

Age Concern and Help the Aged's written evidence to the Communication Committee's Inquiry on the Digital Switchover of television and radio.

1. Introduction.

- 1.1 Age Concern and Help the Aged welcome this inquiry by the House of Lords Communications Committee on the digital switchover of television and radio. Age Concern and Help the Aged have been members of the Advisory Group to Ministers on consumer needs in the digital switchover of television since it was first established in 2000. The Group has produced four reports: Digital Decisions: Viewer Choice and Digital Television, December 2001; Persuasion or Compulsion? Consumers and analogue switch-off, October 2004; Digital TV Equipment: Vulnerable Consumer Requirements, March 2006 and Supporting Vulnerable Consumers with targeted assistance at and after Digital TV Switchover, April 2006. The objective of these reports was to advise on what steps needed to be taken before switchover could be announced and what needed to be done to ensure the process was as smooth and problem free as possible.
- 1.2 While representing the needs of all consumers, the Group took particular care to ensure the needs of older and disabled and other vulnerable groups were addressed to ensure they could experience the benefits of digital television. One of the recommendations that the Government implemented was to establish the Help Scheme to give more direct help to households aged over 75 and those with specific registered disabilities.

2. Digital Switchover

- 2.1 The switchover process is an extremely complex one requiring considerable co-operation and co-ordination between a large number and wide range of agencies if it is to be done with minimal disruption to the public. We think it is a credit to the pre-planning work of Ministers; the Departments of Culture Media and Sport and Business, Innovation and Skills; Ofcom; Digital UK and the Help Scheme as well as the input from the Consumer Expert Group (CEG), that so far switchover has been achieved with very few problems emerging. As well as this pre planning it was also helpful that the first switchover was conducted

in a fairly small area so that any lessons from this could be accommodated in the subsequent larger regions to be switched.

- 2.2 We think the switchover in the Granada region was the biggest test to date and are pleased that the local Age Concern organisations that were involved in this have reported that, in general, the Granada switchover was well done and most people switched without any issues. We were particularly pleased that they reported very limited experience of mis-selling of equipment or rogue trader operations. We were particularly concerned that digital switchover offered a golden opportunity to rogue traders and distraction burglars and were pleased that Digital UK took our concerns on board and ensured close liaison with Operation Liberal and local trading standards departments in the switchover regions.
- 2.3 We were, however, disappointed that retuning continued to be a problem in Granada, as it had in the other regions that had switched. Our North West regional team felt there was insufficient provision in the Granada switchover for practical support with retuning. For many older people, particularly those with dexterity and sight problems, as well as those who had a problem understanding the instructions for various reasons, retuning was a major difficulty.

3. Practical Help

The main options for practical help are:-

- 3.1 To get help through the Help Scheme although this could not help those who were either ineligible or who had not used the Scheme because they had already got their equipment.
- 3.2 To ring the Digital UK helpline where they could be talked through how to retune. Whilst this was found to be very helpful and gave a lot of support, for some older people talking through the problem was not enough to help them retune because they needed practical support in their homes.
- 3.3 To ask friends or family to help but for some this was not a viable option. Either they did not know people who were able to assist or their family lived too far away to be in a position to help.
- 3.4 To get a local retailer to help. Although many retailers were prepared to visit the household to retune, they were charging between £20 and £40 a visit and given two visits were required this was quite an expensive option.

- 3.5 Local Age Concerns approached the Digital Outreach programme and in some cases were able to use the grants scheme to fund practical support at switchover. In some cases the local Age Concerns could provide the practical help themselves. However, they consider that they could have been more prepared for this aspect of switchover and would have liked more formal planning on practical assistance in advance of the switchover date.
- 3.6 One proposal that could reduce the number of problems is that the Help Scheme could make more of the practical help it can offer in its publicity. Many who were eligible for the Help Scheme did not take up the offer because they already had a box or they perceived the £40 payable by those not on means tested benefits as expensive. Families had often provided a box to an older relative in the belief this would prepare them for the switch without understanding the implications of the need to retune. Families may also offer the advice that a box can be bought locally for much less than getting one for £40 through the Help Scheme, without understanding the additional support that is offered through the Scheme. For example, £40 is far less than having to pay £80 to get help from a retailer to retune.
- 3.7 Given this perception of the Help Scheme was evident in the very first switchover in Whitehaven it is disappointing that it remains the case. We think it may be more of a problem in future switchovers since it is likely even more eligible households will have got their own set top boxes. We have already asked the Help Scheme to re-consider their publicity to minimise this problem with retuning. We have also asked Digital UK to highlight this problem, and explore with local voluntary organisations problems and those involved in Digital Outreach in switchover regions action that could be taken to minimise the problems well before the actual switchover date.
- 3.8 We think the experience of the pre-planning and the way Digital UK has established the network of local community organisations is a useful model for other similar Government initiatives. We think these experiences are particularly appropriate for the implementation of the Government's new Community Energy Saving Programme as well as the proposed national roll out of smart meters.

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