

Digital TV switchover briefing: Digital UK's partnership with Digital Outreach

The story so far

Digital UK commissioned Digital Outreach Ltd (DOL), a not-for-profit consortium of Age UK, Community Service Volunteers and Collective Enterprises Ltd, to deliver a £3.1 million community outreach programme in support of switchover in the first five TV regions in December 2007. The success of the first contract led Digital UK to sign a second contract for £3.5 million in August 2009 to run to the end of switchover in 2012.

The outreach work carried out by DOL has been an integral part of success of the switchover programme so far (one quarter of the UK is fully digital and, by the end of 2011, three quarters will be digital). It has provided information, advice, reassurance and support to thousands of potentially vulnerable viewers. The model has been commended by the government's Consumer Expert Group, the independent Communications Consumer Panel and in various reports from committees of the UK Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

Ed Vaizey, the culture minister, paid tribute to the work of the charities at the launch of Digital UK's annual report in July 2010 and noted that it could be a model for other major public change projects such as digital inclusion and smart metering. Mr Vaizey made a direct connection between local community action in support of switchover and the idea of a 'big society'.

Community outreach and DOL

The original objective of the community outreach partnership was to target those viewers who might not be reached by conventional public information campaigns and might need, as the charities put it, 'an extra little bit of help' from organisations they know and trust. The target audiences were the socially isolated; older people; those with sensory, mobility or dexterity impairment; those with mental health conditions; people with English as a second language and those with learning difficulties. Some of these, but by no means all, would be eligible for the BBC's Digital Switchover Help Scheme (further details of the Help Scheme's parallel contract can be found in their progress report at helpscheme.co.uk/reports). Research into the audiences who found switchover hardest, together with early experience in pilot switchover projects in south Wales, the Bolton area and Whitehaven, confirmed the potential benefits of a partnership with local charities.

DOL emerged as the organisation to deliver community outreach from a competitive national pitch in late 2007. The key structural ingredients of the winning bid were a lean, mobile central team based in Glossop, Derbyshire and a strong commitment to working through local charities – e.g. North East Wales Age Concern or the Plymouth Guild of Voluntary Service - rather than inventing a new multi-tiered administration. DOL was committed to harnessing the energies of existing staff and volunteers - and to offer the tools and training necessary to make them effective - rather than creating a new army of switchover

employees directed from the centre. In sum, by mobilising existing local networks, DOL would be able to set up outreach more quickly and efficiently than by creating events and networks from scratch.

DOL incentivises local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations to accord a higher priority to digital TV switchover than they might otherwise be able to do. In particular, the programme of small grants for local activities – a switchover tea, a stand at a local fair, an information point, even a TV for demonstration purposes – enables local organisations to cascade information through their activities and events to drive awareness and understanding of TV switchover. For DOL the measure of success was not just reaching those clients who knew that switchover was going to affect them, it was reaching beyond to those who discounted switchover or were unaware of it.

Success in the Border, West Country, Wales, Granada and West TV regions

Digital Outreach designed an innovative approach to embedding switchover messages into the work of local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations for the first five regions. This included:

- Mapping the local VCS networks against target audiences in the five regions
- Selecting leading local charities and voluntary organisations to co-ordinate a network of other local VCS bodies
- Mailing a community outreach pack to all relevant VCS organisations
- Training hundreds of VCS staff and volunteers
- Disbursing £250,000 in grants to the sector to support the cascade of information about switchover to over 350,000 people
- Disseminating information about the switchover via nearly 3,500 voluntary and community events
- Providing one-to-one support to over 80,000 people in weeks running up to, and at the point of, switchover.

Summary

The Digital UK partnership with the voluntary and community sector – local charities and not-for-profits – has mobilised local support for switchover and helped thousands of potentially vulnerable consumers. It is hard to see how such well targeted support could have been provided by any other organisation, including Digital UK itself, without recruiting an army of new staff and its attendant costs. Switchover has created a new model for a public information campaign, where traditional communications – leaflets to the home, adverts on TV and in the press - are bolstered by local outreach from local charities and volunteers. The legacy will be further and deeper charity and VCS engagement with the digital needs of their clients.

At a time of wider pressures on public expenditure, the community outreach partnership has engaged good neighbourly enthusiasm and support without increasing the demands on government, central or local. It could be said to represent one small step on the road to a 'big society'.

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