

Turn on, tune in,



EQUIPMENT MAKEOVER

Kate Baines 43, solicitor

Kate, who lives in the Borders, an area that will start switching later this year, asked what she needed for switchover. First, we checked her existing equipment.

The family has four TVs – in the playroom, bedroom lounge and kitchen. Sky is already set up in the lounge, along with Sky+ (Sky's own personal video recorder (PVR)), and Freeview boxes are attached to the kitchen and playroom TVs. There is also an old video recorder in the playroom. In fact, the family is nearly ready for the switch and would just need Freeview in the bedroom.

However, the box in the playroom doesn't work well, and Kate wants to upgrade three of her old TV sets in the lounge, playroom and bedroom. She's also keen to have another recording device in the playroom that will let her watch one channel while recording another. Our recommendations for the family are:

- a flat-panel TV for the lounge (visit www.which.co.uk/tv for a list of our Best Buys)
- an integrated digital TV (IDTV) – which contains a built-in Freeview tuner – for the playroom, with a dual-tuner DVD recorder attached as Kate wants to be able to keep some of the shows she records (visit www.which.co.uk/dvdrecorders for more)
- an IDTV or a regular TV with Freeview box for the bedroom.

The digital switchover has begun. But, as our survey reveals, not all of us are happy about it

The digital TV age is here. A few of us have already experienced analogue switch-off, and for the rest it's no more than four years away.

When we reported on the switchover in April 2006, we raised concerns about low levels of awareness. Thankfully, our latest research shows a vast improvement – 93 per cent of people we asked (see 'Our research', p36) know about it.

This rises to 100 per cent awareness in the Borders TV region, which starts switching over later this year.

Mixed reactions

But the enforced switchover is not popular with everyone. A fifth of those surveyed were annoyed that they didn't have any choice about switching. Indeed, 2 per cent went as far as saying they have no intention of watching TV after switchover.

And 41 per cent of those who have already converted all TV sets or plan to do so say they wouldn't have upgraded as many or any of their TV sets to digital if they hadn't been forced to. More positively, half of those we asked would have fully switched to digital without the enforced change.

Key concerns

However, more than half of the respondents had some concerns about switchover.

The biggest single worry was on behalf of vulnerable members of society – 31 per

cent of those surveyed expressed concerns about the financial impact on groups such as older or disabled people or the accessibility of new equipment for them. See 'A helping hand', p37, for more on available help.

A fifth of people were worried about the cost of equipment. Other fears included the environmental impact of switchover, inability to set up digital equipment (for help connecting your equipment, visit www.which.co.uk/tvconnection), the potential complete loss of the TV signal and a lack of preparation.

Despite 80 per cent of people already watching some form of digital TV, the concerns over lack of preparation are borne out in our survey, as only half of those we asked have digitally prepared all the sets in their home that they want to use. Surprisingly, 59 per cent of Borders residents still have at least one TV to convert.

Making the switch

The main ways to receive the digital signal are via a Freeview box or an integrated digital TV (IDTV). However, there are alternatives to Freeview via BT, Sky (satellite), Virgin Media (cable) and Tiscali (broadband). Visit www.which.co.uk/tvoptions for more on digital TV options.

Most of these are subscription-based but if you don't want to pay a subscription, Sky has a Freesat service for a one-off fee of

What is the digital switchover?

