

Government Response to the Consumer Expert Group recommendations in the paper on supporting Vulnerable Consumers with Targeted assistance at and after Digital TV Switchover.

The Consumer Expert Group believes that:

1. The specification of the support package for vulnerable consumers should not be set as a result of what funding is currently allocated, but that the details of the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups should be determined in relation to the level of need of vulnerable people;

Agreed. Our approach has been to identify those groups most at need and to design the Help Scheme around these groups so the right people are provided with the right assistance to ensure they can switch and enjoy the benefits of digital television.

The specifications for the Scheme take account of the findings from the Bolton Digital TV trial and other research we undertook to understand the needs of the consumers and how best to meet them, as well as on the advice and recommendations of the Consumer Expert Group, the Ofcom Consumer Panel and leading charities.

2. The target population for the Government's targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups should be extended to also cover households where one person is partially sighted;

Agreed. It was announced in Parliament on 19 June that persons registered as partially sighted will be eligible for the scheme.

3. The Consumer Expert Group is unconvinced that the means-tested approach for the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups is the best way of ensuring that vulnerable consumers receive the support they need at switchover;

The evidence that we have suggests that income is not, on its

own, a barrier to the take-up of digital television, particularly with equipment available for under £30. The scheme has been specifically designed to help people with the practical issues they may face selecting, installing and using digital television, not primarily with the cost of equipment. The Help Scheme will ensure that everyone will receive the support they need. Those who can afford it will have a charge to pay. This is fair. Even with the charge, the intention is that there will be some level of subsidy for all who use the scheme.

4. We believe that there are significant benefits to be gained from offering a single support package under the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups which includes only limited choice over the type of set top box for vulnerable consumers;

It is essential that the Help Scheme offers beneficiaries equipment that is easy to install and use and designed around the needs of those needing help. We have worked closely with the CEG to develop the core receiver requirement for equipment provided by the scheme.

We envisage that the scheme will make available a degree of choice although clearly it will be less than the lines of a major retailer.

The level of choice will depend on arrangements agreed with the main scheme provider.

5. We do not believe that consumers should be offered a voucher which can be redeemed against any set top box on the market under the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups; we would consider a voucher scheme as a possible alternative only if it was used in conjunction with public procurement and only if the vouchers could only be used to buy boxes which met the specifications set out in Consumer Expert Group Report “Digital TV equipment: vulnerable consumer requirements”;

We agree that vouchers are not appropriate. Research has indicated that people are most likely to need practical advice and

help with installation during digital switchover.

6. Vulnerable consumers should have a choice of platforms under the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups but we believe that no vulnerable consumer should get a lower quality of equipment, information and support if they choose a platform other than DTT;

The help scheme will operate on a platform neutral basis. Practical implementation depends on the arrangements drawn up and agreed with the platform operators. We will ensure, as far as possible that they offer a comparable offer in terms of quality of equipment, support and information as with DTT. It will be for consumers to choose based on good information about the options available.

7. The Consumer Expert Group is very concerned that the announcement of digital switchover and the subsequent publicity will offer new opportunities for rogue traders, particularly with regard to aerial installations, and distraction burglars possibly gaining entrance on the pretence of retuning the television. To minimise this risk we strongly support the development of the digital installer scheme and the use of the digital logo;

A key objective of the Help Scheme is to ensure that the most vulnerable do have access to a safe reliable scheme which deals with fitting and installation issues. We will ensure that all the fitters and aerial installers used by the scheme are trained and have appropriate checks through the criminal records bureau.

In March, the DTI launched the Registered Digital Installer (RDI) scheme. The RDI scheme will provide a trusted source of advice for consumers who need an aerial upgrade to receive digital television. To be registered, installers will have to undergo a satisfactory criminal records check and to have the necessary public liability insurance. RDIs are then able to use the 'digital tick' logo, so that they are easily identifiable by consumers. Digital UK is promoting the development of the RDI scheme and the use of the 'digital tick' logo and are also working with police/trading standards officers.

