

Timeline of changes to Freeview and Satellite TV

TV is changing: Freeview is under threat, the BBC is closing channels and upgrading others, ITV's broadcast licence is due for renewal and Sky wants to exit its satellite TV service.

Two years from now, Ofcom is due to report back to the Government about the future of digital terrestrial TV (Freeview). How does this fit in with the BBC's plans and what happens to satellite TV in the meantime? When are the key dates and how might this affect what you see on screen?

January-April 2023

BBC HD upgrade completes; All BBC One regions to become available in HD on Sky satellite, Freesat, Freeview and YouView (cable and IP platforms are already upgraded). As a result, your local BBC One HD will always appear on channel 101, regardless of how you get your TV in the UK. BBC Alba HD and BBC Parliament HD will also launch on Sky and Freesat. BBC One upgrade due to complete by end of March (satellite), by April (Freeview). A 'nightlight' SD service will continue on satellite until early 2024. There are currently no plans to turn off SD on Freeview.

April 2023

Merger of BBC News and World News Channels; Effectively, UK viewers will see the current international service, except during simulcasts of news programmes already on BBC One and BBC Two.

November and December 2023

World Radiocommunications Conference (WRC-23); Delegates will make global decisions on the future use of frequency spectrum, including some of the frequencies used by digital terrestrial television, aka Freeview in the UK.

Q1 2024

BBC SD channels close on satellite; Viewers who haven't upgraded their satellite equipment to HD compatible receivers will lose BBC TV channels and radio stations.

2024

BBC Four, CBBC, Radio 4 Extra to close; The channels are due to continue online within the BBC iPlayer / BBC Sounds. The BBC disagrees with the concept of the channels being "closed", but BBC Three's online-only stint involved the channel becoming a half-hearted sub-branded area of the iPlayer, which for many users didn't feel like a channel, just a header to unite certain types of content.

1st January 2025

ITV1/STV (Channel 3) and Channel 5 licence renewal; Ofcom will shortly begin the renewal process that will come into effect at the beginning of 2025. During the process, Ofcom will determine the levels of regional programmes to be shown on Channel 3 and how much news or children's programmes should be shown on Channel 5 among other things. Renewal is not guaranteed: for example, if ITV refused renewal, it could continue as an entirely commercial broadcaster on a different channel number.

2025

Ofcom reviews digital terrestrial TV (Freeview) future; The Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) has tasked Ofcom to complete a review on digital terrestrial television by this point. No doubt it will be heavily influenced by the outcome of the WRC-23 and its decision on frequency usage. It's the earliest point Ofcom can serve a five-year notice period on Freeview multiplex licence holders if it's decided terrestrial TV must close. That would result in terrestrial TV as we know it ending in 2030. If terrestrial TV survives longer, Ofcom will still need to make key decisions regarding an IP-switchover for when digital terrestrial TV in its current form is terminated.

2026

BBC-B (PSB3) Freeview multiplex licence expires; The BBC has two Freeview multiplexes – one linked to the Royal Charter (BBC-A/PSB1) and is used for SD channels, and a second – BBC-B/PSB3 – for HD channels. In 2026, the BBC-B licence expires. But the BBC has indicated to the DCMS it won't decide on renewing it yet. Depending on Ofcom's review of Freeview and the future of the BBC beyond the end of the Royal Charter, the closure of BBC-B could be used as an opportunity to close SD channels, migrating BBC HD channels to BBC-A.

31st December 2027

BBC Royal Charter expires; The Government and BBC are exploring new methods to fund the BBC.

2028

Earliest date for Sky satellite service closure; Sky's contract with satellite operator SES expires in 2028. Renewed in May 2022, the contract covers the use of transponders at the orbital position 28.2/5°E and builds upon previous contacts Sky has signed with SES that run until 2027. Sky may sign extensions between now and then, but Sky's recent push to promote its internet-based TV service clearly shows change is coming. The BBC, ITV, Channels 4 and 5 have their own contracts with SES, so technically the main free-to-air broadcasters could continue offering a core, universal TV service beyond Sky's departure, although the economics of providing a service to Freesat users only might be unviable.

2030

Earliest digital terrestrial TV/Freeview closure date; If WRC-23 decides Freeview frequencies should be cleared for mobile services, then digital terrestrial television services will need to wind down from 2030.

2034

Current expiry for digital terrestrial multiplex licenses; The current preferred end date for digital terrestrial television, when multiplex licences expire. By this point, viewers will need to migrate to internet-based TV platforms....but there will need to be a universal, affordable, reliable internet-based TV service for viewers to switch to, something that BBC Director-General Tim Davie has recently raised.