

21 January 2011

Digital Switchover Details Announced

The Digital Switchover is set to take place by 1st June 2011. The details on the Digital Switchover were announced today in a press conference organised by the Digital Switchover Committee. It was announced that as from 1st June 2011 free-to-air Maltese TV stations will only be broadcast using digital technology.

The Hon Charlò Bonnici, the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Communications said that the switchover is a direct result of the European Union's drive to accelerate the process for the Digital Switchover to be completed by 2012, and asserted that Government is firmly committed towards furthering the development of both public-service and commercial television broadcasting. The setting up of this digital free-to-air network is tangible proof of such a commitment.

Ing. Philip Micallef, Chairman, Malta Communications Authority, who also chairs the Digital Switchover Committee, explained that the Digital Switchover was carried out in two phases. The first phase commenced in 2005 and concentrated on the introduction of subscription-based digital terrestrial TV (DTTV) services, creating much needed competition in the sector and resulting in a healthy increase in subscriptions.

This second and final implementation phase, which kicked off in 2009, concerns the transition to digital of public-service and general interest TV, and upholds the principle that viewership of such broadcasts should be without payment. This transition will also result in a number of benefits to free-to-air TV viewers, including improved picture quality, better sound and an increase in the available space for free-to-air TV stations from the existing four slots to six.

Ing. Micallef clarified that the Digital Switchover does not affect Melita's analogue service and explained that the transition from analogue cable to digital is distinct from the Digital Switchover and is a commercial decision taken by Melita itself. Ing Micallef stressed that The Digital Switchover will affect only those viewers who watch analogue free-to-air TV – that is, those who rely on a conventional rooftop aerial to watch Maltese free-to-air TV, and that subscribers of GO and Melita will not be affected.

It was explained that the switchover process is not a complicated one. Viewers who do need to carry out some minor alterations, simply need a UHF aerial, which they most likely already have, and a digital decoder (i.e. digital set-top box) or a digital TV set (i.e. a TV with an in-built digital decoder).

Ing Micallef gave details of the awareness campaign that will be rolled out over the next few months. This campaign will clearly explain the implications of the switchover, its benefits, who it will

affect and how consumers should go about ensuring that their TV sets are capable of receiving digital free-to-air TV transmissions.

The campaign will employ various media to ensure that the information reaches, to the extent possible, all free-to-air TV viewers. Complementing this campaign will be a number of initiatives such as public information sessions, details of which will be provided in due course, and a 'DSO Customer Support in Retailing' scheme in collaboration with retailers to assist viewers when purchasing digital TV equipment and for seeking specialist technical advice.

The press conference also highlighted the launch of a freephone helpline 153 and a dedicated website – www.dso.org.mt – where the general public can seek further information and assistance related to the Digital Switchover.