

24/11/04

Ofcom Consumer Panel publishes recommendations to protect the most vulnerable consumers during digital switchover

Socially isolated people will need the most help in making practical changes to adopt digital television, according to a report published today by the Ofcom Consumer Panel.

The Ofcom Consumer Panel is the independent body set up to advise Ofcom on consumer interests in the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors.

In July 2004, the Secretary of State asked the Consumer Panel to report on "how the interests of the most vulnerable consumers are protected and what measures might be necessary to protect the interests of the most vulnerable in the transition to switchover." Today's report, *Supporting the most vulnerable consumers through digital switchover*, is published in response to that request.

From its analysis of existing research, the Panel concludes that people at risk of social isolation - those who do not have an adequate network of friends, family, neighbours or carers to turn to for support - are likely to face the biggest difficulties in finding out about switchover, in understanding what it means and therefore taking effective steps to adopt digital television.

Colette Bowe, Chairman of the Ofcom Consumer Panel, said:

"Digital switchover will be the biggest challenge for people who have to cope with it on their own, without the help of family, friends or neighbours. We are suggesting that a realistic way to meet this challenge is to mobilise existing community networks. This will cost money. But it will be the key to providing the support that vulnerable people will need if they are to be helped to keep their access to television."

The Panel makes the following recommendations:

- SwitchCo, the body charged with implementing the switchover, should develop a process - working closely with the voluntary sector and local government - to identify people who need help through switchover and provide a scheme offering practical support.
- Financial assistance should be offered to people currently eligible for TV licence fee exemptions or concessions (people over 75 or registered blind) to meet the costs of one-off purchases of equipment and any necessary aerial upgrade work needed to make the transition to digital.
- The total cost of the Panel's recommendations could in broad terms lie between £250m and £400m. As the Panel does not yet know exactly the number of people who will need access to any practical support

scheme, this estimate is based on a proxy population and should be treated as purely indicative at this stage.

- The particular requirements of people with disabilities, especially those with vision or hearing impairments, should be looked at in-depth and quickly. Suitable equipment at reasonable cost must be readily available.
- Manufacturers and retailers should make sure that all equipment on sale is clearly labelled with its digital capabilities in order to prevent people making expensive mistakes in their purchases between now and switchover. They should also continue to develop easy-to-use set-top boxes and remote controls for those people who do not want complicated functionality.
- Finally, and most urgently, an effective public information campaign should begin for digital switchover. This will be integral to ensuring that the widest possible number of people understand the "What?", the "How?" and the "How much?" of digital switchover.

The report Supporting the most vulnerable consumers through digital switchover is available online at www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk.

Ends

Notes for editors

1. The Ofcom Consumer Panel is the independent advisory body set up under section 16 (2) of the Communications Act 2003 to advise Ofcom on the consumer interests in broadcasting and telecommunications.
2. The Panel's eleven members appointed by Ofcom are:
 - Colette Bowe, Chairman
 - Ruth Evans, Deputy Chairman
 - Azeem Azhar
 - Fiona Ballantyne
 - Nainish Bapna
 - Roger Darlington
 - Simon Gibson
 - Graham Mather
 - Kevin McLaughlin
 - Kate O'Rourke
 - Bob Twitchin

For further details please visit www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk.