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Ofcom's priorities for consumers

It is a year since we wrote to you to outline the areas of Ofcom's work which we believed to be the most important from consumers' point of view. We identified the uses of the Digital Dividend, the Digital Switchover; the menace of silent calls; slow take-up of broadband; and consumer anxiety about communications services, notably broadband, as key issues.

I am writing one year on to set out, once again, what we think the consumer priorities for Ofcom should be over the next 12 months and to link these concerns to the results of the Consumer Experience research you are publishing today. These concerns are somewhat different, although issues around various aspects of broadband are common to this year and last.

In the context of Ofcom's Consumer Experience research, there are three priorities we think Ofcom should address in the forthcoming year. And later in this letter we outline a number of other issues that we believe are important.

Our first big issue relates to children and media literacy. In June, the Panel launched its research into children and the internet at a workshop with decision-makers that looked at issues around home internet access for children from low-income households. Among the recommendations to emerge from discussions was that Ofcom should play a leading role in helping parents and children understand the positives and negatives of being online. Ofcom should work with the relevant agencies to provide practical information as to how parents and children can protect themselves from inappropriate material, fraudulent activity and invasions of privacy.

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We propose that Ofcom should create a Children's Panel to provide a strategic overview of all of Ofcom's work that is currently undertaken in relation to children's issues, which relate to access, protection and parental responsibility. This increased focus on children is important because, as users of communications technologies and services, children are a particularly vulnerable group. Children are often the most advanced and proficient users of these technologies, which also play an increasingly instrumental role in their educational attainment.

The advertising of broadband speeds is our second concern. Last month we wrote to the leading broadband providers about how consumers are often not getting the advertised broadband connection speeds that they think they are buying. In the letter we asked industry to come up with solutions that will provide customers with clear information so they can make the correct purchasing decisions. We hope that Ofcom will closely monitor this issue to see whether the industry adequately addresses these issues; and if this does not happen, to consider how Ofcom and others should respond in order to ensure the provision of clear information for consumers of broadband services.

Another aspect of broadband speeds is the level which is deemed necessary at a time when being "connected" is becoming central to how we work as a society. We welcome your recent statement that Ofcom will soon need to consider the definition and implications of a Universal Service Obligation for broadband. However, we feel that Ofcom should not be thinking in terms of mandating minimum speeds, but rather should be identifying how we can ensure significantly higher internet speeds are delivered to all citizens of the UK so the internet's economic and social benefits are maximised.

Access to the next generation of broadband is undoubtedly a key policy area in the coming year. By taking the aspirational attitude described above, a faster broadband network would bring significant benefits, felt by consumers, citizens and the UK as a whole. We believe that taking a genuinely national approach offers an opportunity to reduce significantly disparities between rural and urban areas. There is a good case for saying that this new generation of faster internet access should be provided *first* to the rural communities that currently receive the sparsest and slowest coverage, because these are parts of the country where the incremental public value of such a network enhancement could be greatest.

Beyond our three top priorities - children, broadband speeds, and next generation broadband - I'd like to note a number of other areas where we think you should focus Ofcom's efforts on behalf of consumers in 2008.

With regard to the Digital Dividend Review, the Panel is keen to see Ofcom take on board its proposal for the creation of an innovation reserve. This could help ensure the availability of communication services of a high, but dispersed, public

value, and contribute to the critical goal of ensuring that the digital dividend is used for the benefit of all in society.

We continue to be concerned about the high levels of consumer complaints about communications service providers, in areas such as mis-selling, slamming and barriers to switching. In considering its regulatory responses to these problems, we call again for Ofcom to take into account the need for strong monetary sanctions to provide a real deterrent. We would also like Ofcom to explore how the Telephone Preference Service (TPS) can be more effective, perhaps through better enforcement or higher levels of public awareness of the scheme.

Third, we want to see progress in delivering services for disabled people, where Ofcom and others should be striving to ensure that communications equipment, services and user interfaces deliver real equality of access to all.

This is my last open letter as Chairman of the Consumer Panel, and I would like to record my appreciation of all that you and Ofcom colleagues have done over the past four years to work constructively with the Panel to further the interests of UK consumers.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Colette Bowe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small flourish at the end.

COLETTE BOWE
Chairman, Ofcom Consumer Panel