

Consultation Response

Age UK's response to the Ofcom consultation - Managing the effects of 700 MHz clearance on PMSE and DTT viewers

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Age UK Ref - 1416

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About this consultation

In 2014 it was announced that certain airwaves would be cleared and made available for mobile data – ‘the 700MHz clearance programme’. This will affect some viewers of Digital Terrestrial TV (DTT). Ofcom estimate that, 14-20 million households will need to retune their TV, 100,000-160,00 may need to replace their aerials, 40,000-110,00 may need to point their aerials in a different direction, and a very small number of viewers may need to change to satellite or cable TV. (There will also be changes affecting those who use wireless microphones but this issue is not covered in this response.)

The Government is considering whether there is a case for making public funding available to support viewers. It has requested advice from Ofcom on the effects the changes will have on stakeholders, the options for addressing these effects, and the associated costs. The consultation aims to gather information to inform this advice.

About Age UK

Age UK is the country's largest charity dedicated to helping everyone make the most of later life. The Age UK network includes around 165 local Age UKs reaching most of England. Each year we provide information and advice to around 4.5 million people through web based and written materials, and individual enquires by telephone, letter, email and local face-to-face sessions. We work closely with Age Cymru, Age NI and Age Scotland.

Introduction and context

Any changes that could affect TV reception could have a major impact for older people, many of whom rely on their TV, and who are less likely than younger age groups to use internet based media and communications. The TV is an important source of company, information and entertainment for isolated older people. Half of people aged 75 and over live alone, disability increases with age, and people aged 75 or over are more likely to say they are sometimes or often lonely than those aged 65 to 74 (41 per cent compared to 29 per cent)¹. 45 per cent of people aged 75 and over say they consider the television as their main form of company.²

As set out below, some people will need support when the changes are introduced. A particular concern is that, even if there are test signals, these are unlikely to cover all

¹ TNS survey for Age UK 2014.

² TNS survey for Age UK, 2014

areas. This could result in viewers not necessarily knowing in advance if they will be affected so it will be difficult for them, and any organisations offering support, to plan for the changes. It is important that there is an effective support scheme providing practical and financial help that is able to respond quickly to protect vulnerable older people. We believe there is a strong case for public funding.

Question 1: Do you agree with our assessment of the number of viewers that will need to retune?

No view

Question 2: Do you have any comments on how viewers will find the retuning process and whether there are particular groups of viewers which will require greater consideration/assistance with the process? What help might they need?

We would expect the majority of older people to find the process straightforward. However there are likely to be some people who will face difficulties. The consultation document refers to Digital UK research following the 2013 retuning, which found that most people in the area studied said they would be confident about retuning in the future. However this still leaves a fifth who were not, which based on Ofcom's estimate of 14-20 million households needing to retune, would represent 2.8 to 4 million households.

Older people, particularly those aged 75 and over, are less likely to feel confident with new technology, and may be more likely than younger groups, to have physical and sensory impairments or be living with dementia or cognitive decline. It is estimated that mild cognitive impairment affects between 5 and 20 per cent of the population aged 65 and over, with the oldest age groups more likely to experience it.³ People with this condition can generally live independently but may find some tasks more difficult – this can include a high level of anxiety around new or complicated tasks including those involving technology.

Good communications will be important to help those who feel uncertain about the process, and there should be the option to ring a helpline. However, in a 2010 response on digital switchover, Age Concern and Help the Aged (the predecessor organisations to Age UK) commented that while the helpline providing information about retuning 'was found to be very helpful and gave a lot of support, for some older people talking through the problem was not enough to help them retune because they needed practical support in

³ http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/For-professionals/Research/Cognitive_decline_and_dementia_evidence_review_Age_UK.pdf?dtrk=true

their homes'.⁴ Similarly we expect that under the new initiative there will be a minority who feel uncertain about what to do, and do not have family or friends to help, and may require practical support.

Question 3: Do you have any information to suggest that our estimate for the number of households that will need to replace their aerials should be different?

No view

Question 4: Do you have any information relevant to our assessment of the average cost of an aerial replacement?

We do not have any specific information on costs but we are concerned that if a large number of people in an area need to replace their aerial at one time, demand could increase costs or open up the market to unscrupulous suppliers who may overcharge consumers and/or may not carry out the work to a good standard (see Q9).

Question 5: Do you have any evidence as to what proportion of viewers may struggle to bear the cost of an aerial replacement?

