

Ofcom's Annual Plan 2005/6

Consultation

Response from the Ofcom Consumer Panel

1. The Consumer Panel is broadly supportive of Ofcom's outline plan for 2005/6 and the following two years. A clear and strong sense of 'direction of travel' gives certainty to both consumers and citizens and to industry and must be welcomed. In particular, we are pleased to see the definite commitment to taking action where markets do not deliver for citizens and consumers the outcomes that society demands.
2. We will, as our statutory duty requires, continue to provide robust and challenging advice to Ofcom where we judge that citizen and consumer interests are at risk or where we can see that intervention by either the regulator or others would further those interests in a way that the market, left to its own devices, would not. Central to informing our advice will be the continuation of our own research programme, to complement and add context to Ofcom's own research activities. We note that these will continue to encompass research into SMEs. This is an area where we would encourage Ofcom to consider its level of engagement and understanding – the particular needs of the wide variety of small business in the UK should be an important consideration when developing regulatory policy.
3. In terms of the breadth of coverage of Ofcom's work activity for the years included in the Annual Plan we believe it is comprehensive. We would however recommend that consideration be given to a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to identification of the consumer interest across the full canvas of Ofcom activity. Without this there is a risk that the consumer policy function becomes one which merely addresses one-off, 'stand-alone' issues – rather than stewards of a theme which must run throughout all of Ofcom's activity.
4. With this in mind, we are pleased by the support we have received from Ofcom for our plans to conduct a regulatory audit of the way in which Ofcom equips itself to understand and weigh in the balance consumer interests in policy-making. We hope that the output of that project will be valuable 'tool-kit' which Ofcom and others can use going forward to check that the policy making process is consistently and rigorously paying adequate attention to the 'quieter voices'.
5. On a specific point we are particularly pleased to see at 2.19 of the Annual Plan document that Ofcom aims to have created, by the end of 2007/8, an environment in which "*citizens and consumers are better informed and have the option, via new technologies, labelling and price/quality information, to make effective choices about the content and services they use*". This theme of better and more effective consumer information is one that we will continue to pursue throughout the coming year and one where we expect to see substantial incremental improvement.