Countryside Alliance survey on the future of Freeview

Evidence submitted to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport consultation:
Watch this space: a new strategic direction for UK media

Executive summary

The Countryside Alliance welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport consultation, *Watch this space: a new strategic direction for UK media*.

The Countryside Alliance campaigns for the communities that live and work in rural Britain, representing over a hundred thousand members and supporters. In that capacity we conducted an online survey of members and supporters to understand the likely impact on rural communities of proposals to transition television broadcasting away from Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT). The consultation document raises the possibility of closing the Freeview platform from the end of December 2034, with an alternative option of extending the service for a further ten years until the end of December 2044.

Our survey received 1,093 responses, with over 1,080 respondents answering each of the five quantitative questions and 734 respondents providing detailed written comments about their own experiences of access to television and broadband.

The findings demonstrate overwhelming concern that a premature closure of Freeview would disadvantage rural households. Respondents consistently described Freeview as an essential public service, expressed serious concerns about the reliability and affordability of broadband in rural areas, and argued that no switch-off should occur until genuinely universal, reliable and affordable alternatives exist.

The Countryside Alliance therefore urges the Government to retain Digital Terrestrial Television until rural consumers can access television services on equal terms with those living elsewhere. Decisions on the future of Digital Terrestrial Television should be based on demonstrable consumer readiness rather than a predetermined timetable and should be subject to proper rural proofing to ensure that rural communities are not disproportionately disadvantaged by changes to broadcasting policy.

The Countryside Alliance recommends that the government:

- Retain Digital Terrestrial Television (Freeview) until affordable, reliable broadband is genuinely universal.

- Base any decision to switch off Digital Terrestrial Television on objective evidence of consumer readiness rather than a fixed timetable.
- Assess affordability alongside technical broadband availability when determining readiness for a transition to internet-delivered television.
- Subject any decision to withdraw Digital Terrestrial Television to formal rural proofing to ensure rural communities are not disproportionately disadvantaged.
- Ensure the resilience benefits of terrestrial broadcasting are fully considered, particularly in relation to network outages, severe weather and emergency communications.
- Maintain consumer choice by allowing internet-delivered television to complement, rather than replace, Digital Terrestrial Television for as long as there is clear public demand.

Methodology

The survey was conducted online between March and July 2026 and was promoted through Countryside Alliance communication channels to members and supporters.

Respondents were asked five structured questions relating to their use of Freeview, broadband availability and future broadcasting policy, followed by an open-ended question inviting comments on their own experiences of accessing television and broadband.

The survey generated a substantial body of qualitative evidence from people living in rural communities across the United Kingdom, which has since been analysed through a combination of human and machine intelligence to identify common themes and sentiments.

Quantitative findings

- ***Reliance on Freeview***

Asked whether they rely upon Freeview as an essential source of news, information or entertainment, almost 96% of respondents reported that they use Freeview regularly, while more than four in five regarding it as an essential service.

Response	**Percentage**
Yes, it is essential	83.8%
Yes, but not essential	12.3%
No	3.7%
Don't know	0.3%

- ***Impact of an internet-only BBC***

When asked whether a switch to internet-only BBC services would affect their household, more than nine respondents in ten expected some degree of negative impact.

Response	**Percentage**
Yes, significantly	80.1%
Somewhat	12.1%
No	5.9%
Don't know	1.9%

- ***Broadband availability***

Asked whether their broadband is currently reliable and fast enough to support streaming television, 65% of respondents said that it is not.

These findings suggest an important distinction between broadband availability and broadband usability. Whilst broadband may technically be available in many rural areas, respondents consistently reported that the quality, reliability and performance of their connections are insufficient to support streamed television services as a replacement for Digital Terrestrial Television.

Response	**Percentage**
Yes	35.0%
No	65.0%

- ***Future of Freeview***

Asked whether the government should retain Freeview until high-speed broadband is universally available, including in rural areas, support for that suggestion was almost unanimous.

Response	**Percentage**
Yes	93.5%
Maybe	2.9%
No	2.8%
Don't know	0.8%

- ***Television licence***

Asked whether they would consider ceasing to pay the television licence fee if television became internet-only, nearly 80% said that they would do so. While hypothetical, these responses indicate significant concern that public confidence in the current funding model could be undermined by a compulsory transition to internet-only broadcasting.

Response	Percentage
Yes	78.2%
No	5.1%
Don't know	16.8%

Qualitative analysis

The survey generated 734 detailed written submissions, providing valuable insight into the practical realities of accessing television and broadband in rural Britain.

