

Basic advice about the switch to digital television...

PROFESSIONAL AERIAL RIGGERS AGAINST THE SHARKS



Don't let the sharks empty your wallet

Sheet 1 - Introduction

PARAS is an informal group of industry insiders with detailed knowledge about the UK switch to digital TV, and how it is affecting the public. We have one thing in common: we are appalled at the way some traders and broadcasters are using the switch to digital TV as a means of misleading or even ripping off the public. The more vulnerable members of society seem to be the main targets. This website exists for one reason only: to provide basic facts about the switch to digital TV in the hope that fewer people will be misled.

The official line, which exhorts people to "be ready for digital", whilst being fair enough in itself, is having the unintended effect of panicking a few people, and this of course makes them susceptible to the crooks. Elderly and housebound people who rely heavily on their television are perhaps the ones most affected.

Please help us by passing this information on in any way that you can. Many members of the target audience do not have internet access. Here are some ways you could help:

- Print the information and give it to elderly neighbours
- Put the information on appropriate notice boards
- Ask your local library to hold copies
- Ask your local paper to print extracts from the material
- Mention our website – www.paras.org.uk – in local radio phone-ins
- Email the information to your community radio station

We have made the information on this site available in several versions, all of which are easy to view or download. If you do anything to spread the word we would be pleased to hear about it.

All media are welcome to reproduce the material on this site in its entirety. If you use material from this site please let us know, and please don't wilfully quote us out of context. Other than that this site is completely copyright free. Queries and feedback may be sent to us from our contact page, but I'm afraid we cannot answer individual questions about your TV reception, or recommend installers or equipment.

Britain is changing over to digital TV and a lot of unscrupulous people have smelt money. Although the majority of traders are honest there are some terrible crooks out there. Here's a quick guide that will help you avoid getting ripped off by these digital sharks.

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Sheet 2 - Debunking a few popular digital TV myths

▶ The 'digital aerial' myth

The myth says that you need a special aerial for digital. **There is no such thing as a digital aerial.** All aerials receive digital and analogue signals. We have a page specifically about TV aerials where there is more information.

▶ The Channel Five myth

Some people will tell you that if you can't get Channel Five it means that you won't be able to get digital TV unless you buy an expensive new aerial. This is complete nonsense. **The transmitters that don't have Channel Five will have digital TV when analogue closes down.**

▶ The 'digital signals are weak' myth

You may have the impression that digital tv signals require a new aerial because the signals are much weaker. This is true in some areas at the moment but **the whole point of Digital Switchover is to allow the digital signals to be much stronger.** After digital switchover more than 99% of the population will be within range of digital tv through an aerial.

▶ The Sky myth

If you live in a really poor TV reception area you might have been misled into thinking that paying for Sky is the only solution. Not so! Read the section on Satellite Options.

▶ The Sky+ myth

Some people would like you to think that the only way to record digital TV is by using a Sky+ box. Not true! **There are lots of ways to record digital TV** and, remember, to use a Sky+ recorder you have to pay a subscription to Sky.

▶ The cable TV myth

Word might have been put about in your area that the only way to get any TV reception when analogue is switched off is to subscribe to cable TV. This is also nonsense.

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Sheet 3 - Your television set

- You don't need to buy a new TV set
- You can convert your set to digital for £25
- If you do buy a new TV set get a digital one

You definitely do not need to buy a new TV set because of the analogue switch off.



Any TV set less than twenty-five years old needs nothing more than a simple digital TV receiver – a 'set top box' – which you can buy from electrical shops or supermarkets for about £25.

Set-top boxes are easy to connect up. They require plugging in to a mains power socket, and a second cable will connect between the box and the TV. If you can use a SCART lead you will get a better picture and your tv will probably 'retune' itself to the set-top box automatically as soon as it is switched on.

OK, if your TV set is more than 25 years old (that's very old for a TV set!) it might not have a SCART socket, so it may not work with all set top boxes, but you *can* get a box that would work with your old telly. Frankly, though, you should consider replacing that old set anyway. There's a small chance that it could be a fire hazard, and after all it doesn't owe you anything!

If you decide to buy a new TV set because the old one is worn out you should make sure that you get a digital one. It will have a DVB symbol. To make sure, you could ask the shop to demonstrate reception of a whole lot of digital channels, such as ITV2 and More 4. Be aware that a lot of non-digital sets are being sold off cheaply. If there's no demonstration of digital reception, don't buy.



Almost all new TV programmes these days are made in widescreen, and many are also in high definition. This may be another reason why you might like to buy a new TV, but you don't have to.

If you have impaired hearing ask the shop to demonstrate the **subtitles for the hard of hearing**. Are they easy to switch on?

