

Moving Freeview to make more airwaves available for mobile – the ‘700 MHz Clearance Programme’

Update: 1 October 2020

The last phase of the clearance of the section of the airwaves known as ‘the 700 MHz band’ completed in August 2020. The 700 MHz clearance programme has successfully cleared this spectrum so that it can be used to meet the growing demand for spectrum for mobile data. This final update reviews some of the programme’s key achievements.

The first 700 MHz clearance event occurred in the north of Scotland in 2017. Since the start of the programme, around 70 main transmitter sites and 1,100 relay sites been cleared. TV viewers needed to retune their TV sets following transmitter changes in their area. For most viewers this was sufficient to restore their service. Assistance was available for viewers who could not restore their service in this way, including a helpline and home support for some viewers. As of August 2020, the support line had assisted more than 200,000 viewers and more than 40,000 home support visits had taken place.

Programme making and special events (PMSE) stakeholders were also affected by the 700 MHz clearance. From 1 May 2020, access to the 700 MHz band ceased for PMSE use and government provided funding to support affected PMSE equipment owners that had to vacate the band. Claimants ranged from schools and places of worship to theatres, large hire companies and broadcasters. The PMSE funding scheme has processed 22,000 items and disbursed £25.5m to 287 claimants.

So far, during the course of the programme, 154 grants for TV infrastructure works have been awarded at a value of approximately £270m. This meant work was finished under budget and on schedule— a great achievement for such a large-scale programme of work.

The programme could not have occurred without the collaboration of several programme partner organisations. These included:

- Arqiva, which carried out the engineering work necessary to change the frequencies on which transmitters were operating;
- DCMS, which provided the budget for the work, including funding for the TV infrastructure work, the viewer support scheme and funding for PMSE users;
- TV broadcasters, Digital UK and Freeview and DMSL, who participated in programme governance and working groups and helped deliver aspects of the programme such as viewer support; and
- Equiniti Ltd, which ran the PMSE grant funding scheme on our behalf from registration to equipment processing and grant payments.

Ofcom was responsible for replanning the airwaves to clear 700 MHz and clearing those changes with neighbouring countries. We did that with the support of planners from Arqiva and BBC.

The programme was temporarily paused in March 2020 as a consequence of the COVID-19 situation in the UK with the programme approximately 95% complete. Ofcom worked with partners to replan

the remaining 700 MHz clearance events and remaining PMSE funding claims. The final DTT clearance events took place in August 2020 and final PMSE grant payments will be made at the end of October.

Following the project's completion, spectrum which is due to be auctioned in these frequencies can be used immediately after the auction. This means mobile companies will be able to use it to provide mobile services to customers.