

OFCOM COMMUNICATION ON CHANNEL 61:62 CLEARANCE

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Channel 61 & 62 clearance communication

In line with the Government's direction, during late 2012 and 2013, some of the spectrum currently used to broadcast Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) in the United Kingdom will be released for new uses, including 4G high speed mobile services.

Television services in some areas will move to new frequencies, requiring viewers to retune their digital televisions and set-top boxes.

The purpose of this communication is to give some background as to why these changes are necessary, the benefits they will deliver to UK citizens and consumers and details of how viewers will be supported.

Background

One of the outcomes, as the UK switches from analogue to digital TV, is the release of spectrum previously used by broadcasters for other uses, commonly known as the "digital dividend". Across Europe, part of this dividend will be used to accommodate new mobile services that promise to deliver significant consumer benefits. This includes the roll out of fourth generation (4G) mobile technology, which will provide much faster mobile broadband.

The UK has been at the forefront in Europe in planning for and preparing to release a digital dividend. In 2003, before Ofcom came into existence, the UK Government decided to release 112MHz of this valuable spectrum in two bands – at 600MHz and 800MHz - once digital switchover (DSO) was complete. Between 2006 and 2007, our Digital Dividend Review (DDR) consulted on and set a clear strategy for the way in which we would release this spectrum.

However, at this time, other European countries also started to develop plans for a digital dividend, but with a larger 800MHz band of cleared spectrum than we had been planning.

On 2 February 2009 we published a consultation that considered the costs and benefits for the UK of aligning the upper band of our digital dividend with that of other European countries. We expected very substantial net benefits to UK citizens and consumers from making this change, estimating them conservatively at £2bn to £3bn in net present value.

However, making the change had important implications, in particular the need to clear planned DTT use from channels 61 and 62 (the channels at the bottom of the 800MHz band) and relocate them to a lower frequency.

Clearing channels 61 & 62

In June 2009 we published a statement setting out our decision to clear channels 61 and 62. At this stage the UK was partway through DSO, a process which involves switching off analogue terrestrial broadcasting and substantially increasing the coverage of DTT so that

analogue coverage levels are matched. In order to reduce impacts on viewers, the clearance of channels 61 and 62 was partly integrated into the DSO programme, which is on track to complete as planned at the end of 2012, with the remainder of the channels 61 and 62 clearance due to complete by the end of 2013.

Our target has been to complete the clearance so that the 800MHz band is available across the UK for new mobile services as early as possible. In our June 2009 statement we suggested clearance by the end of 2013 was an achievable, though challenging target. Our current expectation still is that all of the UK will be cleared by that date.

What are the benefits of releasing the spectrum?

We estimate that releasing this spectrum in line with other European countries will help deliver benefits with a value of £2bn-£3bn. These benefits are likely to be seen in three main areas:

- **Faster mobile internet services.** Use of smartphones and tablets for services such as video, social networking, email and internet browsing is growing fast. The additional spectrum will help mobile operators meet these demands for growth in mobile data and to offer faster services.
- **Continuation of a competitive environment for mobile.** Access to this spectrum is expected to be vital to the future commercial success of existing and prospective new entrant mobile network operators. The existing competitive environment in the mobile sector has provided consumers with compelling choice and attractive pricing for mobile services. The award of this spectrum is likely to help shape future competition in mobile markets for at least the next decade.
- **Broadband in less densely populated areas.** The 800 MHz band is expected to be key to the delivery of next generation mobile broadband services in less densely populated areas.

What does this mean for viewers?

It is estimated that engineering work to release spectrum will be required at more than 400 transmission sites during late 2012 and 2013. At about 250 of these locations, some TV services will move to new frequencies, requiring viewers to retune DTT televisions and set-top boxes.

TV retunes may take place in all or part of a TV region. The largest retunes may affect more than a million homes; the smallest just a few hundred. Regions in which retunes will take place are: Anglia, Border, Central, Channel Islands, Granada, Meridian, STV Central, STV North, Wales, West, West Country, and Yorkshire.

The changes are predicted to affect around seven million households – one in four of the total. They will be phased on a region-by-region basis and will be organised in such a way to minimise disruption to TV services and inconvenience to viewers. Where retuning is required, it typically takes a few minutes and is straightforward for most people. All DTT viewers will have retuned at some point during the switchover programme and for the nationwide retune that took place in September 2009.

In the vast majority of cases, retuning will restore all TV services. As with any change of this kind, it is possible that some viewers experience a slight reduction in signal reliability, albeit imperceptible in most cases. There may also be a small minority who experience significant interference or possible loss of some channels due to a range of factors, including the condition of reception equipment, local hills and valleys, and incoming signals from neighbouring areas or countries. Because of proximity with continental Europe, any such interference is more likely in the South and East coasts. Viewers will be able to use the online Digital UK postcode checker for their most up-to-date DTT reception prediction.

As has historically been the case, household television arrangements, including the resolution of reception problems and any associated costs, remain the responsibility for the consumer.

Public information and advice about retunes will be co-ordinated by Digital UK, the not-for-profit organisation also responsible for the implementation of digital TV switchover. The company has extensive experience of managing technical changes to the DTT platform and the provision of public information and advice in relation to digital television. It is planning the timetable of regional retunes and will publicise the dates through on-screen messages and local publicity. An advice line and website will provide detailed guidance on retuning and troubleshooting.

Technical information and timings for the first retunes are expected to be available for industry and stakeholders from spring 2012.

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