

Digital Television Switchover Plan

Ireland's Intentions With Regard to the Transition from Analogue to Digital Broadcasting

Summary

1. This paper outlines Ireland's intentions with regard to the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting.
2. This paper is in two parts. The first part gives an overview of television broadcasting in Ireland. The second part sets out Ireland's intentions with regard to a switchover to digital broadcasting.
3. The Broadcasting (Amendment) Act 2007 sets out a framework for digital broadcasting in Ireland.
4. Under this legislation, RTE is required to roll out multiplexe(s) for the Irish national free to air channels whilst the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) is responsible for seeking commercial DTT service providers.
5. In setting out this legislation, Ireland was cognisant of the importance of achieving analogue switch-off whilst retaining the option of a free to air television broadcasting platform.
6. Ireland has not yet proposed a specific date for when full digital switchover will have occurred and analogue switch-off can happen. However, Ireland is working towards achieving analogue switch off in 2012.
7. The 2007 Act provides that the Minister for Communications will set a date for analogue switch off. In proposing such a date, the Minister will seek to identify a point in the future at which:
 - The coverage of free-to-air digitally broadcast national television in Ireland is likely to be sufficiently high and nearing universality.
 - Analogue switch-off will be expected to result in a minimum of inconvenience to viewers.

Television Broadcasting in Ireland

8. Ireland has stated core policy goals with regard to broadcasting in Ireland. These are:
 - To create an environment that encourages the maintenance of high quality Irish radio and television services by both independent broadcasters and RTE (Radio Teilifís Éireann), the national public service broadcaster
 - To secure a viable future for high quality public service broadcasting in the Irish market
 - To seek to retain access to a range of quality programming in analogue and digital form, on a universal and free-to-air basis.¹

9. Drawing on these core policy goals, the Irish Government seeks to facilitate the development of a substantial universal and free-to-air offering of nationally broadcast programming on digital television platforms in the medium term.

10. While the Government and the Minister for Communications set overall broadcasting policy in Ireland, day-to-day regulation is generally a matter for independent regulators. The Commission for Communications Regulation is the regulator of the electronic communications sector (telecommunications, radio-communications and broadcasting transmission). The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland licenses and regulates independent broadcasters. The RTE Authority is a statutory body, which regulates RTE's activities.

11. Four national television channels are currently available free-to-air through an analogue terrestrial television network. This network is owned and run by RTÉNL, a wholly owned subsidiary of RTE. These channels are RTE 1, RTE 2, TG4, an Irish language channel, and TV3, a national independent television service licensed by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland.

12. Ireland has a strong demand for multi-channel television, driven largely by the popularity of UK channels. Multi-channel television is provided on a subscription basis by companies with cable/MMDS (Multipoint Microwave Distribution System) franchises and by satellite operators. The four free-to-air national channels are a 'must-carry' obligation on all cable transmissions and on digital MMDS transmissions. TV3 is a 'must-carry' obligation on analogue MMDS. Approximately thirty nine per cent of television households receive cable/MMDS services and a further thirty seven per cent receive satellite services. Both the cable/MMDS and satellite providers are offering digital services. Twenty one per cent of television households receive digital television direct-to-home through

¹ Page 16, Statement of Strategy 2005-2007, Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, July 2005. <http://www.dcmnr.gov.ie/NR/rdonlyres/74DEC8B3-0C04-49FC-B1D9-F936B0D7A7C3/0/StatementofStrategyfinal.pdf>

cable/MMDS systems and thirty seven per cent receive digital television direct-to-home through satellite systems.²

13. Ireland has not introduced Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT). A process was announced by the Irish Government to introduce DTT on a commercial footing with a free-to-air component (the four national channels) in 2001. This process was unsuccessful, however, and finished in 2002. The process sought to set-up two new companies – a digital terrestrial transmission company, separated out from RTE, and a private commercial multiplexing company. Legislation in the form of the 2001 Broadcasting Act put in place a legal framework for the introduction of DTT. This legislation has now been revised.
14. In August 2006, Ireland launched a Digital Terrestrial Television Pilot network. It is planned that this pilot will continue until August 2008, during which time DTT broadcasts will transmit from the Three Rock site in Dublin and the Clermont Carn site in County Louth. This trial seeks to inform stakeholders about DTT.
15. The 2007 Broadcasting (Amendment) Act was enacted in April 2007 and provides a framework for DTT licensing in Ireland.
16. Under this legislation RTE must operate a multiplex providing space for the national TV channels, RTE1, RTE2, TV3 and TG4, whilst the BCI is tasked with seeking commercial multiplex operators.
17. It is expected that DTT services will launch in Ireland in mid 2009.
18. A statistical outline of television take-up in Ireland is attached at the Appendix.

Intentions with Regard to the Introduction of Digital Television in Ireland

Considerations

19. Ireland has a stated objective of facilitating the introduction of digital television broadcasting in Ireland. This objective is informed by an over-arching goal of seeking to retain access to the principal national channels on a free-to-air platform in both digital and analogue formats in the medium term.
20. Ireland recognises the international drive towards digitisation and its many implicit benefits. Ireland is fully committed to an inclusive information society and a dynamic information and communications technology business sector. The advent of digital television presents significant opportunities to the Irish citizen,