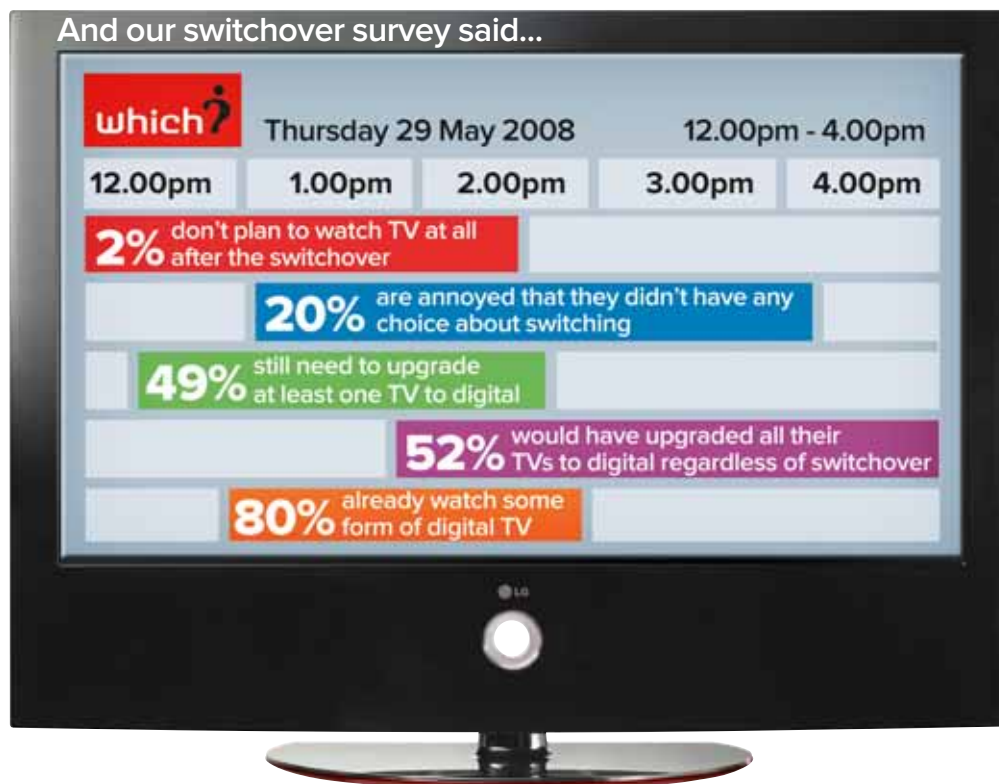
The government is gradually switching off the current analogue TV broadcast signal so that within a few years you'll be able to watch television only if you have digital TV such as Freeview, Sky or Virgin Media cable.

This is known as the digital switchover and it's happening across the UK region by region. It started in Whitehaven last year and will continue until 2012.

Use our map, p36, to see when switchover starts in your region.

switch over

And our switchover survey said...



Several of the key findings from our survey of over 2,000 people

£150. By comparison, Freeview boxes start from around £20. The BBC and ITV are also joining together to launch their own version of Freesat – as we went to press, the broadcasters stated that the expected launch date would be spring 2008.

So why is the switch happening?

While analogue signals are broadcast, there's not enough room on the airwaves (spectrum) for everyone to get digital TV via their aerial (Freeview). This means that a quarter of homes cannot currently get Freeview, and many still cannot receive Five.

Switching off the analogue signal will free up the airwaves so that virtually everyone who can currently get an analogue signal will be able to get Freeview. The government thinks this is a fairer system, as your ability to get digital TV via your aerial won't depend on your location.

The biggest worry was anxiety on behalf of vulnerable members of society

Plus, even a strengthened digital signal will require less spectrum than analogue, freeing up airwaves for services like extra TV channels, high-definition television (HDTV) or wireless broadband.

Why not all at the same time?

Unfortunately, switchover is not that simple. There are more than a thousand TV transmitters in the UK. They all need upgrading, and it's not possible to complete this in less than four years. Since it's impossible to switch all regions at once, the order of switchover is based on minimising disruption and interference between regions.

It's wise to check the map on p36 and be prepared in advance, because however you choose to make the switch, you'll have to make it by the time your region changes over, otherwise, like it or not, you risk missing your favourite shows.

Words from Whitehaven

Residents from the only region to have switched tell us their thoughts. They were previously unable to receive Freeview



Nigel Thornton, 53, consultancy director

'Switchover was fairly smooth, and it's a better service than before.

Initially, the signal from non-BBC channels was unwatchable, but it's improved and picture quality is excellent. However, nobody told us we wouldn't get half the Freeview channels. Digital UK should have made sure all the facts were properly explained.'



John Fletcher, 70, retired scientist

'Switchover information was comprehensive and accurate. We have 18 channels,

as advised in the documentation.

'This is much better than before and we're told we'll get the full service in the future. My advice to switchers is don't be panicked into upgrading your TV aerials – this may not be necessary.'



