



BBC Editorial Guidelines:
Outcome of the consultation on the BBC Editorial Guidelines

Introduction

On 7 November 2024 the BBC opened a consultation on the BBC Editorial Guidelines, these set the editorial standards for the BBC and apply to everyone who works or produces output for the BBC.

The BBC periodically reviews the Guidelines to ensure they keep pace with legal, regulatory, editorial, and technological changes, as well as changes in audience habits and attitudes. These reviews take place approximately every four to five years.

Under the current Charter, the BBC Board is responsible for the Editorial Guidelines. The Agreement states that the BBC must: “set, publish, review periodically, and observe guidelines designed to secure appropriate standards in the context of the UK Public Services”.

The consultation document from November 2024 outlining the proposed changes to the Editorial Guidelines can be found [here](#). Following the consultation the Guidelines were then further amended and approved by the BBC Board. On 24 June 2025, the BBC has published the 2025 Editorial Guidelines. These will come into effect on 1 September 2025, to allow BBC staff and production companies working with us time to adjust to the changes. The existing guidelines, published in 2019, remain in place until then.

Responses to the consultation

We received 46 responses to the consultation, consisting of 34 from organisations or academics and 12 individual responses to the consultation. Where permission has been given, responses are published on our website. Additionally, a number of stakeholders indicated that they would not be submitting a response/had no comment to make.

The BBC would like to thank all those who took part in the consultation for their responses.

The BBC considered the points raised in each response carefully and, where appropriate, amended the Guidelines.

The responses to the public consultation covered a variety of issues many of which were out of the scope of the consultation.

Where issues have been raised which are outside the scope of the consultation but relevant to other parts of the BBC, feedback has been shared with the relevant department.

The two biggest Guidelines issues that arose were in relation to gender identity and language around the use of the word ‘terrorist’.

In relation to gender identity, most of the responses were about the use of language. Much of this was outside of the scope of the consultation however the comments have been shared with the BBC News Style guide team.

However, linked to the gender identity debate were comments in relation to what constitutes a 'child' in the Guidelines with a number of respondents arguing that the BBC should specify that a child is anyone under 18, as per the legal definition of a child.

The Guidelines specify that a child is anyone under the age of 16; the BBC has specific Guidelines for 'young people' – those aged 16 and 17. Ofcom identifies a child as under 15.

The Guidelines continue with the current definition. 16 is the age of consent, it is the age a person can see a medical professional without a parent/carer present, and in the case of the Scottish Referendum, 16-year-olds were allowed to vote. It would be restrictive to expect programme makers to treat a 17-year-old in the same way as a 9-year-old, for example. The Guidelines continue to reflect the requirements of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code when it comes to protecting the under-18s.

A number of respondents argued that Hamas should always be called 'terrorists' and/or that the BBC should always refer to the Home Office's list of proscribed organisations as 'terrorist organisations'.

The revised Guidelines on Impartiality (section 2), Accuracy (section 3), Conflicts of Interest (section 4) and War, Terror and Extreme Violence, Disaster and Disorder (section 12) are very clear on the requirements on the BBC when it comes to covering war and any terror related issues. The BBC does not ban the use of the word 'terrorist', but the Guidelines require it to be used with attribution. It was felt that no further changes were required.

CHANGES TO THE GUIDELINES FOLLOWING CONSULTATION

Section 3 – Accuracy:

Two changes were made to section 3, Accuracy, in response to comments by the Board of Deputies of British Jews and Camera UK respectively.

The Board of Deputies of British Jews argued that Material from Third Parties (3.4.13) in section 3 should be expanded to specifically reference freelance camera people and stringers who may work for other organisations. Whilst the BBC felt that the Guidelines were robust and no further clarification was needed, it did agree to the Board of Deputies' request that this section includes a cross reference to section 12. This Guideline has been amended so it now cross-references two parts of Section 12: Accuracy and Impartiality (12.4.1-4) and Sieges, Mass Killings, Hostage-Taking, Hijacking and Kidnapping (12.4.19).

