

Westminster eForum seminar - Delivering a connected Britain

2 September 2010

Speech by Anna Bradley, Chair, Communications Consumer Panel

Morning. Thanks very much.

So I am going to start just by telling you who I am and who I represent, and then try and inject a slightly different perspective, as you might expect by someone who is the Chair of the Communications Consumer Panel.

So what is the Panel? Well the Panel was constructed under the Communications Act to advise Ofcom and any others it considered appropriate, so for us that includes Government, industry, policymakers and providers of service on those matters that are important to consumers and citizens in the communications market. And it's that thing about issues that are important for consumers and citizens that I want to focus on because that represents, always, our starting point, and our starting point is how does this look from the point of view of consumers and citizens? What would connected Britain look like and what's required to allow consumers and citizens to take advantage of it? And that is what I want to do today, start from that perspective.

And the first thing I want to say is that, when we contributed to the Digital Britain process, we commissioned quite a lot of work with consumers to try and explore with them what they would like the future to look like, and what came through that research very, very clearly in a number of phases of work was just how far we had moved in the direction of considering access to broadband and the internet to be what people describe as almost essential.

Now I want to pause on this for a second, because this nature of almost essential service is critical to how we then move on to frame a debate about what is needed in the future. Consumers in this research were very clear, I will give you a quote from one, always good to quote from people. She said broadband is like a limb, it is basically just one of those things that I have grown accustomed to, I use it every day now and I think most of us recognise that. But when you start talking about essential services, what you also have to recognise is that in policy terms, you are talking not just about what markets can do, but also when markets fail, ensuring that you have policies in place which address those market failures.

And this is an important thing to say in this context because I don't disagree with anything that many of the speakers have said about the value of competition, the importance of entrepreneurship, the need for innovation.

These are critical things and they deliver the best outcomes for consumers, but when we consider the citizenship benefit of broadband, and this kind of sense that broadband has become an essential service, actually we have also to think about how we address market failures, and there is no question that we have market failures in relation to broadband and we will have more market failures, we can say that with very good confidence, because we know network rollouts end up with an area of market failure that needs to be addressed in a different way.

When we followed up this research for Digital Britain, we took a vast body of research, not just what we had done, but what other people had done and put it all together to try and understand what it was that consumers and citizens needed in order to engage with the internet and what I have put up on this chart is a map, if you like, of all the dimensions which consumers and citizens talk about in terms of their need, not just to access, but to engage with the internet in a meaningful way.

And you will see, and again I think it is a point worth making, that this chart covers a range of issues, everything from the most basic of access to network points, right through to a whole set of issues about content and I think that's worth pausing on for a second because every time we come to these meetings we separate out as distinct somehow, and somehow unconnected, the content debate from the infrastructure debate, and actually from the consumer and citizen's point of view this is all part of a big picture and it's the differences between the way that we deal with these various areas that really confused them.

I am only going to deal with two points on this slide this morning, but you could ask questions about many of these boxes in terms of how these needs are going to be addressed, and the two I want to deal with are access and then ability to participate.

So in terms of access, there is no question that this Government, like the last, has an ambition in this space. I think it's described by this Government as achieving the best broadband network in Europe, given what Stephen [Carter] said about the contrast between Europe and elsewhere, perhaps that is not as ambitious as it might be, but it's a clear sense of ambition.

The target that [Government] had for achieving a universal service of 2 megabits has been shifted from 2012 to 2015, but there are some specific steps that have been put in place, both in relation to the universal service commitment and in relation to the wider NGA project, some pilots, and pilots are always good and as an evidence base for further policymaking, very important. But I think the thing that the Panel feels there is a lack of in this area is a medium term plan for implementing not just a universal service commitment, but melding the development of that universal service with the implementation of next generation access.

Now as has been said, the market will deliver a considerable proportion of that and nothing we do in public policy place must get in the way of that, but we also can't afford

to wait. We certainly can't afford to wait on 2 megabits and arguably we can't afford to wait on more, and one of the reasons why we can't afford to wait is that one of the things that has got a new and very welcome increasing emphasis by this current Government is the implementation of that part of the Digital Britain report which was about getting public services online, and this forms an important element of Martha Lane Fox's role as the Government's Digital Champion. She is talking about Local Authorities saying that all school admissions and free school meal applications should be submitted online by 2011 and that the DWP should introduce the idea that all people of working age should apply for benefits online.

Now these are very welcome initiatives and will make life qualitatively better for those people who want to do some of these things, but these are essential public services and unless we have the wherewithal to make sure that everyone can access them, and these are quite short time frames, actually significantly shorter than the universal service commitment, we won't be meeting the needs of citizens in an appropriate way.

So we really do have, now, to start thinking about how we address this potential shortfall and make sure that what is an essential service is available to everyone, extra to what is available from the market.

The second thing I want to say relates to people's ability to be able to get to grips with the internet, and here again the Government have made a clear commitment through its reinforcement of Martha Lane Fox's role to two things. Everyone of working age should be online and no one should retire without web skills.

These are laudable aims and important ones which we would definitely share, but I think the point that the Digital Participation Framework that we have developed on the basis of consumer research illustrates is that actually getting people online is really only a very small beginning because what we need to achieve is a situation where people are really engaged with the internet and getting access to all those things which will give them real benefit. And our research here clearly shows that what happens to those consumers who are not currently engaged is that you can get them online, there is no question, you can sit down with them and you can get them to access the internet on a computer, and they may even see some value in it and go off and experiment a bit on their own. But they then reach this fork in the road where they get scared by it all because for those people who are not currently online, actually it is quite a challenging environment.

So it is not enough to get people online. We have to provide a whole series of ongoing potential support for them, perhaps through peer to peer support, so that their journey is a successful one, and it genuinely is a journey to greater interaction with the internet.

So it's not like teaching a child to ride a bike, where suddenly they just get it. The internet is not like that. It's more like teaching people to read. You need to keep on interacting with and supporting them.

So I guess the short message from those two areas of public policy at the moment is that we clearly have ambitions and that's a good thing. We also have some specific actions and that's also a good thing. But I think we need to develop a clear plan and a sense of urgency about implementing that plan because we really can't wait.

And I want to leave you with one last quote from a consumer, and this is a consumer who was at the fork in the road that I mentioned. They said, “It was frustrating knowing it would be good but not knowing how to do it. When I did have a go it was exciting, great, so far so good. But as soon as I became adventurous it became frustrating and got worse.” And that is often where people give up and we need to make sure that they don’t.

Thank you very much.