COMMUNICATIONS
CONSUMER
PANEL

DECEMBER BULLETIN

We're Not All the Same! Inclusive Communications: Helping older and disabled people to get more from their communications services

"…you may get a person whose speech is poor or, you know, whose communication skills are poor in general, try to be understanding …Do not assume that these people are stupid people and don't treat them like idiots ……. don't talk to me like that, you know. I'm not a blithering idiot, you know, I'm a person."

(Nicola, 65, multiple impairments, rural Northern Ireland)

The Communications Consumer Panel and the Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People (ACOD) has published new qualitative research which explores in detail how accessible communications providers are to customers with additional communication support needs, such as people with disabilities, and older consumers (aged 75+).

The research 'Inclusive Communications' found that communications services can have a greater significance for older and disabled people by helping to mitigate some of the potentially disempowering effects of age or disability. They can help to reduce vulnerability by giving people access to information and services they cannot easily obtain through other channels, and by facilitating participation and inclusion.

However the report highlighted that:

- Customer service issues such as inflexible customer service responses and poorly trained customer service agents can cause problems and frustrations
- Systems-related issues such as passwords and call routing systems can act as barriers to inclusion
- There is a lack of awareness – among service users and some communications providers' staff – of specific rights for disabled people relating to equivalent access
- People use a variety of strategies to help overcome barriers to inclusion
- Some (but certainly not all) think that disclosing their impairment is a useful strategy to get a better experience
- Being assertive and making complaints are other ways of combating poor treatment but many were reluctant to switch

The Panel is therefore calling for communications providers to improve their customer service to support the needs of older and disabled consumers.

Panel Chair, Jo Connell, said; "To enable consumers and citizens to benefit from the opportunities offered by modern communications services, it is vital that they are appropriately supported to do so. This research strongly suggests that some older and disabled consumers encounter a further barrier to effective use of their communications services. They are not receiving the quality of customer service to which they are entitled from their communications providers. This is unacceptable. Communications providers need to operate in a flexible way that is sensitive to the needs of the customer. Where additional adapted services are offered, they must suit the needs of the individual and be consistent and well sign-posted."

Recommendations:

> "I think when everything's running fine in terms of communications networks;
> I'm not as disabled as I might be."
>
> (John, 41, multiple impairments, urban South England)

The consumer experiences outlined in the Panel's research highlight a number of systemic issues, along with opportunities for improvements. We've made a series of associated recommendations in our covering report, 'We're Not All the Same!'

The recommendations address the issues highlighted by the research, providing tangible actions for providers to not only improve the experience of older and disabled consumers, but to also increase the attractiveness of their businesses to those people.

You can find out more in our covering report, the full research and associated cross-sectoral desk research review.

The Panel will be arranging to meet with stakeholders in a series of roundtable events next year to discuss our recommendations and potential practical solutions to help improve older and disabled consumers' experience of communications services.

To register your interest or for further information on the report, please contact contact@communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk

Update on Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD activities

The Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD has discussed a range of consumer issues with communications providers and stakeholders, with a particular focus on complaints handling and ADR, caps for lost and stolen mobiles and access services. We participated in the workshop organised by Citizens Advice Bureau which discussed the issue of debt and the need to build partnerships between communications providers and free debt advisors.

The Panel and ACOD responded to **the European Commission's consultation on the Review of the Regulatory Framework**. In our response, we highlighted that the Review

presented an opportunity to ensure that consumers and citizens not only remain at the heart of communications policy, but that their needs are taken account of as never before. In particular, we would like to see:

- ➢ A review of the Framework which enables the national regulator to act in the best interests of consumers and citizens and does not hamper their ability to intervene where justified and proportionate.
- ➢ Telecommunications fully recognised as a fourth utility and for there to be an ambition for mobile and broadband to be truly ubiquitous.
- ➢ Regulators acting quickly and decisively in cases of market failure, using their position to influence others to take direct action and the Government to develop public policy to address the gaps in the market.
- ➢ The needs of **all** citizens, microbusinesses and consumers to be considered particularly those who are more vulnerable to detriment.
- ➢ An affordable broadband USO of 10 M/bits.
- ➢ More effective targets for infrastructure provision and repair.
- ➢ More effective provision of consumer information to facilitate well informed consumer choices.
- ➢ More done to ensure that everyone can participate in the digital world.
- ➢ Improvements to subtitling on linear TV and VOD, in addition to EPG accessibility.
- ➢ Tangible improvements in consumer engagement, complaint handling and ADR access.

