

WHITEHAVEN GETS SET TO LEAD UK SWITCHOVER

The UK's television switchover starts tomorrow (Oct 17) when thousands of homes in Whitehaven, Cumbria, receive digital channels for the first time.

The switch is the first step in a nationwide programme which will ensure free terrestrial digital television (Freeview) is available to virtually all UK households. Currently one-in-four homes across the country are not able to receive digital TV via an aerial.

The two-stage switchover starts at approximately 2am tomorrow morning when analogue BBC Two is replaced with the first group of digital services. Stage two takes place in four weeks' time on November 14 when the remaining three analogue channels – BBC One, ITV1 and Channel 4 - are replaced with a further 15 digital channels. Homes in the area will then have access to 20 Freeview channels, including BBC Three and Four, BBC News 24, ITV digital channels, E4, More 4 and ten radio networks.

The same process will be followed region by region across the UK from 2008-2012, extending coverage of Freeview channels to 98.5% of households, up from 73% today.

Ford Ennals, Chief Executive of Digital UK, said Whitehaven was well prepared with four weeks still to go before the final analogue television signals are switched off.

Research carried out on the eve of the first stage of switchover indicates high levels of awareness and readiness among the local population. The GfK/NOP poll¹ indicates that with four weeks to go until the area goes fully digital, more than nine out of ten said they had already converted at least one television set to digital. The remainder said they were planning to get digital television by time switchover is complete.

Digital UK has mounted a wide-ranging campaign of communications and assistance since the dates for the UK's first switchover were announced in March. All 25,000 households have been sent information booklets and details of the Digital Switchover Help Scheme². Reminder captions have also been broadcast on all analogue television channels. A Digital UK roadshow toured the area during the summer and more than 120 switchover drop-in events have been held with Age Concern Northwest Cumbria, providing advice and practical demonstrations. This is the same level of communications and support that will be provided in all parts of the UK as switchover happens around the country.

The Digital Switchover Help Scheme has so far received more than 2,000 requests from eligible households for subsidised or free digital television equipment. Installation and guidance on using new equipment is also provided under the scheme.

Ford Ennals said: "Tomorrow is the first step on the road to a fully digital UK. Whitehaven is well prepared to lead this process. Most households are ready to receive digital television and we expect those yet to prepare to do so over the next four weeks."

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“The people of Whitehaven and surrounding communities can rightly feel proud of leading this important change, and of the work of local organisations such as Copeland Borough Council and Northwest Cumbria Age Concern who, along with the Digital Switchover Help Scheme, are supporting the community through this process.

“Our challenge now is to make sure help is widely available for those who need it and that any late converters get themselves ready for the final switchover on November 14.”

Mary Bradley, Director of Age Concern, North West Cumbria, said: “Age Concern and other organisations have worked tirelessly to try and reach as many people as possible to ensure switchover is a success. We now all have a month to check that everyone is finally ready for full switchover on November 14. I would urge everyone to help by checking to see whether their relatives, friends and neighbours are experiencing difficulties, and if so, whether they have the support they need. We are here to help and if we can’t, then we can usually direct you to people who can. “

The national timetable for digital television switchover was published in September 2005. In July 2006 it was announced that Whitehaven would be brought forward in the regional timetable as a lead area to refine proposed measures for public communications and assistance.

Culture Secretary James Purnell said: “Digital switchover offers more choice and fairer access to a broad range of channels and is essential if we are to ensure universal access to quality broadcasting. While more than four-in-five UK households have already made the transition, switchover will complete the process and prevent millions of people being stuck in an analogue ghetto. On my recent visit, I found preparations well in hand, and local people glad to be leading the way as we begin this huge technological and social change.”

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Notes

1. GfK NOP conducted 57 face to face interviews between October 12 and October 13. Results as follows:

Aware of switchover	100%
Aware of what to do to prepare	95%
Aware switchover happens in October	98%
Have digital television	92%
Have digital television on all sets	75%
Feel “ok/comfortable” about switchover process	95%

2. The Digital Switchover Help Scheme is designed to help those who have not yet switched to digital, and will provide the equipment necessary to convert one television and help with installation. Households with one or more occupants aged over 75 or with a significant disability or who are registered blind or partially sighted are eligible for the scheme. There will be a one-off, subsidised fee of £40. For eligible households on income-related benefits, the help will be free.

Switchover will increase people’s choice by making digital terrestrial television (commonly known as Freeview) available to all parts of the UK. One in four households cannot currently receive Freeview channels. Of the other digital platforms, Sky satellite services and BT Vision are available in Whitehaven, but cable is not.

How the UK’s first switchover will happen

- At approximately 2am on October 17, BBC Two will cease broadcasting in analogue to Whitehaven, and the first group of Freeview digital channels: BBC1, BBC2, BBC Three, BBC News 24 and CBBC will become available.

- During this transitional stage, analogue ITV1 will move to button 2 on remote controls to make way for the first group of digital channels. This is necessary due to limited spectrum availability.
- Four weeks later (November 14), the remaining analogue channels will also be permanently switched off. Every home in the area will then be able to receive 20 Freeview channels, including ITV2, E4 and BBC Four, plus digital radio, via an aerial.
- The rest of the country will follow the same two stage process, carried out transmitter by transmitter, between 2008 and 2012.

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