three dramas: they would be no replacement for what is there just now. I know that we want to make sure that “River City” stays, but if we are ever to convince—it is a big if—the BBC to spend the money it gets in Scotland in Scotland on something other than “River City”, what would be needed for to replicate its impact? Would a soap, with all the on-going opportunities that that provides, be the only thing that could replace what is there just now and have the same effect?

Paul Fleming: I will let the working actors answer from their perspective of the different modes of production. They see the stability that can be brought to their working life, which is the core bit of our demands for the BBC.

However, there are lots of things that the BBC could do. It could commit to producing major, sporadic one-off dramas in Scotland over a long period of time, but in order to get the same level of impact as “River City” gets, three dramas for £9 million would not be enough. You are probably talking about doubling or trebling that amount of money and doubling and trebling that amount of drama output. If that is the commitment that the BBC wants to make, that would be very welcome for our members. If it wants to commit to ensuring that people can afford to live and work in Scotland at every part of the production process and to offer enough opportunities to provide that as a bedrock, we will look at it.

Soaps are a very efficient way of delivering stable employment, popular art and the broader economic and cultural infrastructure. At the minute, stand-alone, one-off drama short series just cannot do that on a pound-for-pound basis. If the BBC does not have any cash, which is what it constantly tells us when we are in pay negotiations, that seems to be a very bizarre choice for it to be making.

There are other things that it can do, but they are, pound for pound, more expensive to deliver the same economic output. Why would a Scottish actor move back from London to Scotland to work on a production that has a limited lifespan unless you know that there is a rich and thriving cultural scene where you can get other work? That is the problem, and that cultural scene is what “River City” provides—not a safety net, but a platform on which to build.

Keith Brown: On jobs and the opportunities that they create, Frank Gallagher was making a point about the authentic Scottish voice. None of those other options would necessarily replicate what “River City” does in that regard. The BBC is turning down the voice of Scotland through this, and there is no guarantee that what “River City” provides would be replaced or replicated.

It is a kind of cultural vandalism, because we will end up with a situation in which, I would imagine, we will be surprised to hear a Scottish voice on a soap or drama from elsewhere in the UK, rather than a situation in which somebody knows that they can tune into something where they will hear something that they can relate to, because it is in their own voice. Would that be your view, Frank Gallagher?

Frank Gallagher: If the BBC is looking for other things, there is one other way that it can look at the situation. It could invest more money in "River City" and bring it up to the level that it thinks it should be at, or bring it up to the level that makes it more relevant. Instead of scrounging around for other things to do, such as other dramas, it could say, "Why don't we invest in what we already have?" At one point, we were doing hour-long episodes, and that sustained itself for long enough. I know that things change in TV all the time, but you think, "Why is the answer to everything just to cut it? What about investing in it for better results?"

Lynda Rooke: Absolutely. It is about long-term commitment. That is one of the most important things for the security of performers and others who working in it, and for what can be built on the back of it. I have not understood what the other option is.

Whatever the potential three other things are, they will have a definite commercial pressure put on them. Such pressure often comes from the streamers.

When I came into your building just now, I saw that there was a big placard out there talking about LGBT+ and equality, diversity and inclusion. I do not have to explain to you who is president of the United States at the moment and exactly what has been announced as regards EDI. A number of streamers—Warner Brothers, Paramount, Disney+, Amazon—have already stood there and said, "We are losing our EDI commitment." Those will be the people who will be coming into this nation going, "I don't care what your law is. As far as we're concerned, we have our own rules."

If we are going to push for a Scotland in 2025 where marginalised communities are pushed out and the diversity of this country will be ignored, there is something wrong.

Keith Brown: Your point, then, is that an on-going, long-term commitment provides better opportunities for diversity, equality and inclusion.

Lynda Rooke: Absolutely.

Paul Fleming: The point that you make about Scottish voices is important. We also have to ask ourselves: which Scottish voices? Is it the story of working-class Scottish people that we see on screen? Is it working-class Scottish artists getting employment opportunities? Equity has 50,000 members. The average income of our members over the course of a year is £15,000 from the industry. The average income across the UK is £36,000. That is driven not by low pay when they are in work; it is driven by the scarcity and precarity of the work.

By removing "River City", what the BBC does is remove any opportunity for working-class artists to think, "This is something I can do". People might call our members luvvies and think that the industry is paved with gold, but if you are a working-class parent watching your kid in a nativity play, and they are really good and they come off and say, "Mum, Dad—I want to be an actor," you will know, in that moment, that you do not want your child to be an artist, because of the economic precarity that it brings.