Guideline 3.4.13 now reads:

Material supplied by third parties, including news providers, needs to be treated with appropriate caution, taking account of the reputation of the source.

The BBC should normally only rely on an agency report if it can be substantiated by one of

its journalists or if it is sourced from a reputable news agency.

Material supplied by third parties should only be used if it is credible and reliable.

Any credit or attribution that is included relating to the use of third-party material should be in accordance with the appropriate BBC credit guidelines.

(See Section 12 War, Terror and Extreme Violence, Disaster and Disorder: 12.4.1-4 and 12.4.19)

(See guidance: Crediting and Labelling External Relationships)

Camera UK argued that it can take too long for corrections to be made to online material. The wording, 'in a timely manner' has therefore been added to 3.4.35 so it now reads:

3.4.35 Where there is an expectation that content will be permanently available, such as on BBC News Online; or is available on demand, such as on BBC iPlayer, serious breaches of editorial standards must be corrected and the error acknowledged in a timely manner. In exceptional cases, content may be removed. It should be clear what changes have been made, unless there are editorial or legal reasons not to do so.

Where mistakes are unlikely to be a serious breach of editorial standards, a correction should be published on that platform, so that it is visible before the output is re-played. Such on-demand content does not then normally need to be changed or revoked.

Section 5 Harm and Offence:

Humanists UK and the National Secular Society asked that Guideline 5.4.66 in Harm and Offence be amended to reflect the law change on blasphemy in Scotland. This now reads:

5.4.66 Any content dealing with matters of religion and likely to cause offence to those with religious views and beliefs must be editorially justified, taking account of audience expectations and generally accepted standards. Content makers have the freedom to cover matters relating to religion, including critically or in a way that may be highly offensive to some, but they should always be aware of the potential for offence.

There is no longer an offence of blasphemy in England, Scotland and Wales and it is no longer prosecuted in Northern Ireland. However, religious beliefs are central to many people's lives and can arouse strong views and emotions. Care should be taken to avoid unjustified offence. Blasphemy laws around the world can be very different and content producers may seek advice from Programme Legal Advice.

In England, Scotland and Wales, legislation forbids a person from using threatening words

or behaviour or displaying written material that is threatening, with the intention of stirring up religious hatred.

The Women's Aid Foundation raised the issue of misogynistic abuse in relation to Harm and Offence. The section on language (5.4.27) has been amended to include misogynistic abuse. The Guideline now says:

5.4.27 The effect of strong language depends on the choice of words, the speaker and the context. Different words cause different degrees of offence in different communities as well as in different parts of the world. Over time, public attitudes shift and this is assessed through research. The strongest language is defined as being cunt, motherfucker and fuck, and its derivatives. The strongest language and strong racist language is subject to a referral process.

The use of any offensive language, whether written or spoken, and offensive gestures, must be editorially justified, and signposted if appropriate, to ensure it meets audience expectations, wherever it appears. (See 5.1)

Language is most likely to cause offence when it is used gratuitously and without editorial purpose, and when it includes:

- sexual swear words*
- abusive references to race, religion, nationality and ethnicity*
- terms of sexual and sexist or misogynistic abuse or abuse referring to sexuality or gender identity*
- pejorative terms relating to mental health, illness or disabilities*
- casual or derogatory use of holy names or religious words and especially in combination with other strong language.*

In addition, wording on programmes which straddle the watershed has been amended to allow flexibility for exceptional programming such as Comic Relief. It has a mandatory referral to Editorial Policy to ensure this is the exception rather than the rule. 5.4.12 now reads:

5.4.12 Programmes that straddle the watershed, that is start before 9pm and finish sometime after 9pm, should normally be pre-watershed compliant throughout.

Exceptionally, it may not be necessary where the audience is not expected to be the same throughout the programme. Editorial Policy must be consulted.