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Sheet 4 – Your TV Aerial

- If you are still using analogue you can buy a cheap digital set-top box any time and try it on your existing aerial (but see the sheet about local relay stations).
- When analogue is switched off your digital reception can only stay the same or get better. It will not get worse.
- If you have digital reception now you will NOT lose your reception because you have an old aerial.
- You can wait and see. Once you have digital reception (even with some missing channels) you can if you wish wait until analogue is switched off before you decide about aerial replacement.

If you buy a digital set top box or a digital TV set you should plug in your existing aerial and find out how well it works before you think about spending money on a new aerial. If you have been getting good reception from your existing aerial there's a good chance that it will be fine for digital. **If you can get all the channels you want and the picture is stable there's no need to buy a new aerial.** Even if a few digital channels are missing they will probably appear after analogue is switched off.

In most areas, if your aerial is giving good analogue reception now it will be all right for digital both now and after analogue is switched off. But once analogue is switched off the digital signals will be much stronger, so even if digital reception is not perfect now (or if some channels are missing), after analogue switch-off your reception will probably be perfect. If analogue switch-off is coming soon in your area it most likely isn't worthwhile buying a new aerial now. Wait until after analogue switch-off and then decide. The chances are you will not need to replace the aerial.

In some of the areas where analogue TV is still available, some of the digital signals have to be transmitted for the time being on frequencies that an old aerial can't receive. In these areas you will find that quite a lot of channels are missing when you try your set-top box (or your digital TV) with your old aerial. But if you can get the basic five channels and you really aren't concerned about the missing ones it could be sensible to wait until analogue is switched off before buying a new aerial. The reason is that once analogue has finished, the channels will be re-arranged and it's quite likely that you will be able to receive everything on your existing aerial. Of course, if it bothers you that some channels are missing you have the option of replacing your aerial at any time.

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► Beware of the shark!

If you do replace your aerial the installer might point to a neighbour's roof and show you a large aerial with a lot of funny shaped prongs, and say, "That's what you need. That's a digital aerial!" He might show you such an aerial in a catalogue. However, as you should know by now, **there is no such thing as a digital aerial!**

If most of the other aerials on the street are small ones then it's very likely that all you need is a small one. The installer could be trying to sell you an expensive aerial that you don't need. There have already been countless examples of people being sold massive aerials for digital (costing perhaps £350) when a normal one is all that's needed.

It's true that until analogue is switched off digital reception can be tricky in some areas, but you should bear in mind that an expensive aerial you buy now could be unnecessary when analogue ends and the digital powers are boosted.

There's a limit to what you should spend on an aerial, because there's always the alternative of using satellite, as explained in our sheet about the **satellite options**.

Choosing an installer

The biggest adverts in the yellow pages are often franchise operations that take a fee for passing your details to local installers - who might be good or bad.

The best bet is to get a good recommendation from someone who has had an aerial or satellite dish fitted recently and been happy with the service they received.



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Sheet 5 – Reception from low-power local relay stations

If you get your TV reception from a small local relay station (typically the station will cover just a small rural town or a valley, although there are also some in cities) there probably won't be any digital reception for you from these until analogue is switched off. So if it's common knowledge in your area that there's no digital reception (ask around) you should delay buying a digital set-top box until just before analogue is switched off. If you have to buy a new TV set though (because the old one is worn out) you should get a digital one.

When analogue is switched off you might be amongst the tiny minority of unlucky people who actually will need to change your aerial. This is because some of the small relay stations will use different frequencies after analogue is switched off. If so, the new aerial will only need to be roughly the same size and cost as the old one (allowing for inflation of course!) If you have had really good analogue reception on a small aerial then a small aerial designed for the new frequencies is most likely all you will need for digital.

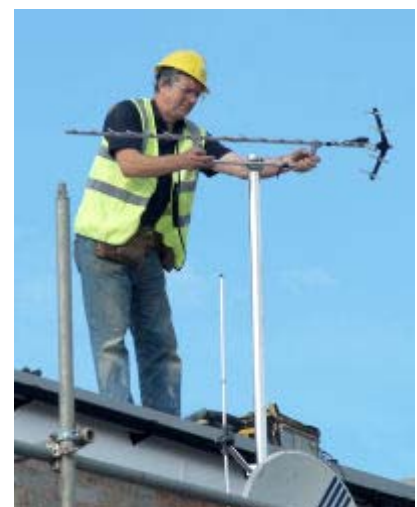


If you want to 'go digital' before analogue TV is switched (so you can get the extra channels) the best way is likely to be BBC/ITV Freesat.

Choosing an installer

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Sheet 6 - The satellite options

- You don't have to take out a Sky subscription now or ever
- You can use satellite without it being anything to do with Sky
- You don't need to buy a new TV set

If you live in one of the few places in the UK where reception from an aerial is very poor you might have problems with digital reception from an aerial now, and you might even have problems after analogue is switched off.