Things like "River City"—things like soap—work. Frankly, the fact that those working-class people are paying their licence fee means that they deserve not only to have and to see their stories told, but to have their children, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and grandparents working in those industries that they are paying for. It is a very different point of pressure from those that apply to a commercial streaming operation that is run out of the United States or anywhere else. That is what the loss of "River City" is emblematic of.

We are very realistic. What we want is a pause and a deep consultation about how this can be done differently. We want a national soap strategy across the UK, so that we can manage our members' expectations and their terms and conditions.

We also want not just some commitments about Scottish drama, but serious investment in Scotland, ensuring that the money of licence fee payers, pound for pound, is returned to them and that economic and social opportunities are being grown. Those are our demands and that is what we will be pushing to the industry to deliver.

Keith Brown: It is very useful to have had the offer from Lynda Rooke to try to work together on this. It is difficult enough for us to influence BBC Scotland without trying to influence the rest of the BBC in the UK, to be honest, but I think that we should do that.

For full transparency, I am not from Dumbarton. I took the high road down to "Garnock Way" when I was younger. I am from Edinburgh.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I have a confession. I am not just the MSP for Dumbarton; I feel as if I am the de facto MSP for Shieldinch as well.

I had the benefit of speaking directly to the landlord because I knew who they were. To suggest that they were surprised that BBC Scotland indicated that it wanted to leave would perhaps be an understatement. They were expecting the lease to be renewed and had no plans to do anything other than to continue the lease. For whatever reason, it appears that the BBC was happy to have people believe that the decision was down to the actions of the landlord and not one that it made itself, which, frankly, is simply not true. Why do you think that it did that? Paul, do you want to go first?

Paul Fleming: It did that because the BBC does not have a plan and it is a very convenient excuse. When we were first told—and you take what the BBC says in good faith—I wondered why on earth a commercial landlord would pull the rug from underneath a key piece of broadcasting and economic infrastructure. If that was a possibility, why did the BBC not have a 10-year contract? Why did it not have a 10-year plan? To be frank, even if what it was saying—and is still saying in a mealy-mouthed way—is true, I think that not having a plan is even worse for the BBC.

That is one of the reasons why we want a UK-wide soap strategy. If what is being said is that there is a general issue with soaps and the situation with landlords is a bit precarious, and that that is why "River City" is going and not "Pobol y Cwm" or "EastEnders", that is bizarre behaviour on the part of the BBC. To find out that the information is dubious was shocking.

We can talk about economic importance, and we can talk about social and structural importance. I want to take the discussion back to this being about people's jobs and people's lives. This is how people clothe their children and pay their gas bill, and they find out that the BBC has been, at the very least, less than straight with them about the circumstances in which they are going and have no guarantees about what their exit packages will look like or when their contracts will end. The BBC has given no thought to that and had no consultation with the union about it. That is fundamentally undignified.

I do not know whether Frank Gallagher wants to talk about this, but I was in the green room on the day that a question mark was raised over the position of the landlord, and I am not sure that it is possible to express the general feeling of our members in parliamentary language.

09:30

Frank Gallagher: It was one of shock. One of the questions that one of the actors asked the people from the BBC that day was: "How can you let a lease run out like that? It's almost impossible; people are in touch with each other maybe six months or a year before leases come to an end, but you're coming down here to tell us that it's just been sprung on you and that's the reason?" Although there were a few reasons put in—I am not privy to whether any of them were true—some ae it just sounded like, "We're just making this up. We need something to say and that's what we're gonnae say." Afterwards, we were finding out things, including from Jackie Baillie, which were making us think, "That's not true."

What can you do, though? As I said before, it is well above my pay grade to get involved in stuff like that. I still work there, and I would be quite happy to work for the next year. There was a sense of shock and just disbelief that they could be that stupid to let something like that happen.

Jackie Baillie: Clearly, convener, it was the case—this is from the landlord's own mouth—that there was no intention to end the lease, so it is very disappointing that that impression was given.

I will move on to the slightly wider issue of the production facilities at Dumbarton. It is not just "River City" that will end; all production will cease at Dumbarton as the lease is given up. The BBC seems to think that it can manage without permanent production facilities in Scotland, and it will not be permanently replacing the capacity that was afforded by the studios at Dumbarton. What do you think are the implications of that decision?

