

CHANNEL 4 RESPONSE TO DCMS/DTI CONSULTATION ON THE ROLE OF INTEGRATED DIGITAL TELEVISION SETS IN ACHIEVING DIGITAL SWITCHOVER

In its response to the government consultation about the draft Digital Action Plan, Channel 4 stated:

In principle, Channel 4 supports mandating of digital television sets (task 2.6). For all sets manufactured after a certain date to be digitally enabled would provide a huge boost to digital take-up. But we believe that there must first be cross-industry consensus, an assessment of the technical features that should be mandated, and research into the impact of price on consumers. We also recognise that mandation is highly unlikely to be achievable at UK level and will require agreement throughout the EU.

Channel 4 continues to believe that mandation could have a role in helping drive digital take-up in the longer term. But this would only be felt over the TV replacement cycle. In the shorter term most new digital access will be achieved through the acquisition of set-top boxes.

There are many other factors – such as coverage and reception, the robustness of aerials, price and availability of set-top boxes and most of all the attractiveness of content – that will have a larger impact on digital take-up in the years ahead.

Response to specific questions

Q1. Many consumers are likely to favour IDTVs for the simple reason that they reduce clutter. They would prefer a single television and a single VCR rather than a TV, a VCR and two STBs, with a corresponding reduction in the number of remote controls.

Q2. Even on an optimistic timetable, it would be some years before only IDTVs were available in the shops. By that stage the UK should have large-scale digital penetration. If only IDTVs are available then, that will make a significant but not overwhelming contribution to increasing digital take-up. Other factors, such as the attractiveness of content and the availability of cheap set-top boxes are likely to be more important

Q3. The TV replacement cycle is estimated at seven to eight years. But this is an average – some sets remain in good working order for many years longer than this before being replaced. So within seven or eight years of only IDTVs being available, a large step would have been taken towards switchover. But other measures would need to be taken to ensure that all households had converted to digital before switchover could take place.

Q4 & Q5. Channel 4 believes that any form of mandate would need to be platform neutral. It should be up to manufacturers to choose with which platform they need to make their sets compatible. There will need to be clear customer information explaining that purchase of one set will not allow consumers to switch platforms in the future without acquiring an appropriate STB.

Q6. For technical reasons it is likely to be necessary to mandate the existence of digital decoders in widescreen televisions as a first step, leaving the mandate of smaller sets until later. If this proves to be true, then mandate will not assist (except in the much longer term) with one of the more intractable problems in achieving switchover – how to convert second, third and further sets.

It would be sensible to move ahead with the mandate of VCRs at the same time as the mandate of television sets, as consumers will need VCRs as well as TV sets to be digitally enabled at the time of switchover.

Channel 4 Television

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