We anticipate that many older people will feel it is unfair to have to pay around £150 for a new aerial in order to continue to maintain TV reception, especially if they do not expect to benefit from improvements in mobile data. (Only 50 per cent of people aged 75 and over use a mobile phone compared to 90 per cent of all UK adults. For smartphones, the differences are even greater as only 8 per cent of those aged 75 and over and 28 per cent of 65 to 74 year olds use one, compared to 70 per cent of all adults.⁵)

For a single person receiving the standard amount of Pension Credit guarantee, £150 is equivalent to nearly their weekly income so represents a major expense. Around 1.6 million pensioners in the UK live in poverty and 12 per cent of people aged 65 and over say they would be unable to pay 'an unexpected expense of £200'.⁶ Among pensioners, poverty rates rise with age, from 12 per cent of those in their 60s, to 18 per cent among people aged 85 and over.

⁴ <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/documents/upload/ageconcernukdso.pdf>

⁵ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/adults-literacy-2016/2016-Adults-media-use-and-attitudes.pdf>

⁶ *Households below average income 1994/1995 to 2013/2014*, DWP, 2015.

Question 6: Do you have any information to suggest that our estimate of the number of viewers that may need to repoint their aerials should be different?

No view

Question 7: Do you have any information relevant to our estimate of the cost of aerial repaints or platform changes?

No view

Question 8: Do you have any evidence as to what proportion of viewers may struggle to bear the cost of an aerial repaint or platform change?

If people can find someone to repoint their aerial for £50, this is a lower cost than getting a new aerial, however it still represents a significant outlay for people living on a low income.

Question 9: Are there any other matters the viewer support scheme should cover?

The consultation paper discusses the costs of viewer communications. Some people will also need financial and/or practical support and it is important that there is a scheme that can meet these needs.

Some older people may be able to afford to have their aerial replaced, or repointed, but will not know how to go about finding a trusted installer, or need help in making the arrangements. An important aim of the support scheme, and communications surrounding the changes, should be to ensure that people have good quality work undertaken at a fair price.

We know that many older people are targeted by doorstep scammers, who overcharge for often unnecessary gardening, maintenance and other services.⁷ Given this risk, local lists of trusted traders would help reduce the risk of criminals and scammers using the opportunity of the changes and telling people they are at risk of losing TV signal, and the general risk of poor quality work. Wales Head of Trading Standards previously warned against the risk of 'aerial cowboys' during the Digital Switchover⁸, so the Government should ensure that the relevant agencies – including Trading Standards – warn people what to look out for and provide trusted trader lists.

⁷ <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/documents/en-gb/for-professionals/consumer-issues/age%20uk%20only%20the%20tip%20of%20the%20iceberg%20april%202015.pdf?dtrk=true>

⁸ <http://www.tradingstandardswales.org.uk/news/news-item.cfm/newsid/17>

Question 10: Are there any other elements a viewer information campaign would need to include? Do you have any comments on or further evidence to inform the above estimates of the cost of providing information and advice to viewers? Please provide supporting evidence for any adjustments that you think may be relevant.

In addition to the components suggested we would like to see local papers and local radio used as this is a good method of communicating with older people, especially the third (33 per cent) of 65 to 74 year olds and two-thirds (65 per cent) of people aged 75 and over who do not use the internet.⁹ Internet use is even lower among those in lower socio-economic groups who will be most in need of support.

A key challenge will be how to target information. Test transmissions should help but we are concerned that Ofcom suggest this may result in some 'false positives' which could indicate that people need to change their aerials when this is not necessary, and also that it might not be feasible to roll out test transmissions to cover all viewers affected.

We welcome the inclusion of communications to charities helping vulnerable groups of viewers under the description of estimated costs. There will also be other organisations who will be in contact with these groups, such as public services and social housing providers. Age UK will be interested to discuss further what support we might be able to provide and the resources that we would need to do this.

Question 11: Do you have any comments on information which is relevant to our assessment of the potential costs of administering a help scheme?

As mentioned earlier it will be important to factor in information, practical support and financial support.

Question 12: Do you have any evidence to further inform our assessment of the likelihood of viewers that suffer from un-related pre-existing reception problems erroneously making claims against a 700 MHz help scheme?

Question 13: Do you have any additional information to further inform our cost estimates and assumptions of the effectiveness for the different triage methods? Are there any other triage methods which should be considered? Please provide supporting evidence for any adjustments you think may be relevant to our current estimates.

No view

⁹ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/adults-literacy-2016/2016-Adults-media-use-and-attitudes.pdf>