Lynda Rooke: It is definitely jobs, is it not? There is a complete lack of commitment. I know about this from situations across the UK. Something closes down that has been used for other facilities as well—people go there because it is very easy as there is a an established set-up and a good unit base from which to operate. Guess what happens once that goes?

It just shows, very clearly, how London-centric the BBC is. It denies that—it talks about BBC Scotland, BBC Northern Ireland and whatever. However, trust me. It is disgusting that it does not have the capacity to understand that. It comes in and says, "Okay, we have just let that run out"—let us be honest, it fibs, because there is an economy of truth here. Jobs will go, and they will be long-term jobs. Once the facilities go and those jobs disappear, they do not come back quickly. They go somewhere else and all you get is white caravans—the big ones—coming in, so that they can stop somewhere with a big unit base to film the Highlands, inner-city Glasgow or whatever, and then clear off again. Trust me—they probably will not be from Scotland.

Paul Fleming: I think that this goes back to the question that Mr Brown asked about the bang for your buck that you get from "River City". The BBC is right that without "River City" as the anchor for

Dumbarton, a lot of the economic rationale is lost. “River City” provides that plank for other productions to happen on and around it. That is how soaps play a vital part in the industrial ecosystem of the industry. The BBC is not making a very strategic decision. If the Dumbarton studios have to close at some point, it should find a permanent home and a permanent base.

I will give you a cautionary tale. The BBC’s most underinvested-in nation or region in the United Kingdom is the midlands in England. The English midlands region pays 26 per cent of the licence fee but receives 2 per cent back. That has been the case in 14 of the last 15 years. What is the principal driver of that? It is the closure of Pebble Mill studios in Birmingham 20 years ago.

When the BBC says, “We do not need these facilities in order to do production”, that is true. Lots of production can be done remotely. The world is very different now and is much more interconnected. However, what is our experience of what happens when the BBC has done that? A lot of the platforms and a lot of the infrastructure go and, all of a sudden, the broader investment goes as well.

There are cautionary tales everywhere. In Scotland, we are very fortunate to have the facility of this committee and the Parliament’s scrutiny powers to get, I hope, some different answers out of the BBC, and to get BBC Scotland at least to think in a slightly different way from its counterparts in London.

Jackie Baillie: Convener, I have one last request of you. Would the committee consider a visit to “River City”, so that you can see the scale of the operation and the ecosystem that supports it? Who knows? Patrick Harvie might get a walk-on part as many Dumbarton residents have done in their time. I would commend that to the committee.

The Convener: We will take that on board, Ms Baillie, and discuss it as a committee. Thank you for bringing it up.

I will finish with a question. The remit of the committee is to follow the work of the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture. The film industry in Scotland is seen as a shining example of a growth industry with many successes. There is also the issue of the fair work agenda in Scotland.

In terms of the ecosystem that Patrick Harvie was talking about, what impact will the facility going have? You have outlined some of the areas, but I am interested in understanding the impact on fair work, or less precarious work. I would not say that the work is not precarious, Frank, but it is less precarious for people working within the industry. As a public sector broadcaster, is the BBC meeting some of its objectives in those areas?

Paul Fleming: The point about precarity is important. It is important to acknowledge how brave Frank Gallagher is. A number of “River City” cast members and Equity members are here with us today. Pay in our industry is phenomenally low and it is brave to speak out. I am not making a specific accusation about the BBC, but when precarity is baked into an industry, it is there to stop people standing up for their rights and challenging decisions that they see as wrong for the workforce. That is a core part of it.

One of our anxieties as a trade union is that the loss of “River City” would mark an increasing precarity in the industry, an increasing inability for people to enter it and an inability for people to speak out freely and be part of the industry in which they fundamentally create the capital. It is phenomenally brave of them to stand up and speak out, and to do that not just for artists or for themselves, but to do it for audiences and infrastructure in Scotland.

To follow up on Jackie Baillie’s request, it is also worth saying that if you all went to Dumbarton and saw the infrastructure that is there—and, frankly, saw the scale of it for something that in your mind is quite a small TV production—you would see an extraordinary operation, from the people serving you your lunch all the way through to the artists on the set. You will see what it means economically.

I pay tribute to Jackie Baillie, Neil Bibby, Pam Duncan-Glancy and the others who came down to visit us, and to the cabinet secretary, who has been, I think, very robust on the issue. Full credit to him for coming to an all-member meeting of our members and giving a very clear vision as to what he feels his role is here. He is certainly asking the right questions.

