

## Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD response to DCMS' call for inputs into a new digital strategy for the UK

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The Communications Consumer Panel (the Panel) and the Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People (ACOD) welcome the opportunity to contribute ideas on how the UK's digital revolution can be taken to the next stage.

The Panel works to protect and promote people's interests in the communications sector, including the postal sector. We are an independent statutory body set up under the Communications Act 2003. The Panel carries out research, provides advice and encourages Ofcom, governments, the EU, industry and others to look at issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and micro businesses.

The Panel pays particular attention to the needs of older people and people with disabilities, the needs of people in rural areas and people on low incomes, and the needs of micro businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers.

Four members of the Panel also represent the interests of consumers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively. They liaise with the key stakeholders in the Nations to understand the perspectives of consumers in all parts of the UK and input these perspectives to the Panel's consideration of issues. Following the alignment of ACOD with the Panel, the Panel is more alert than ever to the interests of older and disabled consumers and citizens.

### Response

We note that Digital Economy Minister Ed Vaizey has at this stage called on the public and industry to share their thoughts and ideas on the new frontier for digital revolution. We are keen to contribute and would welcome the chance to input into a more formal consultation as soon as the opportunity becomes available.

The Panel's focus is - and we believe the government's focus should also be - projecting and protecting the interests of consumers and citizens, including micro businesses.

We believe the next "frontier" should place weight on data protection and privacy issues, so that consumers can have confidence that new developments will not leave them exposed to fraud, data misuse and nuisance.

A new broadband Universal Service Obligation should be clearly defined and put in place promptly, with the flexibility to allow for rapidly changing consumer demands in a fast-paced sector; the aim should be ubiquitous coverage with no-one left behind. More investment in digital participation is needed, with assisted digital for those who are nervous about going online. The good work that has been started by government and charities needs to be built upon further by government to allow consumers and citizens - including the most vulnerable - to enter the new digital frontier confidently. Digital

participation is vital so everyone can benefit from the digital world and ‘Digital by default’ should mean *access by default*.

We are pleased that Ed Vaizey recognises that consumers and citizens should have “*access to the internet whenever and wherever they need it*”<sup>1</sup> and would encourage government to take the necessary steps to improve mobile coverage across the UK, including all modes of transport and hard-to-reach areas. In 2015, we contributed to the Department for Transport/DCMS consultation ‘Improving coverage for rail passengers’<sup>2</sup> and the DCMS/DCLG ‘Review of How the Planning System in England can Support the Delivery of Mobile Connectivity’<sup>3</sup> and note that the relevant departments are analysing feedback. We would urge government departments to collaborate with each other, Ofcom and industry and take prompt action to benefit consumers and citizens.

We also note Ed Vaizey’s comment that “*UK plc is [...] boosted by around £145 billion a year from digital technology, with the average British person spending around £1,500 online for goods each year.*” At the same time, it is vital to note the contribution made to UK plc by small and micro businesses and to enable them to grow and be part of the digital revolution. In 2015, we contributed to the BIS consultation on ‘the protection of micro and small businesses in purchasing goods and services’<sup>4</sup>. The new digital strategy must include better availability (in terms of physical access, and reasonable prices) of superfast broadband for small and micro businesses. It will also be crucial that small and micro businesses are able to grow without the fear of being wiped out by a cyber-attack - and they must be confident enough to be able to assure their customers that their personal data is protected. In 2014, we published our research into micro businesses’ experiences of communications services<sup>5</sup>, which revealed a number of findings about barriers to take-up of communications and digital services - including more specific barriers for disabled business owners and those in rural areas. We produced recommendations for government and industry.

We would encourage government to review responses to all recent consultations - as well as staying up to speed with research and analytics by Ofcom and others - to ensure that the new strategy is well-informed and realistic and further consultations are only conducted where necessary.

We welcome enthusiastically the notion of “*better services for less*”, but would encourage government to find ways to ensure that this does not result in “*better services for fewer*”.

Ed Vaizey has highlighted the fact that “*Every part of the UK economy and our lives has been digitised - from how we shop and entertain ourselves to the way we travel to work*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-digital-strategy-the-next-frontier-in-our-digital-revolution>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/mobile-communications-for-uk-rail-passengers>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/how-the-planning-system-in-england-can-support-mobile-connectivity>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/purchasing-goods-and-services-protection-of-small-businesses>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/research-and-reports/realising-the-potential-micro-businesses--experiences-of-communications-services>

*and manage our health.*” We would urge government to consider how intimidating this may be for those who can't - or simply choose not to - go fully 'digital'. Our 2012 research 'Bridging the Gap'<sup>6</sup> which looked into consumers' barriers to digital engagement and participation, led us to a set of clear conclusions and we produced recommendations for government and industry.

We believe consumers and citizens who are not - or in some cases not *yet* - digitally engaged, should not be unduly disadvantaged by progress for the majority. Along with assisted digital support, there should still be an analogue provision that works, so that people can still use public services effectively and are able to find out about healthcare, jobs, courses and ways to improve their own lives. We would also urge government to consider the rights and abilities of the proportion of UK adults who are not functionally literate or are learning English as a non-native language.

As highlighted above, consumers who live in hard-to-reach rural locations - and, we would add, inner city locations - need to be given support to access reliable, high quality broadband and mobile networks, so that these communities can benefit and participate effectively.

It is vital that all consumers and citizens are able to feel empowered in the way they interact with the state and that none are left marginalised.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/bridging-the-gap-sustaining-online-engagement/bridging-the-gap-sustaining-online-engagement-2>