If you are sure you are in a really bad reception area the answer might be to use satellite. Because some people live in places where TV reception from an aerial is difficult, the government and the broadcasters have made sure that you can get all your normal TV channels from a satellite dish, *without subscribing to Sky*.



Of course if you do want Sky all you need do is take up a Sky subscription in the normal way. You will get all the 'ordinary' free channels though the Sky dish, so you won't need an aerial. If you cancel the Sky subscription the dish and receiver box are yours to keep, and they will still receive the basic five channels plus some others.

If you don't want to pay any subscriptions you can use a Freesat service. There are two Freesat services. One is 'Freesat from Sky' and the other is the Freesat scheme operated by ITV and the BBC. If you have no intention of ever subscribing to Sky then the BBC/ITV Freesat scheme is the one for you. Ask a local TV dealer for 'BBC and ITV Freesat'. The set-top box will cost about £55 and you will also have to pay for a dish installation.

If you are in a very poor aerial reception area the satellite option can work out quite well for you. Remember that you won't need an aerial at all – only a dish. Even if you have more than one TV set you will still only need one dish, as they can be adapted to feed several sets.

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Sheet 7 - Recording TV programmes

- You can use your old video recorder along with a digital set-top box
- Your old video will always play back your tapes

There is no real need to do anything until analogue is switched off, although you can act in advance if you prefer.

When analogue is switched off your VHS video recorder won't be able to receive any programmes by itself. However, if you are really happy with it then you could buy a set-top box (either for aerial or satellite reception) and simply use it to supply programmes to the video recorder.

So you would have two set-top boxes, one to record from and one to supply programmes to the TV set. In any case, your old video will always play back your tapes quite independently of the TV broadcasts. So even after analogue is switched off you will always be able to play your tapes as long as your video recorder is in working order.

If your video recorder is getting a bit old though, it might be as well to buy a new digital recorder. This will need to be the type that works from either an aerial or from satellite, depending on which you have.

The modern digital recorders are very easy to use, and if you have always found the old video a bit confusing you'll get a nice surprise if you get a new digital one.

- **If your reception is from an aerial you can use any of the non-satellite digital TV recorders on the market, such as the Freeview+ one.**
- **If you have a Sky subscription you can use a Sky+ box to record programmes.**
- **If you have BBC/ITV Freesat you can use a Freesat recorder (available from Dec 2008).**

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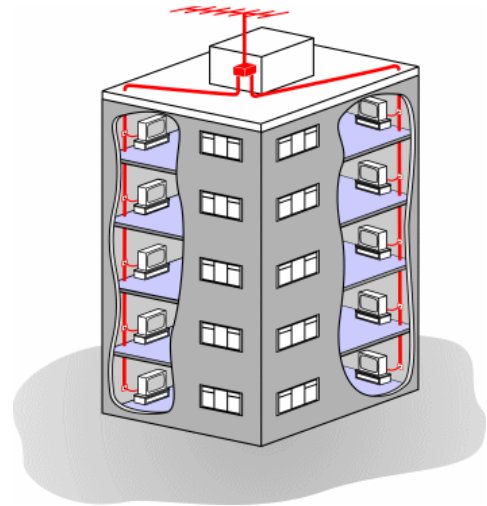
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Sheet 8 – Communal TV aerial systems

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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Sheet 9 - Widescreen and High Definition

These new features both have things in common - they both require a digital TV signal, but often people think they have them when, in fact, they don't.

Widescreen

Widescreen televisions have now become commonplace in the UK, but just because you have a wide screen TV it does not necessarily mean that you are watching proper widescreen pictures. By default, Freeview and Sky boxes are usually set to provide a correct picture on a standard (4:3) television. If this picture fills a TV with a widescreen all that happens is that the picture is stretched until everyone looks short and fat. This is not what widescreen is about.

On our web site there is a straightforward, step-by-step guide to making sure that you are watching a true widescreen picture.

High Definition

High definition pictures have more detail and precision and are of particular benefit to those with larger screens. High definition is not a feature that can be added to the an existing transmission so it has to be broadcast as a special new channel with its own schedule of programmes. This is why you will hear references to "The BBC HD Channel", for example. (Though often these channels will broadcast the HD version of a programme at the same time as it goes out on the main channel - a necessity when the programme is live!)

HD services are digital, of course, and at present only available on satellite or cable, though there are plans to introduce HD services to 'Freeview' after Digital Switchover.



Many TV sets are now being sold as HD Ready and bear the logo shown on the right. This means just what it says: the sets are ready to display a high definition picture if they are given one to display. This may be from a satellite or cable HD box or from a High Definition disc player e.g. Blu-Ray.

The best way of connecting any High Definition box to an HD Ready tv is using an HDMI cable. HDMI stands for High Definition Multimedia Interface. (That's nice, isn't it?) This will ensure that you get the very best quality picture possible.



More detail on our web site at www.paras.org.uk