What we really need from the committee is that kind of approach to the BBC, so that you do not just get the answer, “Oh, well, you will get a bit of drama. That is okay because this is an artistic question, but if it was about an editorial issue, well, that’s none of your business.” You need to ask, “How could you possibly lose Dumbarton? How is it so precarious as a major production facility? What do you mean £9 million? How long? How far? How many hours? How many people? How many of them will be based here? What metrics will you assess it by?” You need to ask what the road map is to deliver every penny from Scottish licence-fee payers as spend back in Scotland—and not just on work that is badged as Scottish for Scottish artists who are forced to live outside Scotland because they can only have a career elsewhere. You need to ask how the BBC will ensure that it is building a cultural infrastructure

that attracts investment and growth. Those are the big questions for the BBC.

Lynda Rooke: I am also thinking of the locality of Dumbarton. If you go to Media City in Salford, the Old Granada Studios, Childwall or wherever, the local community who live nearby may not all work there, but they have a sense of identity about the place. It is theirs. It is something that they own in the sense that it is a locality with a regional identity. That will go—it will disappear.

The other thing about precarity is that people could lose their home. If they decide that that is a risk, they will move and you will lose talent again. We have known that to happen in the past in Scotland. I know that many people have gone down to London or wherever because they could not make a living here. I am very pleased that some people have been able to do so and have a long-term plan, but that is very rare.

Soaps and continuing dramas are one of the few bits left of the industry—apart from some opera companies, although that area is now dodgy—that allow people to think about having a long-term place to work and be. Many other people get a job and are there for years. I know that things have changed, but overall there is some security, and this was one bit of security.

When I was doing the soaps, I sometimes breathed a sigh of relief that I could pay off the overdraft and get myself back on the straight and narrow. That is so important. You take that away and you really are throwing people to the wolves. I speak from the heart about this, about what it feels like and about the plans for people who live in the area.

The other soaps—"Coronation Street" and "Emmerdale"—have opened their doors to say, "Here we are. Come and look at our set. Come and look at our identity". People are queuing up to look at "Game of Thrones" and "Derry Girls".

Again, economic opportunities are being missed. I do not know how often there are studio tours or whatever, but those things are important. I know that "Pobol y Cwm" lets people in sometimes to have a look. Ultimately, what "River City" offers the performers, crew and technicians is a long-term view and the security that is so rare in this industry.

The Convener: Frank, I am not asking you to reveal anything personal about your own circumstances, but in general, are there salaried actors with contracts on "River City"? Is it a contract that is based on production time?

Frank Gallagher: It is freelance.

The Convener: Is nearly everyone a freelancer?

Frank Gallagher: They are all freelance, yes.

What Lynda was saying is right. If you go there one day, you will see the number of people milling around, and each of them has a purpose. Then just imagine that it is blank and that everything has gone. You cannot say that people have moved on somewhere else, because it is a training ground that brings people through so that they have the experience to move on somewhere else. If nowhere is doing that at all, where do they go?

The Convener: Does the freelance nature of the work apply to the production crew as well?

Paul Fleming: I will be hyper-technical and clear. Frank Gallagher is quite right. People are freelance for the purposes of tax. They are limb (b) workers for the purposes of employment law and for the purposes of collective bargaining. There is a dual status, if you like, to treating people as limb (b) workers: a tax status, and the status of working under a collective agreement. I gather that, on "River City", the production is a bit of a mix. Some technicians are permanently employed and others will be employed in a freelance capacity.

Consequently, we believe that our members have full rights once they have been engaged for two years or more. Where else in the industry do you get engaged for two years or more than on a soap opera or maybe a long-running west end show? Those are basically your only options. There is a very big fair work question there if you take away that kind of employment and that kind of engagement. The nature of soaps is that people get killed off, people move on and storylines change. Our members accept that precarity is baked into even the most secure work. Our collective agreements deal with that—you get a severance payment when you get bumped off. That is our position.

That level of uncertainty is something that we fundamentally accept and our collective agreements deal with it, but it is a very different uncertainty from being in a show that might have one or two seasons, an unpredictable storyline and a tiny core cast. There is a real difference in the quality of employment, if you like, or in the stability of the employment that is offered in those two scenarios.

The Convener: Keith Brown has a final question.