The full response can be viewed here (PDF)

The Panel and ACOD responded to **Ofcom's consultation on access services targets for non-domestic channels.** In our response, we acknowledged the rationale behind – and agreed with - Ofcom's proposed extension of the transitional period for qualifying non-domestic channels for another 12 months (with changes taking effect on 1 January 2017), as long as the target date is met. We highlighted that this may require tighter monitoring from Ofcom. Until then, we believe that extra subtitling should be provided.

The full response can be found here (PDF)

Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Digital Participation

This month, Mairi Macleod, Panel member for Scotland attended the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Digital Participation. At the meeting, the Scottish Futures Trust (SFT) provided an update on their work looking at the underlying infrastructure necessary to underpin the 2020 world-class digital vision for Scotland.

The Trust have been reviewing the options around commercial intervention as well as the policy or regulatory levers to help facilitate the Scottish Government's goals before public intervention needs to be put in place.

Mike Neilson, director of digital for the Scottish government provided an update on the Digital Scotland programme. He highlighted that investment in infrastructure needs to be balanced with other factors such as high quality transactional public services, increased digital participation and digital skills. He provided an overview of the challenges, which include how to pull together mobile and fixed broadband in the correct combination to

achieve the goals in terms of coverage, and how to deal with the gap between the most disadvantaged areas and others. Discussion concentrated largely on swiftly tackling the needs of the most disadvantaged, and how to stop the digital divide becoming ever wider.

Connected Nations 2015 - good progress on coverage but more to be done

Consumers' use of fixed Internet and mobile voice/data has changed significantly in recent years and these services are now essential components of many people's everyday lives. We're pleased to see that Ofcom's Connected Nations 2015 report recognises that while there has been good progress on the availability and take-up of communications services, there is still more to do to improve broadband and mobile availability and quality for consumers and businesses around the country.

Broadband

The report highlights that:

- More than a quarter of homes (27%, or 7.5 million) now have 'superfast' broadband - with a connection of 30 Mbit/s or more

- Superfast broadband is now available to over eight in ten UK homes (83%, almost 24 million)

- Broadband in rural areas also continues to improve, with superfast broadband now available to almost four in ten premises across the UK (37%, or 1.1 million)

However the report also identifies challenges in improving coverage across the UK.

- Around 8% of UK homes - around 2.4 million - are currently unable to receive broadband speeds of 10 Mbit/s or above.

- This jumps to around half (48%, or 1.5 million) in rural areas, where speeds are often affected by premises lying further from the network's local street cabinet or local telephone exchange.

- Although superfast services are now available to the premises of almost seven-in-ten small and medium sized enterprises or SMEs (68%, almost 900,000), almost a half of SMEs (around 130,000) in areas like business parks are unable to receive speeds above 10Mbit/s.

- Ofcom estimates that by 2017, when 95% of all UK premises will have superfast broadband, around 18% of SMEs will still not have access to a superfast service.

We've consistently called for a commitment to a Universal Service Obligation for broadband of 10 Mbps, so we welcomed the UK government's announcement and look forward to seeing more detail about the policy intention in the forthcoming consultation. Ofcom has announced that it is providing technical advice to Government to inform its plans. Ofcom is also working to remove barriers for smaller providers to invest in new network deployments, which often serve areas with little or no existing coverage.

Faster broadband means consumers can connect more devices to the internet at the same time, particularly on Wi-Fi where a connection can be shared throughout the home. A 10 Mbit/s connection remains the tipping point, after which most people rate their broadband experience as 'good', according to the report.

People can also check whether their in-home Wi-Fi is giving them the best service by using a simple app launched by Ofcom. The Ofcom Wi-Fi Checker, which runs on smartphones and tablets, allows consumers and businesses to discover the quality of their wireless internet signal wherever they live or work - as well as offering practical steps to help people get the best from their connection.

Wireless broadband may not be working as well as it could in nearly six million UK homes and offices, according to the Ofcom research published today. This is often caused by the Wi-Fi set-up in the house slowing down broadband. The app tests the Wi-Fi set-up and, if it finds a problem, will provide some troubleshooting tips to help improve broadband. It is free to download now from Apple's App Store and Google Play.

Mobile

The report states that more than seven in ten premises (73%) can now receive a 4G signal from three of the four networks, up from 44% last year, as operators continue to roll out faster mobile broadband. However, the report shows there is more work to be done on mobile coverage and quality of service.

While 99% of premises can receive a 2G signal, the proportion of the entire UK landmass able to receive a signal from all four operators has remained at 55% since last year. This is expected to increase following an agreement between the Government and all major operators for them to achieve 90% geographic coverage of voice services by 2017

A summary of the report can be found here.

Digital proposals for the NHS

A government report, drawn up by Baroness Lane-Fox has called for the introduction of free Wi-Fi in every NHS building as part of efforts to modernise the way NHS services are run.

