

Digital switchover assistance for Edinburgh

✘ by George Ward

Elderly and disabled people in Edinburgh can receive assistance with the Digital Switchover which kicks off in central Scotland on June 1st 2011. It marks the end of the analogue television era, as a stronger digital TV signal is being introduced across the UK. The amount of space left on the analogue signal is low, and apparently needs replacing.

The process, deemed to be the biggest thing to happen to TV since the introduction of colour, is led by Digital UK, the independent body set up to ensure the switchover runs as smoothly as possible. The STV Central region, which covers five transmitter groups across Edinburgh, Glasgow and other parts of central Scotland, is the final part of Scotland to be switched and, once complete, Scotland will become the second nation in Britain to be fully-digital.

All television owners have received information leaflets in the post, but for people over 75 and for those registered blind, partially sighted or eligible for certain disability benefits, the switchover may seem a daunting process. The BBC has introduced the Switchover Help Scheme to give useful assistance to those who fall into these categories, and for those who have been living in care homes for six months or more.

Luke McCullough, the Scotland National Manager from the Switchover Help Scheme, said: "By writing to everyone eligible for the Help Scheme six months in advance, we are doing our utmost to ensure no-one is left behind."

"Some people rarely leave their homes, and only venture out to the hairdressers or bookies once in a while. By contacting

workers in these sectors to pass Help Scheme information along, we can reach those who would otherwise not know about the process.”

For £40 those who are entitled can receive equipment to switch one TV per household to digital. If they want, they can also have the equipment installed, receive a demonstration of how it works and can call a dedicated number if they have any questions for up to 12 months after installation. If they're eligible and also on income-related benefits, the help is free of charge. Everyone eligible has been contacted directly, but it is possible for some people to slip through the net.

McCullough continued: “All those who are eligible for the Help Scheme receive three letters, with the first sent out a full six months in advance. By writing to every nursing home too, we are determined to find and assist everyone who needs our services.”

The recent Help Scheme Progress Report highlights that 5% of the population have no strong support network to rely on, and are therefore unlikely to get through the switchover alone. While 80% of the population can be reached using mainstream advertising, and the other 15% will need and likely receive help from a friend, carer or family member, ‘The 5%’ tend not to engage with mainstream communications.

Most agencies and organisations struggle to find ways to reach people within ‘The 5%’. Due to their circumstances they can be very selective about the people they trust, and tend to rely on very few ‘contact points’ within society. One or two trusted people could be the only reliable way to connect with them, so the Help Scheme has developed a specialised ‘Communities Programme’ to find such individuals.

It has created the Community Outreach Programme delivered by Digital Outreach Ltd to provide Help Scheme awareness through its partnerships with the third sector. The programme works

with one or more primary charity partners in each region. Together they train volunteers to spread the word about the Help Scheme through a range of local events.

The Help Scheme has highlighted findings by Help the Aged and the Office for Disability Issues. A 2008 study found that up to 300,000 older people in the UK can go a month without speaking to a family member or neighbour and 24% of people with disabilities experience difficulties understanding things, or making themselves understood.

Between 2008 and 2010 the Help Scheme contacted more than two million people and completed around 350,000 installations. The Help Scheme has provided a service that, with the help of partners and experts, has continually evolved and found new ways to reach and serve eligible people better.

Lindsay Scott from Age Scotland, said: "Although some older people have contacted us with concerns about having to pay for the assistance, most are happy with the Help Scheme. There is lots of information provided by Digital UK and the BBC."

Spending on the Help Scheme totalled £78 million by the end of the 2009/10 financial year. The Help Scheme carried out nearly a third of a million installations for eligible older and disabled people since launch.

Wales, northern Scotland and some regions of England have already completed their switchover, and most developed countries are doing the same. The Help Scheme and Community Outreach Programmes in all nations have proved vital in getting everyone switched in time.

Scott continued: "Many older people are a lot more online-savvy nowadays and are finding accredited dealers to get the correct equipment. There have not been too many incidences where fraudulent suppliers have tried to sell equipment that is not actually necessary, although it's always good to be on the lookout for such scammers."

From the regions that have switched to date, it is clear that the Help Scheme is spending significantly less than the £600 million originally ring-fenced in the TV licence fee for its operation. Underspend to date is just over £130 million, with the projected final total likely to be around £300 million. It is also due to a lower than projected take up of the Help Scheme, which can be attributed to more people than expected independently converting to digital TV.

Awareness has been the key to the success of the scheme, especially as there are 60 million TV sets in the UK. 88% of adults are aware of the digital switchover in TV regions yet to switch, largely due to the Digital UK advertising campaign. Awareness of the Help Scheme in the STV Central region was only 43% in 2008 but now, a couple of months before switchover, awareness has risen significantly.

Despite Ofcom and the Government requesting Digital UK to be set up, it is a not-for-profit organisation independent from both however the Help Scheme eligibility criteria was set by the Government.

More information about the Help Scheme is available at www.helpscheme.co.uk or by calling 0800 408 7654.