

TV reception in shared properties

Bill Wright looks at the implications of analogue switch-off for the owners and residents of blocks of flats or shared properties.

Because individual aerials and dishes might be impractical or unsightly, most apartment blocks in the UK have a communal TV distribution system. This provides TV reception for all. In essence an aerial and dish feed into a 'head-end' which is usually in the loft above the stairs. The head-end filters and amplifies the signals and sends them down separate cables to each living room wall plate.

Who pays?

In the case of privately owned flats the system is normally administered by the management agent or by a residents' association, with routine maintenance costs being paid from the ground rent fund and a special levy being imposed for any major upgrades. In the case of rented flats and residential homes the landlord usually covers all costs.

Sky+

Of course problems can arise with these systems as with all other aspects of communal living, with individual residents sometimes feeling great frustration and annoyance at some aspect of the TV system's performance.

In recent years the provision of suitable facilities for Sky+ and Sky HD has become the hottest potato. These services need two separate cables from the 'head-end' and of course the majority of properties built before 2003 only provide one. Even today some builders are only installing one, despite the fact that the extra cost at that stage would be minimal. Once the building is finished though, fitting a second cable and the necessary extra head-end equipment can be dauntingly expensive, especially in a fairly new upmarket building where visible cables are banned.

I can't recommend the use of 'stackers' — which squeeze two sets of signals down one cable—but if you do go for this solution I suggest you do it on the prior understanding that you will only pay if it proves to work properly.

Analogue switch-off

By now some residents will have tried DTT (digital terrestrial television) set-top boxes or Integrated Digital TV sets. If these have not

worked properly any shortcomings of the communal TV system will have to be addressed, and with ASO (analogue switch-off) not so far away in most of the UK there is a fair degree of urgency. System installers are getting very busy and it is beginning to look as if people in blocks who leave it until the last moment will end up with no TV.

It seems inevitable that a host of crooked and incompetent 'installers' will crawl out from under their stones for the duration of the ASO period.

No digital transmissions

There are several reasons why a system that worked for analogue might not work for DTT. Firstly, digital signals might not be available in the area until ASO. In that case, if analogue reception is less than perfect the system should be checked out and brought to a high standard now.

In most cases, transmitters that won't carry DTT until ASO will use the same old analogue frequencies for digital once analogue disappears, so aerials and systems that work well now for analogue will be fine for digital with no modifications required. So don't get ripped off for unnecessary conversion work! A good installer will tell you if the existing system will be OK after ASO.

Worn out systems

Pre-1985 systems will probably need serious work or even complete replacement. This isn't because DTT is more demanding; it is because these systems have reached the end of their life anyway. There's no way these systems will carry satellite signals and attempts to titivate them for DTT will in most cases be a waste of money. Bite the bullet!

Incorrect aerials and filters

Many transmitters send out the digital signals on frequencies that cannot be received properly by the analogue aerial, and some distribution systems include channel filters which, if they pre-date digital transmissions, will inadvertently prevent digital reception. So if surrounding properties have good DTT and your block

Fig 1 shows a typical TV distribution system based on a 'head-end', which will serve the whole building.

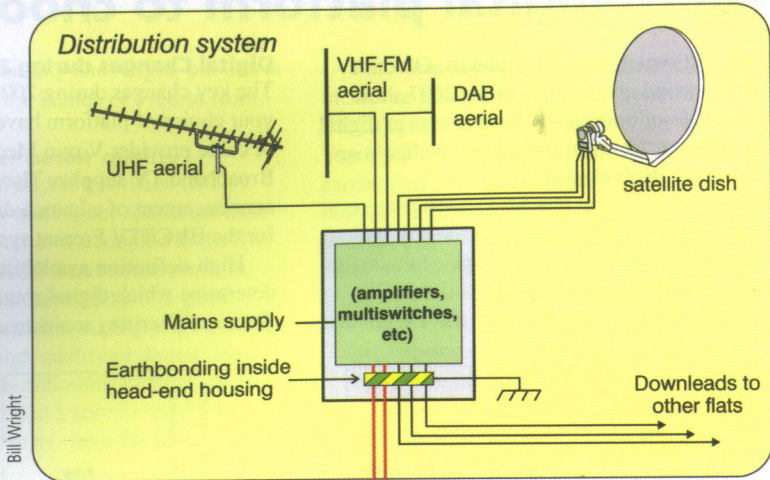
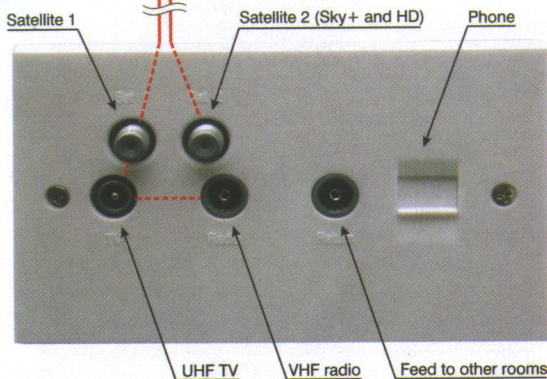


Fig 2 shows the style of outlet plate that should be available in each flat.



doesn't, you will need to have the aerial replaced and possibly some work done to the head end as well. A sure give-away here is when a set top aerial gives better DTT than the system.

Poor reception in the locality

At ASO the digital signals will be increased in power a great deal. In areas where digital TV should work according to the postcode checker but doesn't, advice should be taken from a local installer. In general though, if analogue reception has been reasonably good then digital reception will be fine after ASO.

If analogue reception has always been poor in the area it could be that even after ASO digital reception will be unreliable. Again, good local advice is needed. The best solution could be to treat terrestrial reception as a lost cause and go down the satellite route. This can be much cheaper and more effective than struggling on with poor terrestrial signals.

Moving into a new flat

Potential purchasers of flats should look at the outlet plate in the living room. For Sky+ and

Sky HD there must be two satellite connectors, marked 'Sat 1' and 'Sat 2'. Get confirmation that both connectors will provide an independent satellite dish feed. The outlet plate should have a socket marked 'return'. This takes the output from your Sky box and feeds it to the bedrooms, so you can view satellite there.

If there's a reception problem when you move in complain immediately. Check the reception quality of terrestrial analogue and digital TV even if you don't intend to use them. Analogue ghosting or digital freezing is just not acceptable. Satellite reception should be rock solid on both sockets, and the signal quality reading (press Services, 4, then 6) should not be less than 50%. Ignore the signal strength reading though; it's meaningless ■