Andrew Davies, 55, guesthouse owner

'The switchover cost our business [a guesthouse] about £1,000 in

equipment and electrical work. We've saved a bit by replacing Sky with Freeview boxes, but we're gaining no overall benefit whatsoever. Neither the guests nor my wife and I use the extra Freeview channels much. It makes me wonder why switchover was necessary.'

MYTHBUSTER QUIZ

We asked the people in our survey whether they thought eight 'facts' about switchover were true or false. The answers and the percentage of respondents who got them correct are below. See how you get on

- 1 You need a digital TV set to get digital programming True ☐ False ☐
- 2 If you already have digital TV equipment, you don't need to do anything else to receive a signal after switchover True ☐ False ☐
- 3 When switchover happens in your region, all TV access will be lost for at least 24 hours True ☐ False ☐
- 4 You need an HDTV to get digital programming True ☐ False ☐
- 5 You won't need a TV licence if you plan only to watch DVDs/play games on your TV True ☐ False ☐
- 6 The analogue radio signal is being switched off at the same time as the TV signal True ☐ False ☐
- 7 Some people will need a new aerial to get a signal after switchover True ☐ False ☐
- 8 If you currently get a good analogue signal, you will be able to get Freeview after switchover even if you can't now True ☐ False ☐

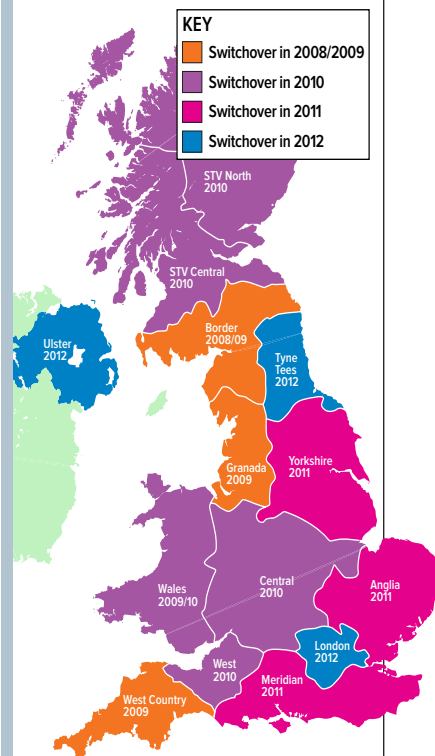


Answers

- 1 **False** (41 per cent correct) You can convert almost all analogue TVs to digital, even if they're quite old, by attaching a set-top box. You may need to adjust the settings, as most digital broadcasts are widescreen.
- 2 **False** (11 per cent correct) Even if you've got all the equipment you need, you'll have to retune all set-top boxes and recording equipment that receives a signal via your aerial (Freeview), as the frequencies will be different after switchover.
- 3 **False** (55 per cent correct) Loss of signal should be brief and should happen in the middle of the night.
- 4 **False** (67 per cent correct) You don't need an HDTV to watch standard digital channels, although conversely you do need a digital TV service to get HD broadcasts as HD isn't available on analogue. Ofcom, the telecoms and broadcasting regulator, is aiming for HDTV to start becoming available on Freeview by late 2009. However, to watch HDTV you will need a new type of set-top box and an HDTV set. See www.which.co.uk/hdtv for more.
- 5 **True** (17 per cent correct) You don't need a TV licence unless you watch TV broadcasting, but if this is the case you should inform TV Licensing in writing.
- 6 **False** (41 per cent correct) No date has been set for switching off analogue radio.
- 7 **True** (53 per cent correct) Only a few households will need a new aerial to get Freeview after switchover. Don't worry if you can't get Freeview now – the digital signal will be boosted after switchover. If you can get a good analogue signal now you should be fine.
- 8 **True** (26 per cent correct) The main purpose of the switchover is to make the digital signal strong enough for everyone who can currently get an analogue signal to get Freeview. However, not everyone will get all the commercial Freeview channels.

The big switch

The map below shows the switchover start year for each broadcast region



As it's impossible to switch all regions at once, the order of switchover is based on minimising disruption and interference between regions.

Whitehaven has already switched and the Borders region is next. London will be one of the last regions to switch in 2012.

