

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 17 January 2024 at 10.30 am

Meeting held in hybrid format at Riverside House and via Microsoft Teams

Present

Consumer Panel/ACOD

Rick Hill (Chair)

Kay Allen

Amanda Britain

Rachel Burr

Judith Clifton

Lenna Cumberbatch

Helen Froud

Michelle Goddard

Robert Hammond

Richard Spencer

Apologies

Michael Wardlow

In attendance

The Panel's Executive Team

Ofcom colleagues

Representative of Plum Consulting Ltd (item 6)

Item
1. Welcome and introduction 1.1 The Chair welcomed Rachel Burr, Panel Member for Wales, Panel Members and attendees to the meeting.
2. Declarations of Members' interests 2.1 There were no new declarations of interest.
3. Minutes of the meeting on 14 December 2023 and matters arising 3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 14 December 2023 were APPROVED following minor amendment and clarification of action taken in response to a previous action point



regarding affordability.

4. Chair's update

- 4.1 The Chair and National Members provided an overview of the Panel's recent activity and stakeholder engagement across the UK.
- 4.2 The Panel relayed its utmost concern on the potential implications to public safety of the migration of consumers' landlines from the old copper telephone network (PSTN) to Voice over IP. The Chair had written to MPs and governmental representatives across the UK and would continue meeting with officials.
- 4.3 The Panel continues to strongly recommend a national campaign to highlight the PSTN Switch Off, to boost consumer awareness, however other methods to inform consumers should also be adopted and the Panel will continue engagement across sectors to encourage a multi-agency approach.
- 4.4 Although the Panel are pleased with Ofcom recently adding [information on moving landline phones to digital technology](#) on their website, the Panel eagerly await an update to the Government's Health and Social Care Guidelines and hope Government will empower Ofcom or Industry to act.
- 4.5 The Panel are keen to continue to highlight the risks posed to consumers upon their migration to IP and look to write to devolved Nations and Local Government Associations.

5. Consumer Policy update

- 5.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom's consumer policy team on its key consumer priority areas.
- 5.2 The Panel continue to raise concerns with the delay to One-Touch Switching as no end date has been published of when CPs will affect the change which causes further delay and detriment to consumers.
- 5.3 The Panel are keen to receive an update from Ofcom on the affordability of communications services, such as social tariffs and to learn what the next steps are and what alternatives, if any, are being explored.
- 5.4 The delay of the Shared Rural Network remains of deep concern to the Panel. An update was requested.
- 5.5 Of equal concern to the Panel is the future regulation of postal services. The Panel understands from its stakeholders that some consumers, citizens and micro-businesses rely on a six-day delivery service of letters. The Panel highlighted that other layers of detriment can be compounded by an unreliable postal service, as was evidenced in the Panel's [rural research published in July 2023](#). The Panel look forward to continuing discussions with Ofcom on its proposals.
- 5.6 The Panel continue to raise concerns on the effects of the 2G/3G switch off and the potential harm to consumers who rely on video relay calls to communicate or have no effective reception for their mobile device and live/work/travel through not-spots.



6. Plum Consulting insights on barriers to digital engagement

- 6.1 The Panel welcomed a representative from Plum Consulting who provided a summary of their research into the barriers to digital engagement and insights within the communications sector concentrating on pressure points for consumers.
- 6.2 The Panel felt the information supplied provided a helpful analysis and concluded deep concerns with the over layering of social deprivation, geography, age, skills, poverty and rurality, which all equate to a deeper and widening digital gap as the digital world becomes more sophisticated. Without some form of government intervention, the digital divide will continue to grow and individuals will fail to connect due to lack of knowledge, skills and attitudinal barriers.
- 6.3 The Panel felt future areas of research within digital skills and engagement could take the form of a cross mapping exercise between postcode models of deprivation and internet services to fully evaluate and understand the levels of the digital divide.

7. Migration to IP update

- 7.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on issues concerning potential implications to public safety caused by the migration of consumers' landlines from the PSTN to Voice over IP.
- 7.2 The Panel reiterated to Ofcom the importance of telecoms providers identifying consumers they deem as needing extra support, including people with telecare devices, and cease all migrations to this cohort until a more robust system and audit framework is put in place.
- 7.3 The Panel urged the importance of a national information campaign to boost consumer awareness.