She has made the recommendations in a bid to increase take-up of internet enabled services in health and care. This follows a commission from Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt who asked the former UK Digital Champion to look at ways in which there can be more digital inclusion across the NHS.

Baroness Lane-Fox put forward four main recommendations to the National Information Board:

- To make sure those with the most health and social care needs, who are often the least likely to be online, are included first in any new digital tools being used across the NHS.

- The provision of free Wi-Fi in every NHS building.

- To build the basic digital skills of the NHS workforce to ensure that everyone has the digital skills needed to support people's health needs.

- A target of at least 10% of registered patients in each GP practice should be using a digital service such as online appointment booking, repeat prescriptions and access to records by 2017.

The Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt has now announced that all NHS buildings will be provided with free Wi-Fi.

Further details can be found here.

Ofcom publishes latest complaint figures

The Communications Consumer Panel has long supported Ofcom in publishing complaints data made about providers of fixed line telephone, fixed line broadband, pay monthly mobile and pay TV services. We believe that this data provides consumers with useful information for comparing companies' performance whilst ensuring the communications market works for consumers.

We were disappointed to read in Ofcom's latest report that the total volume of telecoms and pay TV complaints made to Ofcom increased between Q2 and Q3 2015. Broadband and fixed line telephone saw the most notable increases in total volume of complaints. Complaints about pay monthly mobile and pay TV also increased, while the total complaint volume for mobile pay-as-you-go remained at similar levels to Q2 2015.

The latest report covers the three-month period from July to September 2015 (Q3), and includes complaints made about 13 providers of fixed line telephone, fixed line broadband, pay monthly mobile and pay TV services.

DCMS announcement of satellite dishes to boost broadband speeds in most remote areas of UK

The Panel was interested in the Department of Media, Culture and Sport's announcement that homes and businesses in some of the most remote areas of the UK are to be offered a subsidised satellite broadband connection if they are currently unable to obtain an affordable broadband service of at least 2 Mbps.

The scheme is being rolled out throughout December 2015 and forms part of the Government's commitment to make sure every home and business in the UK can access speeds of at least 2 Mbps by the end of 2015. An estimated 300,000 properties across the UK will be able to make use of the new offer.

Users will be responsible for paying any remaining cost of installation and commissioning (if any), choosing the features of the satellite broadband service they require, and for paying the monthly subscription for the service they selected (for a minimum period of 12 months).

An online tool is now available to check whether the scheme has launched in your area.

New report reveals 4,600 miles of British roads have no 2G coverage

Consumers, citizens and micro businesses are more reliant than ever on communications services – and particularly mobile devices. Voice, text – and at a rapidly increasing pace, data – are all central aspects to people's lives. We believe that mobile coverage should be truly ubiquitous – and relate to both indoor and geographic coverage, as well as on roads and rail.

We were therefore interested to read the RAC Foundation's report that revealed almost 4,600 miles of British roads have no 2G mobile phone coverage from any network provider, meaning that there are many areas where drivers could not call for help in the case of a breakdown, accident or emergency.

Ofcom publishes report on new internet safety measures

The Panel believes that all consumers should be able to access the internet in a safe environment. Ofcom's fourth report for the UK Government outlines measures to help keep families safe online, including the steps taken by the UK's four largest broadband providers to offer an "unavoidable choice" to customers about activating family-friendly network-level filters.

Following an agreement with Government in July 2013, the largest broadband providers – BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media – committed to offer an unavoidable choice about network-level filters to all new and existing customers. All four providers' customers have now been offered this choice.

The report highlights that, by the end of June 2015, 6% of BT customers, 30-40% of Sky customers, 14% of TalkTalk customers and 12% of Virgin Media customers had family-friendly network-level filters in place. The report also explains some of the factors behind the different levels of take-up.

Cracking the UK tech literacy challenge

In March 2015, BT CEO Gavin Patterson announced the organisation's ambition to help build a culture of tech literacy and launched a tech literacy programme designed around three pillars – inspiring children so they are excited and curious about technology; enabling teachers to inspire children; and equipping schools so they can get the best out of tech across the whole of school life.

Many organisations are working on different aspects of the challenge - including schools, colleges, the government, not-for-profit organisations, campaigning groups and social networks. In September leading players in UK tech, education, policy, Government and parenting came together for an innovative crowdsourcing event at BT Tower to generate

practical solutions to challenges. A report has been published that captures their collective thinking, reflections and fresh ideas.

You can find out more at the BT website and follow the conversation on Twitter using **#TechLiteracy** or join the Tech Literacy LinkedIn interest group.

Follow us on Twitter

Follow the Panel's news on Twitter @NewsCCP