

Consultation response

Enquiry into Digital Switchover of TV and Radio
Communications Select Committee
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW

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1. About Which?

Which? is an independent, not-for-profit consumer organisation with around 700,000 members and is the largest consumer organisation in Europe. Which? is independent of government and industry, and is funded through the sale of Which? consumer magazines, books and other subscription services.

2. House of Lords Enquiry into Digital Switchover of TV and Radio

We are pleased to submit written evidence about **digital radio** at the Committee's request.

Through our magazines and online, we provide information and advice to consumers about digital radio. This information is publicly available at <http://www.which.co.uk/advice/tv-music-and-radio/index.jsp> and additional more detailed information is available to our Members (subscribers). We have also covered the possible switchover in our Consumer News in December 2008: <http://www.which.co.uk/news/2008/12/dab-radio-switch-could-be-as-soon-as-2017-165126>

3. DAB and DAB+

We understand that some, but not at all, DAB radios could be upgraded to work with DAB+. But we are concerned that some cheaper DAB radios may not be upgradeable and may become obsolete. We would therefore welcome an industry standard label indicating if a DAB radio is upgradeable to work with other digital

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radio formats. Though the Government and OFCOM do not currently have plans to upgrade from DAB to DAB+, we expect this may happen at some point in the future. If consumers upgrade from analogue radios to a digital radio, and then find they have to upgrade again this will be disruptive, costly and wasteful (from an environmental perspective).

We believe that technically there is little impediment to DAB radios using a decoder chip that will work with both DAB, DAB+ and some other digital formats. Further information about the technical possibilities is available from Frontier Silicon.

<http://www.frontier-silicon.com/>

4. Digital radio switchover

4.1 In-car radios

Our main concern about digital radio switchover relates to the use of in-car radios. We'd like to see good quality retrofit options for in-car radio. Currently our understanding is that getting a full scale DAB radio installed in your car post-production can be prohibitively expensive, though we have not yet fully researched this.

We have tested the Pure Highway radio for use in-car (see Appendix 1) which retails from around £64. We thought that, although it's reasonable, it doesn't work as well as we would like in cars with small window screens. We are unsure if the digital switchover would mean that this system wouldn't work at all because it transmits to the in-car system using FM.

From a reception point of view it's certainly the case that in-car DAB suffers from patchy reception at the moment - particularly when you're travelling along motorways and switching from one transmitter to another. We expect that additional transmitters would help solve this problem and the guidelines previously released suggest that if coverage on major roads wasn't adequate then a radio digital switchover wouldn't happen. We agree with this approach; it's vital that coverage is improved on major roads.

4.2 Other DAB reception problems

There are also problems with reception in some areas of the country due to the topography - for example in Wales. This can be of course also a problem for FM. We have also had consumer queries from people living in parts of East Anglia, including the city of Ipswich, who are unable to get major BBC stations on their DAB radio. As with in-car radio DAB reception, coverage does need to improve before a switchover can take place without adversely affecting consumers.



It is however worth noting that consumers who can't receive an adequate digital radio signal are likely to be able to listen to radio at home via their digital TV receiver (though this might be an inconvenient option for many consumers who may not have a TV in the same locations in their house as their radios).

4.3 Increased choice on DAB?

In the past there's been a lot of discussion about the increased choice of radio stations on DAB. We consider this to be potentially misleading. Set-up costs for DAB radio transmission are high so opportunities for small scale local broadcasters (such as community or student broadcasters) might be reduced. And in the last year or so several commercial broadcasters have closed DAB stations due to drops in advertising revenue.

We therefore do not think increased choice alone is a reason for digital switchover. Rather the success of DAB in the UK is probably mostly due to the BBC's support for the format. Anecdotal evidence is that good BBC Radio 5 Live reception and other services such as BBC Radio 5 Live Extra is a key reason why people switch to DAB. So in this sense increased station choice compared to FM is important.

5. Internet radios

We have reviewed 5 internet radios (for home use) of which three are Which? Best Buys. The review of the Pure Avanti Flow, which retails around £220, is attached at Appendix 2.

Internet radios are currently an option for home use but are not yet designed for in-car use. In-car use of an internet radio will only work once wireless reception is good enough to ensure a constant signal.

Home use is of course dependent on a good wireless signal but consumers also need to be aware that significant home use of an internet radio may impact on their download usage allowance set by their Internet Service Provider (ISP), depending on what contract they have with their ISP.



Appendix 1

Which? review of Pure Highway DAB in-car radio

The Pure Highway is a DAB radio that has been designed for use within the car and can be mounted to the car's windscreen. It transmits an FM signal that can be picked up by your regular car radio, and then played through the car's stereo system. We didn't evaluate the sound quality, as it is largely dependent on the car stereo system.

We found that the windscreen mount is very secure, and sports a flexible stem that allows the direction that the radio faces to be easily adjusted. It can also be easily removed from this magnetic mount and used as a personal, pocket-sized radio - however headphones are not supplied. You'll need two AA type batteries to use when carrying it around, but when in the car it is powered by the cigarette lighter.

For cars with larger windscreens, the Pure Highway is good, but we can't recommend it for smaller cars with limited space or view. It also has some niggles with the lack of labelling of multi-functional controls. And while it can pause and rewind live radio, we advise that you don't attempt to operate any of these functions while driving, something that is also made clear in the manual.

It can be connected directly if your car stereo has an audio line-in socket, and this may provide better sound quality than the FM transmitter option. This device doesn't have an analogue tuner.

Pros: Provides DAB radio to your car, quick and easy to install

Cons: Not ideal for smaller vehicles



Appendix 2

Which? review of Pure Avanti Flow

The Best Buy Pure Avanti Flow boasts impressive sound quality and offers access to both internet radio stations and broadcast digital radio and FM. However, it's not the easiest radio to use.

It's a fairly large tabletop radio that weighs in at a hefty 4.2kg. Sonically it excels - our expert listeners were impressed by its sound quality on a wide range of different music types and also with spoken voice, rating it as one of the best digital radios they'd heard. Sound quality is helped by a large speaker mounted in the bottom of the radio, which gives it a good bass sound.

It's a versatile radio with both DAB and FM tuners as well as Wi-Fi access to more than 10,000 internet radio stations plus podcasts and 'listen-again' programmes. You can also access Pure Sounds - a selection of more than 83 ambient effects and natural noises such as a babbling brook or a buzzing bee.

It has 40 presets to store your favourite DAB and FM stations and its iPod dock lets you easily hook up your player and listen to your MP3 downloads through the radio's speakers. It will charge your iPod, too. There's also a stereo headphone socket and a line-output for connecting to your hi-fi system if you wish. The aerial is telescopic.

On the downside, we didn't find it particularly easy to use, mainly because of difficulties in finding and navigating round the internet stations. The remote control buttons and menu structures are confusing and not intuitive - you'll need to learn your way around this radio before you feel comfortable with it.

Pros: Excellent sound quality, very versatile, internet radio access, iPod dock

Cons: Not particularly easy to use