

STAY TUNED

DigiTV has managed to secure contracts with all DiTV players, bringing benefits to local authorities, writes **Jane Hancer**.

The devil is in the detail, as they say, and in terms of contracts this is more often than not the case. Having ideas is easy; it is the contracts that are notoriously difficult to negotiate. Add on top of that new technologies, emerging platforms, unknown issues and risks, and a litany of legal unknowns can ensue.

This was most certainly the case five years ago when the first local authorities were investigating digital TV (DiTV) with the various platform providers.

Understanding the vagaries of these platforms, building new software, evaluating where responsibility lay and establishing who should shoulder liabilities led to months of contractual wrangling. This in turn meant that services were slow to launch and projects were bogged down by bureaucracy, rather than allowing a focus on whether the medium would actually work and what services would be useful.

digital TV (Sky, cable and some Freeview boxes) for over three years now. The Starter Kit now also publishes to mobile and kiosk because of interface similarities and technical improvements. A single per authority annual price of £10,000 to access the technology and publish to all platforms is the current financial model. And after various forms, iterations, negotiations and amendments one single contract now exists.

National projects were always led by local authorities for local authorities, and DigiTV's lead authority was Kirklees Metropolitan Council. In December 2005, the DigiTV project legally transferred from the ODPM to become a wholly owned and managed service provided by Kirklees MC. Still working with the same team, on a not-for-profit basis and on behalf of local government, Kirklees MC took the project on as they saw the benefits of the work already



3 Mobile (with other mobile networks on the way). The details of these have been distilled into one contract which the local authority or local government agency signs with DigiTV/Kirklees MC. DigiTV works with fire authorities, police authorities and other organisations such as Citizens Advice, Legal Services Commission and health authorities.

From a situation in which only a few authorities were publishing DiTV services, because of a lack of clarity in terms of pricing policies as well as the infancy of the medium, around 90 organisations now use the DigiTV Starter Kit to offer information and services on digital TV and mobile. The simple technology, low price and contract clarity has certainly led to increased take-up.

And digital TV is on the move; innovative pilot projects such as BBC Local News in the West Midlands, fully interactive Freeview boxes, links with broadcast programming and the new opportunities broadband TV will bring, will all change the face of digital TV. This, coupled with increasing awareness and usage of digital TV and mobile devices, means that the foundations, contracts and services created by DigiTV are well timed.

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It was against this background that the Digital TV National Project (DigiTV) was born in 2002, sponsored by the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). DigiTV had three core aims: to create one simple technology to allow all of local government to publish digital TV services; to drive the price down to an acceptable and accessible level; and, of course, to produce one simple contract. The contract needed to incorporate all the issues from each of the digital interactive TV platform providers, creating a framework to give peace of mind to local government, save on legal costs and allow authorities to concentrate on the more important work of creating services appropriate to their local audiences.

A simple to use web-based technology, the DigiTV Starter Kit, has been publishing local government services to

undertaken, as well as realising that digital TV had a long way to go to achieve its full potential.

With the analogue switch-off timetable published and starting in 2008, an increasing number of local authorities publishing services using the Starter Kit and DiTV penetration increasing monthly (now over 70 per cent), the marketplace for these services is starting to really establish itself. Interactive services are becoming more sophisticated and a growing number of programmes offer their viewers additional interactive options. Interacting is becoming part of our viewing habit, so the opportunity to deliver services – especially to those households across the digital divide – and create efficiencies within the e-government agenda is clear.

Contracts now exist between DigiTV/Kirklees MC and each of the platforms: Sky, ntl, Telewest and