DUK are also promoting the Approved Digital Advisor Scheme whereby accredited advisors in stores will be able to help consumers with advice on the options for switching to digital and advice on equipment including aerials and services for those with special needs. DUK are undertaking compliance monitoring to check the quality of the advice being given. Accredited advisers will carry the 'digital tick' logo.

8. Similarly any specific help to vulnerable households will need to pay particular attention to matters of security to protect these households. The Consumer Expert group recommends that the body implementing the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups adopts the processes that were used by the Channel 5 retuning operation to ensure as far as possible that any opportunity for the exploitation of older households is minimised;

We will ensure through the terms of the tender and the contracts

that all the security measures necessary to protect vulnerable consumers are taken (passwords, due information on time of visits, advice on having a friend or family member with them at the time of the appointment, etc), The quality of the security measures proposed will be a criteria in the selection of the company delivering the support,

9. Installers and helpline staff must have disability and age awareness training before helping older and disabled people;

We agree that, as for the security measures, this should form part of the requirements for service providers selected to run the scheme.

10. It is vital that the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups should be accompanied by an adequate free helpline. It should also be accompanied by an appropriate instruction package and user guide. This guide should be in a number of different languages and formats as outlined in the Consumer Expert Group report “digital TV equipment: vulnerable consumer requirements”. Government must ensure that both vulnerable support services and associated information provision is accessible to those who do not speak English;

We agree that the provision of a free phone number and advice in different languages should form part of the requirements for service providers selected to run the scheme. We will consult with the CEG on detailed requirements.

11. Aerial installers used as part of the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups, should be member of the recently launched approved aerial installers scheme.

We envisage the Help Scheme will look to use RDI qualified staff as far as possible, but we need to allow the scheme provider the possibility of deploying trained and vetted staff that have not been through the RDI scheme

12. Beneficiaries of the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups should be able to nominate a third party who would organise delivery and installation on their behalf and be contact point;

We agree with this recommendation.

13. People covered by the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups should be provided with set top boxes 9 months ahead of switchover to leave an adequate lead time. It will clearly be vital to begin to develop the list of eligible consumers well in advance, and we recommend this is done at least 18 months before switchover.

We agree that there should be a minimum 9 month qualifying period in each region – set 8 months before switchover and one month afterwards. We believe this will be sufficient for communications with those eligible for help and for the scheme provider to arrange installation of set top boxes for those who claim support in time for switchover of their transmitter

The Digital Switchover (Disclosure of Information) Bill will allow social security data on individuals and their families to be shared with the administrator of the Digital Switchover Help Scheme to enable the administrator to get in touch directly with people entitled to help under Scheme. Communications will be targeted from the start of the qualification period in each area.

14. Switchover installation support and home visits under the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups must remain live for at least 1 year after switchover has been completed, and the helpline support should remain available for a further period may be up to 18 months;

The Help Scheme will be required to support households that qualify and make a claim up to one month after switchover. Once the equipment and fitting has taken place, further support will be available from the scheme. The length of time this will be available before a regional operation can be wound down will vary for each region depending on the level of follow-up support required. We will get a better idea from Whitehaven about how long the installation support and home visits may need to remain in place.

There will be help line support available from Digital UK until the end of switchover in 2012.

15. The opinion of the Disability Rights Commission should be sought on how best to identify the people with disabilities for the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups who are not currently claiming DLA/AA;

We have discussed the Scheme with the DRC and are considering with them how this might be achieved.

16. The targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups should be available in all housing contexts, including housing situations with communal TV viewing, as long as one person living in the accommodation meets the eligibility criteria;

Assistance from the Help Scheme will be available to people who live in multiple dwelling units and residential care and nursing homes in cases where their reception equipment is the responsibility of their landlord or care provider. The nature of the assistance will depend on each particular case, but there will be a requirement on the scheme to make every effort to ensure those who currently rely on a communal TV system are connected after switchover.

Digital UK is working with social and private sector landlords to encourage them to invest in upgrading systems for switchover. There will be cases where the communal TV system fails and we will look to see how set-top reception (taking advantage of improved digital terrestrial services at switchover) and other potential solutions can be deployed.

