

Ofcom Planning Options for Digital Switchover

Consultation document

Response from Ofcom Consumer Panel

1. The Consumer Panel starts from the position of support for the principle of digital switchover. We believe that there are potentially significant benefits to people at large in the UK from a switchover to digital television. But the full value of these benefits will only be realised if the route to switchover is managed in such a way as to minimise the risk of detriment to people – particularly those who are vulnerable.
2. In November 2004, we published a report – “Supporting the most vulnerable consumer through digital switchover”¹ – which took a step by step look at the process of digital television adoption and considered what barriers there are at each stage and for whom. Whilst our the majority of our key findings and recommendations related to the measures that would need to be taken to assist the most vulnerable people through the switchover process, we also recommended that:

“The widest possible roll-out of DTT should take place in order to ensure that the largest number of households across the UK have a choice of digital television platforms and access to a low cost option for digital switchover.”

3. We regard full roll-out of digital terrestrial television (DTT) to be an important factor in the take-up of digital television, ensuring as it does a maximum number of households with both a choice of digital television platforms *and* a low cost option. We therefore fully support the inclusion of non-cost based factors such as the extent to which TV platforms are affordable to consumers and the extent to which TV platforms are available to consumers in Ofcom’s option evaluation. We also recognise and support the view that the wider the availability of DTT the easier it will be to mount a simple and consistent nationwide public information campaign.

Digital switchover options

4. In light of these considerations, we believe that Ofcom’s Option 1 (Public service multiplexes adopt 16QAM at -10dB and -7dB (at a limited number of sites)) is the optimal solution for the majority of consumers. It appears to us that this option guarantees DTT coverage which at least matches (and potentially exceeds) that of existing analogue transmissions, which offers comparable quality and reliability of transmissions and which fits with the likely timetable for switchover.
5. We do note that Option 1 will reduce in a loss of capacity on one multiplex; but we are persuaded that the overall increase in total number of channels, combined with the coverage guarantees, outweigh the potential loss to viewers of two channels².
6. Whilst Option 2 does appear to at least match current analogue coverage, and retains capacity, we note that this relies on an increase in transmission sites. In

¹ “Supporting the most vulnerable consumers through digital switchover – a report by the Ofcom Consumer Panel” November 2004 - <http://www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk/dso.htm>

² This assumes that the channels lost do not have public service broadcasting obligations.

light of the already complex nature of the primary switchover task, we are concerned that adding these additional build requirements may lead either to delays in the overall timetable or to the timetable for those viewers in the area reliant on the additional transmitters.

7. Options 3, 4 and 5 each offer coverage rates of less than current analogue television coverage and are thus discounted by the Panel. All of these options would reduce choice for consumers.

Public service multiplexes

8. Finally, in paragraph 2.3 of the consultation document Ofcom poses a question that relates to parity between public service multiplex coverage obligations. Our view is that any coverage obligation agreed between Ofcom and the commercial public service broadcasters must at least be matched by the BBC in its own digital switchover planning. For the publicly funded BBC to adopt coverage obligations which do not match those which commercial operators are obliged to meet would be untenable.