OUR RESEARCH

In January 2008, we asked 2,103 members of the public aged 16 or over about their preparation for, perception of and concerns about the digital switchover.

Contacts

Age Concern 0800 009966
www.ageconcern.org.uk

Community Service Volunteers
020 7278 6601; www.csv.org.uk

Digital UK 0845 650 5050
www.digitaluk.co.uk

Help the Aged www.helptheaged.org.uk

Your questions answered

We answer our members' queries about the switchover

Q Bad weather can affect digital picture quality – will switchover improve this?

A Digital UK, the organisation leading the switchover, says poor reception on Freeview is because the signal is not at full power yet. Once the signal is boosted after switchover, such problems should dramatically reduce.

Q Will I need to buy a new aerial?

A It's unlikely. If you receive a good analogue picture now, you should get a good Freeview picture after switchover. To find out how to do an aerial test on Teletext, visit www.digitaluk.co.uk. If you want



Poor reception. A thing of the past?



Philips DTR210 Freeview box

a second opinion, get your aerial checked by a registered digital installer (www.rdi-lb.tv or call 0845 650 5050). Or check www.which-local.co.uk for recommendations in your area.

Q To receive a separate signal, does every TV have to have a set-top box?

A Unless you have IDTV (integrated digital TV) sets, which pick up a digital signal directly, if you want to receive separate signals (and watch different channels at the same time) on each TV, you will need separate boxes for each set.

Q How can I connect a set-top box to an old TV that doesn't have a Scart socket?

A Look for a set-top box with a UHF modulator. You

can connect the set-top box and TV via the aerial socket.

Q Why won't some people be able to get all the Freeview channels?

A Commercial channels have decided to extend coverage to 90 per cent of the UK after the switch but feel it's not commercially viable to extend transmission to the remaining 10 per cent. On a positive note, post switchover, 98.6 per cent of homes should get all public service channels such as BBC, Five and E4 on a reliable basis. A further 1.1 per cent will receive these but may experience interference. The remainder are unlikely to receive a usable signal and should investigate alternatives to Freeview.



Sky is an alternative to Freeview

Q How can I help reduce the environmental impact of switchover?

A If you're buying a new TV, buy one with digital built in (an IDTV). It's more energy efficient than buying a separate box and TV. Increasingly, packaging will display the digital tick logo in a scoreboard graphic. The scoreboard will include the energy in standby level and the Energy Saving Recommended logo (below) if the product conforms to the Energy Saving Trust measurement criteria. Also, recycle old TVs at a local facility or by returning them to the original retailer. Wherever possible and practical, do not leave your TV equipment running unnecessarily.



A HELPING HAND

How to get assistance from official sources, retailers and volunteers

Retail advice

You can improve your chances of getting good advice by looking out for the digital tick logo on the badges of staff who've been trained to answer questions about switchover. The digital tick also appears on TV equipment that's designed to work before and after switchover.

If you're concerned about finding equipment that's easy to use, check www.which.co.uk/tv for ease-of-use ratings.

Official schemes

Some people will receive financial and practical help from

the government to convert one television to digital. If eligible, you'll be told how to apply a few months before your region switches. You qualify if:

■ you or your partner are aged 75 or over

■ you/your partner or a dependent child are entitled to one of the following: disability living allowance, attendance allowance, constant attendance allowance (CAA) under the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit scheme, and CAA and

war pensioners' mobility supplement under the pre-2005 War Pensions scheme

■ you/your partner or a dependent child are registered as blind or partially sighted.

The scheme won't be free to everyone who is eligible. If you are on pension credit, income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance, the scheme is free. Everyone else will have to pay £40. Bear in mind you can get basic Freeview boxes from around £20.

How you can help

As official help is available only to particularly vulnerable groups,

this could leave some people who don't qualify left struggling to deal with new equipment.

Digital UK hopes that its new initiative, Digital Outreach, will plug the gap. The programme involves three major charities: Age Concern England, Help the Aged and Community Service Volunteers. They will train volunteers, distribute information to potentially vulnerable people, conduct public events and home visits and set up a network of help centres at the time of switchover.

If you want to volunteer for the scheme, contact the charities before your region switches.