8. Mobile Roaming Customer Protections update

- 8.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on the outcome of their roaming consultation to amend the General Conditions provided by communications providers.
- 8.2 The Panel reiterated that inadvertent roaming remains a major concern to consumers. Consumers who have inadvertently roamed whether living in Northern Ireland or a coastal area around the UK, should not incur these charges.
- 8.3 In addition to roaming charges, the Panel re-iterated the need for consumers to not receive detrimental data charges due to inadvertent roaming triggering fair usage policies. A free alert to consumers, provided by CPs when a device travels outside of the UK network to switch off roaming would be welcomed, however a level of caution must be put in place for consumers to not incur bill shock if they forget roaming has been switched off.
- 8.4 The Panel raised concerns with the level of consumer understanding to how much of their data usage would equate to a megabyte and the cost attributed. Many consumers will not recognise how many megabytes of data they have used and thus the charge



associated. The new General Conditions highlight signposting the consumer to a link to take them to the necessary information on a providers' website, however many consumers could be wary due to the abundance of online scams.

9. Pricing Trends for Communication Services

- 9.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on UK residential fixed broadband, mobile phone, landline and pay-tv services both standalone and bundled services, in addition to what customers pay for these services, incorporating affordability, debt and consumer engagement.
- 9.2 The Panel expressed that the report highlighted some of the inequities within bundled services and remain concerned with the level of services offered to consumers experiencing affordability issues. The Panel highlighted that lower priced devices may have lower access to data packages, and that some consumers in poverty are cancelling their services altogether due to price increases.
- 9.3 Although data presented suggested an increase in social tariff uptake, the Panel continue to remain concerned with the slowness of the uptake to date and expressed that the number of consumers on social tariffs is below what they would expect.
- 9.4 The Panel re-iterated concern on how consumers obtain a 'best price' for the service they require. When 'shopping' for a service, online prices differ from those via the telephone, and again differ when visiting a store. Many consumers are unable to bargain for a better deal and the Panel advised that providers should offer a 'best-price' across all routes of purchase.
- 9.5 The Panel relayed concern with the future pricing of products and services. The Panel urged Ofcom to monitor competition carefully so that providers do not follow other providers' behaviour and generate unjustified enrichment from soaring or hidden prices for consumers.

10. Thoughts on Panel Strategy

- 10.1 The Panel discussed topics of interest and focus for their forthcoming plan of work for 2024/2025.

11. Future Regulation of Phone-Paid Services update

- 11.1 The Panel received information concerning the proposed transfer of regulation of phone-paid services from the Phone-paid Services Authority (PSA) to Ofcom.
- 11.2 The Panel were pleased to learn the proposal for consumers not incurring a charge from the first second they are connected to an ICSS service and suggested the complaints data may not be a true reflection due to many consumers feeling embarrassed to complain.
- 11.3 The Panel would respond to the consultation and welcome regular engagement and updates on the future regulation of phone-paid services.



12. Connected Nations Report update

- 12.1 The Panel received an overview of the key findings of the Connected Nations UK Report, as published in December 2023.
- 12.2 The Panel expressed continued concern with the low definition by government of ‘decent’ broadband under the Broadband USO (10 Megabits per second download speed/one Megabit per second upload speed). The Panel urged Ofcom to seek a greater understanding of consumers within higher speed bands to assist in measuring improvements in rollout, understanding which consumers the service works for, where they live and how services can be enriched. An overlay, such as geographical mapping, to understand the uptake of consumers opting for the Broadband USO speed along with the voucher scheme to identify areas of digital skills detriment, to help to identify consumer eligibility would be welcomed by the Panel in a future meeting.
- 12.3 The Panel sought further discussions on the measurement of network reliability.
- 12.4 Information concerning climate change and the actions that some UK providers are taking to reduce their own carbon footprints and the net zero commitments they have made ahead of the UK-wide 2050 deadline was welcomed by the Panel. The Chair had recently made contact with the Digital Connectivity Forum’s working group on sustainability Chair and would stay engaged in this work.

13. AOB

- 13.1 Details would be circulated to all members on the next round of National Stakeholder Hubs, so that newer and existing members could listen to the consumer voice across the UK.