² Figures from Comreg: <http://www.comreg.ie>, ComReg Quarterly Report, 08/22

- the public sector and the business sector. The citizen can benefit in terms of increased entertainment offerings, additional sources of information and a new form of interaction. Digital television presents a potential means of service delivery for Government and the public sector. Digital television may also act as a key driver of business and economic development across a whole range of sectors.
21. Ireland acknowledges that market forces and consumer demand must drive the uptake of digital television services. Appropriate regulation will facilitate this uptake. There may also be a role for Government designed at initiating or unlocking market demand for digital television.
 22. Ireland has a specific television broadcasting landscape that makes it relatively unusual in Europe. It is geographically separate from mainland Europe that has implications for satellite transmissions and for spectrum usage. It has a low population density with an extensive demographic and economic concentration around Dublin. It has two official languages, Irish and English. Political, geographic and economic linkages with Northern Ireland have repercussions for broadcasting policy. UK television channels are very popular in Ireland, and are largely provided on a subscription basis. Ireland has the second highest penetration of satellite television in Europe, but Sky, the operator of the principal satellite platform, is unregulated in Ireland.
 23. While spectrum is viewed as a vital national resource and is carefully monitored in terms of its usage, there may not be the same level of demand on spectrum in Ireland that occurs in other countries. For this reason, analogue switch-off in Ireland may not be the priority it is in other Member States where demands for spectrum usage may be extremely high. However, Ireland appreciates the rapidly changing nature of information and communication technologies and the usefulness of additional spectrum.
 24. Ireland identifies significant synergies in the development of digital television services on the one hand and data and telephony services on the other. In terms of both regulation and other initiatives in the area of digital television, Ireland will seek to exploit any suitable opportunities for the parallel delivery of broadband services.

Plans for Digital Switchover

25. Within the context of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Act 2007 and the ongoing development of digital broadcasting, Ireland will consider proposing a switchover date. In proposing such a date, Ireland will seek to identify a point in the future at which:
 - The coverage of free-to-air digitally broadcast national television in Ireland is likely to be sufficiently high and nearing universality.

- Analogue switch-off will be expected to result in a minimum of inconvenience to viewers.
26. Ireland has not proposed a specific date for when full digital switchover will have occurred and analogue switch-off can happen. There is a very significant dependence on analogue broadcasting in Ireland. Approximately twenty five per cent of Irish television households avail of analogue terrestrial television broadcasting only³ and as many as ninety nine percent of television households have access to analogue terrestrial broadcasting services.
 27. Ireland proposes to facilitate the continued development of digital television across competing delivery mechanisms. As there is no free-to-air digital broadcast of the national Irish channels at this point in time, Ireland expects to continue free-to-air analogue television broadcasts in the medium term.
 28. As already stated, the availability of the national channels on a free-to-air digital basis is a key policy objective and the Broadcasting (Amendment) Act 2007 provides the framework for DTT development. The Minister for Communications will keep apprised of these developments and will use this information in developing a policy for analogue switch-off.
 29. In developing policy on analogue switch off, Ireland will pay particular attention to the costs faced by the citizen in any digital switchover. While many citizens choose to pay for subscription television services, all television licence holders can view free-to-air broadcasts. Ireland will highlight the issues facing the free-to-air viewer in its considerations.
 30. Consistent with trends across Europe, Ireland expects that, in the medium to long-term, digital television will become prevalent in Ireland. It is expected that many platforms including cable, MMDS, satellite and DTT will all play a significant role in this regard. It is also expected that some digital services will be on a subscription basis and others will be free-to-air.
 31. Ireland recognises that the declaration of a specific date as an ‘analogue switch-off date’ can be a useful means with which to inform citizens about changes in the broadcasting environment. The availability of such information can empower citizens as they are faced with different technology or consumer choices. Ireland will bear this consideration in mind as the prevalence of digital television broadcasting increases.
 32. However, notwithstanding the above, Ireland is committed to achieving analogue switch-off in 2012.

³ Figures from Comreg:http://www.comreg.ie/_fileupload/publications/ComReg0652.pdf

33. Ireland considers that there are opportunities for possible EU co-ordinated action in this sphere now and in the future. Existence of a suitable forum at an EU level may provide opportunities for co-ordination of policy.
34. Ireland will continue to update the European Commission on digital television developments in Ireland, particularly as new Government proposals emerge.

Broadcasting Division,
Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources
July 2008

Appendix

Statistical Outline of Television Take-Up in Ireland⁴

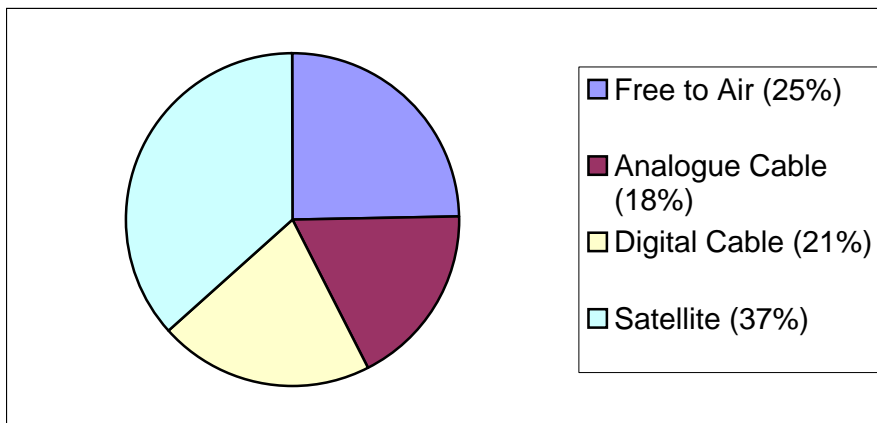
Households

Estimated number of households with a TV:	1,460,000
Number of Households subscribing to Pay TV:	1,099,000
Number of free to air Analogue Only Households:	361,000
Number of Digital TV Households:	841,000

Subscribers

Number of Satellite subscribers (Digital):	535,000
Total Number of Cable/MMDS subscribers:	564,000
Number of digital Cable/MMDS subscribers:	306,000

Distribution of TV Households in Ireland – December 2007



⁴ Figures from Comreg:
<http://www.comreg.ie>. ComReg, Quarterly Report 08/22