We are also undertaking further research to better understand how television is used in care settings and how this may affect the delivery of the assistance needed in residential care and nursing homes.

17. It will be necessary to set cut-off dates for eligibility for access to a targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups programme. The Consumer Expert Group suggests that every person across the UK who was born in or before 1937 and

therefore turns 75 or more in 2012, the year when the last region switches to digital, should be considered eligible for the targeted help scheme;

This would create different rules for age-based eligibility and extend the scheme to 71 year olds in the early regions. This would add significantly to scheme costs. According to research from the DCMS Taking Part Survey, 61% of 65-74 year olds have switched at least one set to digital television.

We agree that the qualifying period should begin eight months before the final switchover, and end one month after switchover. This means many people approaching 75 at the point of switchover will be helped in advance of switchover. Overall we think the balance is right.

18. There should be a clear duty on the Government to get in touch with people who are eligible for the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups;

19. The Government has to give the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups the possibility of using central databases that help identify people who would be eligible for targeted help. Data protection issues should not stand in the way of doing this;

We agree with these recommendations. The Digital Switchover (Disclosure of Information) Bill would permit social security data to be shared with the administrator of the Digital Switchover Help Scheme so that the administrator can get in touch directly with people entitled to help under the Scheme. Giving access to social security data enables the scheme to target individuals and confirm entitlement without the need for a lengthy claims procedure. This minimises the inconvenience for those who want to access the scheme and helps minimise costs of the Scheme

20. The Government should monitor take-up of the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups against target figures calculated on the basis of disability prevalence and size of the older population.

We intend to monitor take-up of the Help Scheme and will consider, with the CEG, the best way to do this in practice.

21. Current plans for help with installation will not include all those who may need it. The current scope of the Government's planned support for vulnerable consumers of implementing the targeted assistance scheme for vulnerable groups is too restrictive and should be extended with further schemes to cover other groups that would not be eligible for the targeted assistance scheme. Further work needs to be done to work out how households with people aged 65+ be provided installation assistance, and what role trusted volunteer assistants can play in helping them come to grips with the new technology.

We have no plans to extend further the scope of the help scheme. Research shows that the age of 75 appears to represent a turning point for many after which there are decreases in quality of life and ability and clear increases in disabilities and this corresponds with a very low take-up compared to the general population. The issues are not so acute for 65 – 75 year olds.

DUK are undertaking research into other hard to reach groups to assess their needs. DCMS and DUK are considering what role volunteers and charities can play in helping these consumers through switchover.

22. Digital UK and Ofcom must closely monitor take-up amongst low income consumers. If the future levels of take-up of digital TV amongst low income consumers prove to be cause for concern, the Government must reconsider providing additional support for low income households;

The OFCOM/Digital UK have commissioned a detailed tracker which monitors take-up amongst low income consumers. Details of the tracker are published quarterly.

23. Delivering support to the most socially isolated will be very important. The Consumer Expert Group recommends that the government monitors closely if the statistics on the uptake of digital TV would identify a section of the population other than disabled people and people over 75 who may need further support because of social isolation;

We will keep under review progress by the groups identified by

Digital UK and the CEG as more difficult to reach and work with Digital UK through the Digital Switchover Programme and with leading charities to ensure that socially isolated groups know what is happening and take steps to convert to digital television in good time for switchover.

24. Volunteers will have a key role to play in delivering support and information for vulnerable groups both before, at and after switchover, but the voluntary sector simply does not have the capacity to provide this support without adequate funding.

25. The DCMS should draw up a budget to facilitate the involvement of volunteers as “trusted assistants” who can visit vulnerable consumers just before and after switchover to provide peer support with using the new technology;

The help scheme budget agreed with the BBC will include resources to support the activities of trusted assistants. We are continuing to discuss the detailed arrangements with Digital UK and with CEG members to scope and establish this programme as part of the wider assistance available from the Help Scheme.

26. This paper should be disseminated by the DCMS to PKF, who are currently reviewing the BBC's bid for an increased licence fee settlement;

PKF were no longer engaged by DCMS when this paper was received. We have therefore not asked PKF for views.