

am responding to the request for feedback on the Interim Report.

I have been involved in a professional capacity with the digital switchover project, having conducted studies for BERR and Ofcom.

I noted Action 7 which states "We will consider at what point and at what cost the standard offer provided by the Digital Television Switchover Help Scheme could have a return path capability, and we will ensure that such capability is available as an option."

I recognise that the Help Scheme can be used to set high standards and that the Scheme has already had a catalytic effect in terms of audio description and higher standards of usability. However I think there is a need for some care when looking at the issue of a return path.

I have been aware for some time of the Government's desire to encourage the use of digital television as a two-way medium and as a gateway to certain services. The rationale for this is that more homes have TVs than PCs, and that some of the sociodemographic groups that have most need for service access are the least likely to have PCs.

I believe that this logic should however be balanced by acknowledging two other factors:

- (i) That the TV and associated handset is not a particularly usable piece of interactive technology. This has been found in various studies dating back to the 'Easy-TV' project and by some of the work conducted by ourselves at Sagentia (formerly Scientific Generics).
- (ii) The commercial market in DTT set-top-boxes has not so far resulted in many boxes with a return path capability.

I would be concerned if the Help Scheme were to try to push set top boxes in a direction which was at variance with the way the consumer market was driving them. I would therefore suggest that Action 7 is modified to include some recognition of the desirability and appropriateness of a return path capability. The decision should not be on cost grounds alone. If, by 2012, there are a large number of retail set top boxes with a return path, then the case for implementing this feature in the Help Scheme would be strong. If, on the other hand, the retail market for set top boxes has tended not to incorporate return path capabilities, the reason could be that most consumers do not find this to be an appealing or usable proposition, and the case for including a return path in the Help Scheme would be less strong.

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