Although respondents came from different parts of the country, several consistent themes emerged. This section will outline those themes and provide representative quotations from respondents' submissions.

- ***Freeview is viewed as an essential public service***

The strongest theme running through the responses was that Freeview is regarded not simply as a means of entertainment, but as an essential public service. Respondents frequently linked this role to the wider objectives of public service broadcasting. Access to trusted news, national events, weather information and emergency announcements was viewed as particularly important for rural communities, where television often provides a vital connection to public life.

Public service broadcasting has an important role in ensuring rural communities have equitable access to trusted news, weather information, farming coverage, emergency information and democratic debate. Respondents frequently reflected these wider benefits in their comments, describing television as an important source of trusted information and a vital connection to national and local life.

Many respondents described television as their principal source of trusted news, current affairs and companionship. For older people, those living alone and people with disabilities, television often provides an important connection with the outside world.

> *"My TV is my 'eyes on the world'."*
>
> *"Many residents... rely on terrestrial TV for entertainment, news, important information and to overcome a feeling of isolation. For many, the TV feels like a friend or family member."*
>
> *"Freeview is a reliable universal service that works, so why change it."*

- ***Broadband availability does not reflect real-world experience***

Many respondents challenged the assumption that broadband coverage statistics accurately represent the experience of rural households.

Although some areas are officially classified as having access to superfast broadband, respondents reported connections that are slow, unreliable or subject to frequent interruption. Many described buffering, dropped connections and reduced performance during busy periods or poor weather, leading them to conclude that broadband cannot yet be relied upon to deliver a universal television service.

The survey therefore suggests that availability data alone should not be used to determine readiness for the withdrawal of Digital Terrestrial Television.

These responses suggest that measures of broadband coverage alone should not be used as an indicator of readiness for a transition to internet-only broadcasting. Consumer experience, including consistency of service and reliability at peak viewing times, is equally important when considering the future of universal television access.

> *"Despite recent improvements to broadband services generally, many residents do not enjoy fast or reliable internet"*
>
> *"Our broadband comes via overground cables that are often out of action in windy weather, sometimes for several weeks at a time."*
>
> *"Yes, it doesn't work. Despite being in a semi-urban setting, every day either the digital voice line or the internet cuts out. The provider always claims we have full coverage – nonsense and gaslighting. It was exactly the same at the past three rural addresses I lived at."*

- ***Affordability remains a major concern***

Cost emerged as one of the most frequently raised concerns.

Many respondents objected to the prospect of having to purchase or upgrade broadband services to receive television channels that are currently available free through an aerial. Others highlighted the wider financial implications of internet-only television, including higher broadband subscription charges, replacement equipment and increased household expenditure. For pensioners and households on fixed incomes, respondents argued that these additional costs would represent a significant financial burden.

Respondents also highlighted that the transition could require investment in replacement television equipment, upgraded broadband packages, improved home wireless networks and, for some households, entirely new internet subscriptions.

Many questioned whether these additional costs represented a fair replacement for a service currently received through an aerial at no additional monthly cost. To access Digital Terrestrial Television currently, consumers need only purchase a TV Licence: if they otherwise do not need for a broadband connection, acquiring one for the sole

purpose of accessing services equivalent to Freeview represents a new cost to maintain an existing service.

> *"The houses in my area get broadband fine, but it's not free… I don't want to pay a monthly fee to access what I already access."*

> *"Even where internet services are adequate, cost is prohibitively expensive for some households."*

> *"I could not afford to replace them with 'smart' TVs… Broadband subscriptions are a significant part of my leisure spend."*

- ***Rural communities risk being left further behind***

Respondents repeatedly argued that closing Freeview before universal broadband provision would widen existing inequalities between rural and urban Britain. Many felt that public policy too often assumes infrastructure standards that have yet to be achieved in many parts of the countryside.

Several respondents drew comparisons with the withdrawal of other rural services, expressing concern that television broadcasting could become another example of rural communities losing access to universal public services.

> *"I am parish councillor in a rural parish with a population that is older than the national average… many residents do not enjoy fast or reliable internet"*

> *"I live on an isolated rural area where Internet (& mobile phone) coverage is hopeless verging on non-existent much of the time."*

> *"There are currently no plans to provide fast broadband in our area, apparently too costly. We are situated 2 miles from the local village which has fast broadband. BT will only guarantee 1mb. Other services don't work in this area or are far too expensive."*

- ***Older and vulnerable people would be disproportionately affected***

A significant proportion of comments focused on elderly relatives, neighbours and vulnerable residents.

