

Ofcom's independent Consumer Panel says socially isolated consumers need more help with digital switchover

15 September 2005

The Ofcom Consumer Panel today raised concern that the Government's latest announcement on digital switchover does not go far enough to address the needs of the UK's most vulnerable citizens. Responding to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport's statement last night, the Panel urges Government to put in place a practical plan of action which responds to the needs of socially isolated people.

Colette Bowe, Chairman of the Ofcom Consumer Panel commented:

"It is disappointing that Government's announced action plan doesn't reflect the steps we set out at the Government's request over ten months ago to make sure that the most vulnerable people - the socially isolated - can participate in the digital switchover revolution.

"Many people rely on family and friends to help them choose and use complicated new TV equipment. People who don't have this type of support are in danger of getting ripped off by rogue traders and going without television when the analogue signal is switched off. That's why our report sets out a model of practical support for socially isolated people to be delivered by local grass-roots organisations. We urge the Government to push the delivery of this support to the top of its list of priorities. "We are disappointed that most consumers will be charged for calling the switchover helpline. Why should people pay for advice about switchover when they have no choice but to make the switch to digital? The plans to make 0800 calls available on a selective basis are impractical."

Colette Bowe continued:

"The TV licence is free to everyone over 75. But now the Government is only proposing to offer free equipment, installation and instructions for digital services if an older person also claims pension credit. This change in government policy on free TV reception for older people disregards widespread acceptance of the existing policy on the licence fee as fair. Many pensioners who are entitled to Pension Credit won't get financial help with switchover because they don't claim this credit.

"Digital switchover can bring significant consumer benefits. The Government needs to think harder about how to make sure that people who might get left behind are helped to make this huge and important change"

Ends

Notes for editors and CSEs

In July 2004, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport asked the Ofcom Consumer Panel to consider what measures might be necessary to protect the interests of "the most vulnerable" consumers during digital switchover. The Panel published its report in November 2004. Visit our website to see a copy of the report. The Panel's report, [Supporting the most vulnerable consumers through digital switchover](#), estimates that there are approximately 4.4 million households who may be in need of the practical support scheme. If using local volunteers to provide this support, such a scheme could cost up to £110 million. In addition an estimated £270 million could be needed to ensure vulnerable people have a set top box and aerial.

The Ofcom Consumer Panel was established to advise Ofcom on the consumer interest in the markets it regulates. The Panel is independent and sets its own agenda. Visit www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk for more information about the Panel.

Georgia Klein, Policy Manager of the Consumer Panel is available for interviews.

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