

Dear Ofcom

I would like to submit this response to your consultation on the accessibility of EPGs for visually impaired people at:

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consultations-and-statements/category-2/epg-accessibility>

I am blind. I don't have any connection with the TV industry, and I do not have any special technical knowledge. But I do have lived experience of trying to use a television as someone who has very little eyesight.

I'm only 42 years old and have lived with deteriorating vision for most of my life.

When TV equipment started to go digital, by which I mean that buttons and knobs were replaced by on-screen menus to adjust screen brightness and tune stations, I found it impossible to use a TV. Even simple tasks like knowing what channel I was watching became impossible because the only indication was given on-screen. In the past, you would know what channel you were watching because there were only 4 or 5 channels and each one had a dedicated button on the TV. So for years I stopped watching TV almost entirely because I just couldn't operate the TV itself. It was just too visual.

As FreeView was launched to the mass market, TV became even more inaccessible as on-screen EPGs became the mainstay of program selection.

These were no use at all to me, or to the hundreds of thousands of other people with serious sight problems who cannot see to read them.

Then in the late 2000s a FreeView set top box made by a company called TVonics was produced. All the on-screen menus spoke using text to speech (TTS). Even the EPG spoke using TTS. It was amazing, and for the first time in years I found I could watch TV again. I would find out what channel I was watching, and what was on, by listening to the TTS. I could even set it up myself.

The key thing that made the difference was that the equipment actually spoke to me. It read out the information given on-screen in a sensible, intelligible way. This single feature opened up the door to TV again. As a result, I started watching TV. I still use this TVonics box to watch TV as it is the only TV platform which provides accessible EPG information built-in.

Unfortunately, the company that made the TVonics FreeView boxes went bust a few years ago and there is no replacement for this equipment. Some mainstream TV manufacturers like Samsung and Panasonic have made some limited efforts to incorporate TTS into their more expensive TVs (40 inches and above). There is some limited capability to navigate and use the EPG on some of these devices using TTS, but its implementation is partial.

I would like to appeal to Ofcom, when considering what guidance it will issue to EPG providers, to ensure that their services are available to blind and partially sighted people by means of text to speech. I would like Ofcom to make it *mandatory* for EPGs to speak.

Indeed, it ought to be mandatory for all TV equipment to speak all the on-screen information. The EPG is very important, but unless the TV speaks from the first time you switch it on, many people, including me, will struggle even to get it working in the first place.

The technology is available, and has been available, to make this happen.

It has been available for many years. It just takes leadership from someone to make it happen.

Some people say that blind people can obtain TV listings from a website, or via a smartphone app. They say that we should be happy with this, and that there is no good reason to make the EPG on the TV speak. I **strongly** disagree.

There are a lot of people who do not want, or cannot have, a smartphone.

This could be for economic reasons - the cost of buying the smartphone equipment or the cost of running the data packages required to support it.

It could be that the barriers for disabled people to learn to use touch-screen devices, or to set them up with routers etc, are very high. It could be a matter of legitimate preference. Or it could be for physical reasons due to poor dexterity.

Having to use apps or websites to look up TV listings is more a demonstration of the underlying inaccessibility of built-in EPGs, rather than real accessibility to EPGs.

Please, exercise your discretion and make speaking EPGs mandatory. If you ask providers to use their reasonable endeavours to do this, nothing will change. Please help to make my life, and the lives of thousands of people like me, better by making this vital feature mandatory.

Thank you