

Advice to Ofcom from the Ofcom Consumer Panel



Title of Ofcom Project:	Citizens, Communications and Convergence
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1. The Consumer Panel welcomes the publication of the Ofcom paper 'Citizens, Communications and Convergence' designed to encourage debate on Ofcom's role in furthering citizen interests. It is commendable that Ofcom takes citizen interests seriously and we were grateful to Alistair Bridge for taking time to discuss the paper with the Panel.
2. The Consumer Panel takes the view that 'citizen issues' are about whether people get full access to communications irrespective of who they are and where they live. The Panel has looked at both consumer and citizen issues, and its research has examined a number of the latter issues. In particular, through our work in developing the Consumer Interest Toolkit, we identified two distinct concepts encapsulated in the term '*citizen interest*'.
3. Firstly, people might have a demand for various services and products of the communications industry; this demand might not be met by the unfettered working of the market at any price that is generally reasonable. However, this demand is recognised to be legitimate in that its satisfaction has in some demonstrable way been willed by society. Examples of such demand might be for public service broadcasting or for the enhancement of broadcasting to meet the needs of people who have a hearing impairment. Both of these examples, in various ways, are demonstrably "willed by our society" in that their satisfaction is provided for in legislation.
4. The second concept of the "citizen interest" is more difficult to pin down. It rests on ideas about the importance of communication and connectedness in our society - ideas which have changed over time and which continue to change. It also rests on an understanding that the methods through which the public and private sectors deliver their outputs is changing and the increasing use of communications technology to deliver those outputs may make it increasingly difficult for some people to participate as fully in our society as they would wish.
5. The dynamism of this second concept is important. People have to learn, and continue to learn, to interact with communications technology and this

is a task that they may perform more or less well at different stages in their lives. This second, distinct concept of the interest of citizens is about understanding how change in this market place, whether influenced or not by regulatory intervention, may work to people's disadvantage for reasons that do not stem from their ability to have access to some goods or services at a reasonable price. Examples of these kinds of "citizen" issue arise in consideration of vulnerable people in the changeover to digital TV or in considering the definition of "universal service".

6. Previous Ofcom projects have not always explicitly taken account of citizen issues and it will remain a challenge to ensure that citizen interests are pursued where they are less obvious and the emphasis is on economic analysis if unintended harm is to be avoided. We also believe that the evaluation / audit approach of our Consumer Interest Toolkit is equally applicable to the understanding of these citizen issues and that the Toolkit methodology should be adapted and used to ensure that citizen as well as consumer interests are safeguarded in Ofcom's decision-making processes.