Keith Brown: Going back to the question of diversity, I think that it is fantastic that you have managed to find a leading role for a Hibs fan in the cast as well. [*Laughter.*]

The discussion is centred very much on the BBC for obvious reasons, but the witnesses have made a point about the symbiotic relationship between what the BBC does and what "River City"

does, and what Netflix, Amazon, Paramount or whoever else do. Is there not a case for looking at those organisations too? I know that it may be a bit of a fool's errand, but can they not contribute in some way to what we want to see? I am thinking of something along the lines of the informal cultural college that "River City" has produced for different careers within the industry. Could they contribute as well, or would they just not consider that?

09:45

Paul Fleming: I will be very blunt. I am not sure that the streamers pay their way in terms of infrastructure in the United Kingdom as a whole. We have to be realistic: one of the reasons why they come here in such great numbers is that the BBC provides the infrastructure. I am not sure that the BBC always gets the best deal. There is a bit of asset stripping of the state going on, if I am honest. The pressures that the streamers then create on the economic and administrative concerns of the BBC mean that it goes in a more corporate direction, which leads to a death loop downward.

I went to a fascinating round table with the major streamers and the Government in Westminster back in 2022, at which it was very clear that the biggest advocates for the licence fee and the BBC were the streamers, not the Government and not the BBC itself, because they recognised that infrastructure. That is the reality of how the industry works. I do not think that that is a bad thing. Part of the role of the state is to provide that infrastructure and attract that investment. The BBC does not take that role very seriously, and it does not advocate for or speak about that role.

We also have to be realistic about what is going to happen. Donald Trump has been very clear that he believes that Hollywood is dying and that that is partly because all the work is being exported. I do not think that the fact that people worked on "Barbie" under a British collective agreement is destroying Hollywood. I do not believe that making "Indiana Jones", "Star Wars" or small independent dramas under British collective agreements in the United Kingdom or in Scotland is a threat to Hollywood. In fact, I think that it helps Hollywood. However, Donald Trump does not. This is not the political moment for the BBC to rely on some sort of streamers levy or some sort of encouragement so that the streamers invest and publicly and openly say that they are committed to broadcasting and investment in Scotland or anywhere outside the US. That ship has sailed.

In reality, there is one place to go. I am at risk of getting my figures slightly wrong, but we have to remember, amidst complaints of the cost, the incredible value of the BBC to the licence-fee payer. As I said, the overwhelming majority of people watch more than eight hours of BBC content a week. The average British household pays around £500 a year in TV subscriptions now, £150 of which is the licence fee. Look at what you are getting pound for pound and hour for hour.

There has been an awful lot of talk in the press recently about "Adolescence", which is an incredibly moving and important drama that was produced, to be fair, by a streamer. The talk has been, "How do we get this into schools?" That is the wrong conversation. The programme was not designed for children; it was designed for adults, and 20 years ago it would have been watched by every adult in the country because it would have been on a public service broadcaster, to which everybody had equal access. If you wanted to watch the football at the weekend, you were able to watch it because it was on the BBC, ITV or Channel 4.

This is about the erosion of people's equality of opportunity to watch. The more that we are dependent on streamers, for which you pay an annual or monthly fee, the more that we are digitally excluding audiences.

Encouraging the streamers and getting them to invest in return for a levy is one thing, but there are great unintended consequences. You cannot replace the infrastructure of public service broadcasting for audiences or the stability of employment for artists. Only the BBC has an interest in British economic growth. Only the BBC has an interest in British intellectual property or building British infrastructure. The BBC should have more of a commitment to Scotland, Scottish infrastructure and Scottish stories, rather than to the United Kingdom as a whole, which necessarily makes it a London-centric organisation. That is the strategy that has to be demanded from it.

Keith Brown: I am not sure that we should accept the context that Trump wants to set for us as a reason for not pursuing that, and it would be interesting if the committee were to get people from Netflix or Paramount in front of it to find out. You said that people benefit greatly from this, so let us try to monetise that bit.

The Convener: Thank you. I am glad that we managed not to get drawn down the football route there, although it is a common theme in this committee, I have to say.

I thank the witnesses very much for appearing before the committee this morning. The committee has a great interest in our cultural remit in terms of Creative Scotland. We have talked a lot about the ecosystem in Scotland, which is one of the things that I see at risk here. I saw many of the actors who are in "River City" coming up through the National Theatre of Scotland and the Citizens

Theatre. That all contributes to the culture of Scotland, which this decision makes more precarious.

Thank you once again.

09:49

Meeting continued in private until 10:54.

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