

Your response

Overview

We welcome the opportunity to respond to Ofcom's call for input on UK preparations for the World Radiocommunication Conference 2023 (WRC-23). Our response is focused on Section 5: Broadcast TV & Support Applications.

Silver Voices is a non-profit making company campaigning for self-representation by senior citizens at all levels of society. We call for a society in which the views and contributions of elders are encouraged and acted upon. We already have well over 5000 members and about 200 MPs from all political parties receive our regular policy briefings.

Our organisation might not usually respond on this topic but it is becoming very clear that this conference has implications for the future of Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) services. These TV services are important to the people we represent and we would like Ofcom to ensure they continue in their current form.

Our position

We are advocating for a 'no change' position on WRC-23 agenda item 1.5 "*Review of the frequency band 470-960 MHz with potential IMT identification*". Decisions taken at this World Radiocommunication Conference will have a lasting and wide-ranging impact on UK broadcasting.

Our main priority is the future of DTT, which uses the 470-694 MHz spectrum band. 'No change' would protect DTT's continued use of the spectrum and we strongly encourage Ofcom to build an international consensus for this position to represent the UK's interests robustly on the world stage.

DTT holds an important place in the heart of Britons. Recent research from Ipsos has found that more than half (56%) of British adults have watched Freeview via an aerial in the past year. Further, well over three-quarters (87%) have listened to broadcast radio services – which share the same infrastructure as DTT – in the past year.¹ Broadcast TV and radio are a critical national asset, allowing us to enjoy experiences like the Jubilee, Glastonbury or Euro 2022 together as a nation. We know from our work that this is particularly important to senior citizens across the country who see DTT services as an important part of their day-to-day life.

The case for DTT services

DTT and radio services delivered via an aerial enjoy broad support, across all age groups and regions. Research undertaken by Ipsos on behalf of Arqiva shows that 90% of adults believe broadcast services should continue to be supported. More than 8 in 10 (85%) believe government or local MPs should actively support continued provision of these services.² A significant change in the UK's spectrum arrangements could put these services at risk.

¹ Ipsos (2022). *The Importance of Digital Terrestrial Television and Broadcast Radio*
https://www.arqiva.com/Importance_of_Broadcast.pdf

² Ipsos (2022). *The Importance of Digital Terrestrial Television and Broadcast Radio*
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We believe that everyone should have access to the high quality and diverse programming that broadcast TV and radio provides, regardless of their income, the level of their digital skill, where they live or their age. Many who rely on broadcast TV and radio are often those who have the least: the lonely, the poor, older people, the vulnerable and the disconnected.

DTT is free at the point of use – delivering a diverse range of content, including public service broadcasting. This provides access to affordable and reliable programming that has a clear impact on personal wellbeing and community cohesion, including in the most rural of communities. At a time when streaming subscriptions are starting to plateau because of cost pressures, this offers great value for money.

Now the UK has left the European Union, WRC-23 is an opportunity for Ofcom and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to take a leading role in discussions and decision-making and garner support amongst other member nations for a ‘no change’ position.

The importance of DTT and radio to senior citizens

While broadcast services have a broad base of support amongst the UK’s different demographics, they are of particular importance to senior citizens. Older people in their millions depend on terrestrial TV and radio as their main link with developments in the outside world, the value of which was shown with public health announcements beamed into every home during the pandemic. Older people particularly rely on Freeview, as many cannot afford the cost of streaming services, especially in the context of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

We are concerned that relying on a broadband-based radio and TV system would be less reliable and also much more costly – putting TV beyond the means of those on benefits or surviving on the state pension. A significant minority could end up excluded from the modern world, increasing loneliness and depression. According to the Ipsos report, a quarter of people (25%) agreed that they would be “very lonely” if they lost their Freeview service via an aerial, rising to 44% of those who are 65 and older and living alone.

Conclusion

Silver Voices is delighted to respond to this call for input and looks forward to working with Ofcom as you continue your preparations for WRC-23. It is important that the right decisions are taken at the Conference and that Ofcom protects the UK’s interests by safeguarding the future of DTT and radio broadcasting for decades to come. We would like to reiterate our support for a ‘no change’ position on the ‘review of the frequency band 470-960 MHz with potential IMT identification’.