[GB] Regulator Issues Report on Progress to Digital Switchover

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The UK's communications regulator, Ofcom, has issued a report commissioned by the Government on digital switchover. It notes that there has been considerable progress in take-up of digital equipment; 50.2% of households now have it, and the report claims that "the UK is recognised as the global leader in digital TV adoption." In 1999 the Government set a target for switchover for the period 2006-2010, subject to universal availability of the main channels in digital form and 95% of households having digital equipment by that date (see IRIS 1999-9: 15 and IRIS 2003-7: 9). Ofcom considers that without further action this target is unlikely to be met, estimating that only 78% of households will have digital equipment by 2010. A particular problem is that only about three-quarters of households will be able to receive digital TV through their aerials until the signal's power is boosted at switchover.

The regulator now recommends that there should now be a move from planning switchover to its implementation. The Government should set a firm timetable for a rolling programme of regional switchover over about four years, ending in 2010. Only one or two analogue channels should be switched off first so that the digital signal could be boosted without screens going blank immediately. The regulatory framework should be used to create incentives for broadcasters to promote switchover, including new licence conditions and the possible use of spectrum pricing. The BBC should be given new obligations as part of its Charter review. Other regulatory action, using must-carry obligations under the Communications Act 2003, may be necessary to ensure that public service broadcasters are available free-to-view on digital satellite.

A mass national advertising campaign should promote switchover, and unconverted equipment should be subject to a labelling scheme to warn that it will not function after a set date. A body, termed "SwitchCo", independent of Government and broadcasters, should be established and well resourced with responsibility for implementing switchover by the set date. At a later date, the Government should consider limited financial assistance for particular groups of consumers to support conversion of equipment. In international negotiations, the UK will seek to protect flexible UK use of the spectrum released by switchover.

Ofcom, "Driving Digital Switchover" April 2004

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