Also, the wording on suicide has been amended to reflect there are a number of suicide prevention charities and to make it clear to programme makers that charities may provide additional advice but should not have editorial influence. Guideline 5.4.59 now reads:

5.4.59 There are sensitivities around the use of language. Suicide was decriminalised in 1961 and the use of the term 'commit' is considered offensive by some. Content makers should avoid using the term in their own scripts and reports, although contributors may use it. 'Take one's life', 'died by suicide' or 'kill oneself' are alternatives. Suicide prevention organisations, such as the Samaritans, are also usually willing to be consulted about the

portrayal of suicide. A link to a BBC Action Line should be considered when output deals with such issues and Editorial Policy should usually be consulted.

(See Section 15 Independence from Commercial and other External Interests: 15.4.28)

Section 6: Fairness

The RNIB made a detailed response on accessibility issues. While most of these fell outside of the scope of the Guidelines, Section 6, Fairness, has been amended to include specific reference to reasonable adjustments in productions. It now reads:

6.4.1 'The BBC is committed to being inclusive and accessible to all and supporting reasonable adjustments, such as access requirements, across productions'

This wording has also been added to the introduction of Section 9: Children and Young People as Contributors.

Section 12: War, Terror and Extreme Violence, Disaster and Disorder

The reference to the Geneva Convention in Section 12 (War, Terror and Extreme Violence, Disaster and Disorder) has been amended to include reference to detainees following comment from Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights:

12.2.3 Content makers should take account of the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the Additional Protocols, particularly as they apply to the treatment of prisoners of war, hostages and detainees. Where the provisions have been disregarded, any use of humiliating and degrading footage of prisoners of war, hostages and detainees that disregards their right to human dignity should be considered carefully.

The Guidelines have been amended to apply the same attribution requirement to the use of 'terrorist attacks' as for use of the term 'terrorist'.

The section on Use of Language in section 12 now reads:

12.4.8 The term 'terrorist' should only be used with attribution i.e. when quoting or citing its use by others. Content makers should not adopt other people's language as their own; their responsibility is to remain objective and report in a way that enables audiences to make their own assessments. The BBC should convey to the audience the full consequences of an act by describing the perpetrators as, for example, 'bombers', 'gunmen', 'kidnappers', 'insurgents' and 'militants'. Their actions should only be described as 'terrorist attacks' with attribution.

Section 13: Use of BBC Content after Broadcast or Publication:

The Branded Content Governance Project argued that the same requirements which apply to third parties should apply to the BBC's own commercial services. 13.3.12 and 13.4.34 have been amended accordingly and now specifically mention BBC Studios.

Several submissions to section 13 called for the BBC to update incorrect information that has become out of date overtime. This has not been actioned (partly because of the impractical nature of doing so) but Guideline 13.4.10 has been amended to remind programme makers to let audiences know this is archive material, where appropriate:

13.4.10 Content should not be re-used in a way that materially misleads the audience about a situation, events or what is being depicted. Labelling may be required. There may be exceptions for trails, comedy or entertainment purposes.

Editorial material that content makers plan to re-use or reversion may have become inaccurate or out of date and where appropriate it should be made clear to audiences that it is archive.

Additionally, the wording on what constitutes the permanent accessible archive has been tightened to avoid ambiguity on what is publicly available and what forms part of the BBC's archive, not searchable by the public, on the BBC's own servers.

Section 14: Religious Content:

The National Secular Society argued that there should be equal treatment for non-religious beliefs. 14.3.4 was amended accordingly

14.3.4 Where religious content includes audience interaction, appropriate measures must be in place to allow the expression of faith and an exploration of issues around faith, while ensuring that religious and non-religious views and beliefs are not subject to abuse and that vulnerable audiences are also protected from exploitation.

Also, 14.2.1 was amended to encompass all contributors. It now reads:

14.2.1 Producers of religious programmes and related content have editorial freedom for the output to express faith and to explore matters of faith. Production teams must ensure that contributors to content about religious views and beliefs are not subject to abusive treatment.

Other Guideline-wide changes:

The Guidelines have been amended to remove the word 'talent' where possible. Where this word is still used, e.g. 'talent owned Indies', this has been agreed by the Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

The Guidelines reflect the structural changes in the World Service Group.

Job titles, where they are referenced in the Guidelines, have been amended to be consistent throughout the Guidelines e.g. Heads of Editorial Standards / Compliance and Complaints.