

*Basic advice about the switch to digital television...*

# PROFESSIONAL AERIAL RIGGERS AGAINST THE SHARKS



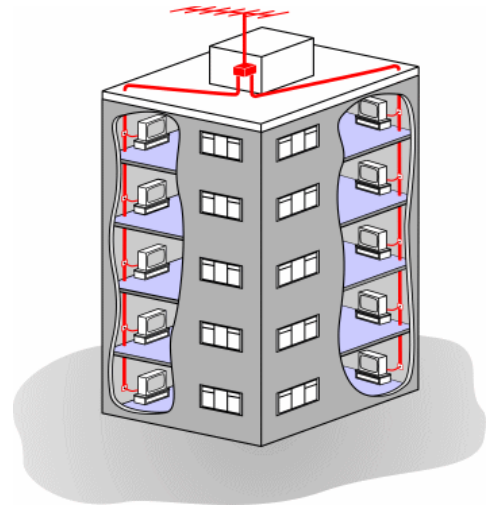
*Don't let the sharks empty your wallet*

## Sheet 8 – Communal TV aerial systems

If you live in a block of flats... an apartment block... a sheltered housing scheme... on-site staff accommodation... a care home... long stay hospital accommodation... social housing... it's quite likely that your TV set will be connected to a Communal TV aerial distribution system

### What is a communal aerial system?

Individual aerials and dishes are impractical and unsightly for some types of residential property. Usually there is a communal aerial system of some kind instead, which supplies TV signals to every property. This means that the aerial and satellite dish are not the responsibility of individual residents. (If people start spouting jargon you may hear them referred to as MATV, SMATV or IRS systems.)



### Is your system ready for digital?

If you are concerned about the switch to digital the first thing to do is to find out if the communal system is ready for digital.

Small blocks of up to a dozen flats or houses usually have a simple TV system that is 'transparent' to all incoming signals. The system doesn't know and doesn't care whether the signals are analogue or digital. Even some quite large systems work this way. So from the residents' point of view the situation is much the same as if each flat had its own aerial. In essence, if your analogue reception is really good then your digital reception (of the main channels at least) should be fine after switchover, and might well be fine before then.

Large systems serving scores of dwellings can be a bit more complicated. Many of them will work fine for digital just like the small systems, but some of them will need to be adjusted so that they carry the digital signals. This work can be quite expensive, although the cost per dwelling should be low.

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All systems, large or small, need to be in reasonably good working order in order to work for digital reception. If the analogue reception is poor then the digital reception might also be poor, or even non-existent.

There are two obvious ways of finding out if your system is ready for digital.

1. **Ask!** – Ask neighbours if they have digital, and if it works properly. Alternatively, ask the person or organisation responsible for maintenance (more about this later).
2. **Try it!** - A set top box will only cost about £25 from a supermarket. Buy one and try it. Plug the aerial lead into the box, connect the box to the TV with the fat black SCART lead that comes with it, and off you go! (We have more detailed connection advice elsewhere on this site). If it works you can just sit back and watch TV. If it doesn't, or it doesn't work very well, maybe you should do something about it.

We try not to suggest to anyone that there's any great urgency about getting ready for the switch to digital, because in most cases viewers don't actually need to do anything until just before the switch-over date if they don't want to. But if you use a communal system that doesn't work for digital it might be wise to start the ball rolling well before the switch-over date. You know how landlords and property managers can drag their feet, especially if they need to spend money!

## **If the system isn't ready for digital, who should you approach?**

Accommodation with shared facilities are organised in so many different ways that we can't cover them all here. But ask yourself who you would complain to if the roof leaked: that's a good clue!

If you are in sheltered accommodation and you can't get out or use the phone easily, the home help, warden, or centre manager could be the person to tell. If necessary ask a neighbour or relative what to do.

For council housing, the usual contact is the local housing office. Look on your rent book or other documentation. There could be a 'neighbourhood champion', or tenant liaison officer, or if you are housebound and can't use the phone the rent collector could be the person.

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For housing association property, you should be able to find the phone number of the area or regional office. This will be on your rent book or tenancy agreement.

Where all the properties belong to one landlord and are rented then the landlord is normally the person to approach, unless they have appointed an agent.

For apartment blocks or complexes where most of the dwellings are privately owned, there are various possibilities. The first is the management agent, if there is one.

## **The management agent**

Some places will have appointed a management agent to look after all the routine maintenance. If you aren't sure ask a neighbour, or look at the notices in the hallway or main entrance. If there is a management agent they are the obvious people to speak to, but the response might not be the one you want. The reason is that the terms of management agents' contracts vary. In some cases they take full responsibility for all maintenance (in exchange for a fixed payment from each flat), but do not take responsibility for 'upgrades'. They might well consider the conversion of the TV system for digital to be an upgrade. In that case they will probably be prepared to organise the work, but they will charge the cost to the residents as an extra. Of course, this means that the residents must give prior agreement. This is usually by a majority vote.

## **Residents' Associations**

Some places don't use the services of a management agent. They simply have a residents' association, which meets at regular intervals. The association collects ground rents from each property and spends the money on maintenance and improvements as it sees fit. In a big complex there will probably be 'block secretaries' and these are the people to approach.

## **What if no-one wants to help?**

If you find that your digital reception is deficient in some way — missing channels, poor reception, unreliability — you will need to get the problem sorted eventually, so it might be as well to start making enquiries now. But if your complaints fall on deaf ears, what should you do?

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Firstly, speak to as many neighbours as you can and find out if the problem is general. If it is then complaints on behalf of many will carry more weight than those on behalf of one individual.

## **Points you should make...**

In most cases the communal system will be made ready for digital without any fuss. But in the few cases, where the landlord (or whoever) digs his heels in, you might have to make a few waves.

In council and housing association rented property the rent is often calculated by the adding together of 'rent elements'. If this applies to your home, and if you can find out how much the rent element for the TV system is, you can multiply the amount by the number of dwellings on the system. This will give you an idea of whether the amount spent on maintenance is fair. Remember that the councillor for your ward is there to speak for you — contact him or her and explain the problem.

The argument that the conversion to digital is an 'upgrade' rather than 'maintenance' — and thus not covered by the management agreement or the rent item set aside for the TV system — might be fair enough if the system works perfectly for analogue but poorly for digital. But if the system has had no attention for many years, and the analogue reception is poor, the chances are that digital reception requires not an 'upgrade' but simply a reasonable level of maintenance. This has been lacking in the past, and now it must be done.

If there is a tenancy agreement or covenant saying that you cannot install your own aerial or dish, this is very likely to be unenforceable if the communal system doesn't work properly. This could be worth mentioning, because the threat of a rash of aerials and dishes can often work wonders. If all else fails you could consider orchestrating the writing of as many letters as possible by people in the block, announcing that dishes and aerials will be installed if the system is still faulty after a certain date. Mention that in the event of the system subsequently being repaired the cost of removing the dishes and aerials will not be the residents' responsibility.

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## **Problem areas**

There are a few parts of the country where some of the large communal systems will need to be adjusted when analogue is switched off. The work can't be done in advance because it has to be done at the same time as the transmitters are changed over.

If it turns out that the communal system has gone to rack and ruin and needs to be replaced completely, we suggest that if you have any say in the matter you opt to have a new system that includes satellite. This should include at least two feeds to each dwelling, so that Sky+, SkyHD, and Freesat+ will work properly. The residents' association (or whoever holds the purse strings) should get prices for systems with and without satellite. The difference in cost should not be all that great. In private developments where individual dishes are banned, the provision of a satellite distribution system can be an important plus factor when properties are sold.

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