

Digital Switchover Executive Summary - Plain English Summary



Summary and recommendations

1. In July 2004, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport asked the Ofcom Consumer Panel to consider measures that might be needed to protect the interests of the most vulnerable customers when analogue television switches over to digital.
2. The Panel supports the idea of digital switchover. We believe that there could be significant benefits from switching over to digital television. But the full value of these benefits will only be seen if the switchover is managed in a way that reduces, as far as possible, the risk that vulnerable people cannot take advantage of digital television.
3. In preparing this report we have concentrated on two main principles.
 - o First, our belief that what people will need is practical help.
 - o Second, that changing one television set to digital in a household will make sure continued access to television. Because of this, we have based our estimates of costs on changing one set in each household.
4. This report does not repeat the large amount of research and investigation that has already been completed in this area. Instead it focuses on the very practical aspects of switchover. We take a step-by-step look at the process of switching over to digital television and see what the barriers are at each stage and for whom.
5. Our main finding from this analysis of the switchover to digital process is that those who are likely to be most vulnerable are people who need help in making the practical changes they need to get digital television and who have nobody they can turn to for support. That is, digital switchover presents the biggest challenges for those who are 'socially isolated' - people who will have difficulty in finding out about switchover, in understanding what it means and who cannot take effective steps to deal with it. As a result, people without an adequate network of support from friends, family, neighbours or carers will be particularly vulnerable.
6. We realise that it is difficult to measure social isolation, for example, we cannot just refer to the benefits system. It will be related to age, to various kinds of disability and to having poor skills in speaking, reading and writing in English. Because of this, there is a need to find a new way to tackle it.
7. We make the following recommendations.

- a. SwitchCo, the organisation which will be responsible for the switchover, should develop a process - working closely with the voluntary sector and local government - to identify people who will need help through switchover and provide a scheme which offers practical support. We estimate that a national scheme along these lines could cost about £110million.
- b. Financial help should be offered to people currently eligible for a discount on the TV licence fee (people over 75 or registered blind). This will help with the costs of buying equipment and paying for any work needed to upgrade their aerial to make the change to digital. We estimate that the costs of this help could lie between £134million and £270million.
- c. As a result, the total cost of what we are recommending could, in broad terms, lie between £250million and £400million.
- d. Significant and rapid attention must be paid to the particular needs of people with disabilities, especially those with vision or hearing difficulties, so that suitable equipment at a reasonable cost will be available.
- e. The widest possible roll-out of digital terrestrial television (DTT) should take place to make sure that as many households as possible across the UK have a choice of ways to get digital television, including a low-cost option.
- f. Manufacturers and retailers need to be encouraged to make sure that all equipment on sale is clearly labelled with what it can do, in digital terms, to prevent people making expensive mistakes in buying equipment between now and switchover.
- g. Manufacturers should continue to develop easy-to-use set-top boxes and remote controls for those people who do not want anything too complicated.
- h. But most urgently, we urge those leading the switchover process to begin, as soon as possible, a public information campaign for digital switchover. This is important if we are to make sure that the widest possible number of people understand the 'What?', the 'How?' and the 'How much?' of digital switchover.