Respondents emphasised that traditional television remains simple, familiar and dependable, whereas internet-based viewing requires greater digital confidence and ongoing technical support. Some feared that the removal of Freeview would increase social isolation among older people and those less confident with digital technology.

> "*I am an old age pensioner who lives alone and has somewhat limited mobility. Unless I drive then my home is very much my world."*

"I think older people do not have viewing patterns younger people have or the confidence and resources (cost implication) to use internet. It is discrimination against older people. "

"I work as a high intensity user (HIU) Link Worker for emergency services and I can assure you the more lonely and isolated people feel they have an increased risk of misusing primary health care services and emergency services… to hear people talk through their telephone."

- ***Resilience and reliability matter***

Respondents also highlighted the resilience of terrestrial broadcasting. Many observed that television received through an aerial often continues to function during broadband outages or mobile network failures.

Several questioned whether concentrating television delivery onto broadband networks would reduce the resilience of national broadcasting infrastructure. Respondents observed that terrestrial broadcasting frequently remains available during broadband outages or periods of severe weather when internet connectivity is disrupted, reinforcing its importance as a resilient means of accessing trusted public information.

"My concern is not just with unreliable broadband… but also the loss of potentially vital public information in an emergency if the internet is down."

"I'm terrified enough about the switch of land lines to digital… No TV as well will be like going back a century or so."

"I have Freeview as a back up for an Internet outage… I do not believe we should narrow our options to only Internet based as a nation… 'Never put all one's eggs in one basket' comes to mind."

- ***Respondents favour choice rather than replacement***

The qualitative responses suggest that respondents do not reject internet-delivered television in principle. Rather, they consistently express a preference for retaining consumer choice by allowing internet-delivered services to complement, rather than replace, Digital Terrestrial Television.

Many supported continued technological innovation, while maintaining that consumers should retain the choice of receiving television through an aerial for as long as demand remains.

"People should have a choice."

"I think it is fundamentally unfair to expect everyone to have an internet subscription just to watch TV… This move takes away choice and is not fair to consumers."

"At present, broadband access is a matter of choice, while Freeview and landlines give (or gave) some further communication options."

Implications for government policy

Based on the totality of the information respondents to the survey provided, we would suggest that it indicates the following implications for government policy and planning beyond the basic question of when a digital television switch-off should occur:

- The survey indicates that broadband *availability* is not necessarily the same as broadband *usability* for streamed television. When assessing readiness for a switch-off of digital television, the latter is what is relevant.
- Affordability should be considered alongside technical coverage when assessing consumer readiness. The survey found significant resistance to the imposition of a new cost to access a service that had not previously borne one.
- Rural and remote communities are likely to be disproportionately affected by any fixed timetable for closing digital television. The consultation paper references an intention to *"work with industry and audience groups to design a package of support for audiences to transition their viewing to IPTV services"*; a one-size-fits-all approach to the design of this package will be insufficient and the needs of these communities must be fully considered.
- The resilience benefits of terrestrial broadcasting should form part of the government's assessment, particularly during network outages and emergencies.
- Objective evidence of consumer readiness should determine the timing of a Digital Terrestrial Television switch-off, rather than by a predetermined date.
- Any decision on the future of Digital Terrestrial Television should be subject to proper rural proofing to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged by assumptions about digital connectivity which do not reflect lived experience.

Conclusion

The Countryside Alliance survey provides compelling evidence that proposals to withdraw Digital Terrestrial Television from 2034 raise substantial concerns for rural communities.

The quantitative findings demonstrate overwhelming support for retaining Freeview until genuinely universal broadband becomes available. The qualitative evidence explains why: respondents consistently describe broadband services that remain unreliable, costly or unsuitable for streaming television, while emphasising the continuing social importance of universally accessible public service broadcasting.

We appreciate that even the earlier proposed Digital Terrestrial Television switch-off date is eight years away, and it is reasonable to presume further build-out of the superfast

broadband network within that period. The survey, however, revealed a distinct lack of trust that internet services will have improved sufficiently within that timeframe to support the universal adoption of Internet Protocol Television at equivalent standards of quality and reliability to what can currently be achieved through Digital Terrestrial Television.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that any decision to close the Freeview platform should be based on demonstrable consumer readiness rather than a predetermined timetable. Such decisions should also be subject to proper rural proofing to ensure that changes to national broadcasting policy do not unintentionally disadvantage rural communities.

The Countryside Alliance therefore urges the government to commit to retaining Digital Terrestrial Television until all households – including those in rural and remote communities – can access public service broadcasting through affordable, reliable and resilient alternatives without suffering disadvantage.