FEBRUARY BULLETIN

Draft Work Plan consultation – 2015/16

The Communications Consumer Panel and the Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People (ACOD) have published their draft Work Plan and proposed priorities for 2015/16 http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/current-year/current-year

The draft Work Plan explains the Panel and ACOD's role, describes the different ways in which we engage with issues, explains how we have chosen our draft priorities for the coming year and sets out the areas that we propose to address. This Plan is being put out for consultation in February and March 2015 and will be reviewed following comments made by stakeholders. The consultation runs until 23 March 2015.

Panel responds to new broadband speeds report

New Ofcom research shows that nearly one in three UK broadband connections (32%) are now superfast, up from around one in four (24%) in November 2013.

The growing take-up of superfast cable or fibre services has resulted in the average UK broadband speeds increasing by a fifth in the six months to November 2014. The average UK broadband speed is now 22.8Mbit/s, up from 18.7Mbit/s in May 2014.

Average download speeds in urban areas increased by 21% in the six months to November 2014, largely as a result of increasing take-up of faster services and Virgin Media's upgrade programme. However faster cable and fibre services have lower availability in rural areas and therefore speeds in these areas are typically slower, delivering around one-third of urban speeds on average.

In response to the publications of the report, the Panel's Chair, Jo Connell, said; "Whilst this is great news for urban areas, there is still a lot to be done to improve speeds in many areas, particularly rural.

"It has been the Panel's view for some time that sub-optimal delivery of communications services as a result of inadequate infrastructure - be it a lack of fast broadband or the absence of mobile and/or data coverage - has long since ceased to be a matter of simple irritation for consumers and micro businesses, and is now an issue of real detriment. Ofcom's Infrastructure Report 2014 highlights that there are 3% of customers still unable to attain a basic broadband connection of 2Mbits/s and we would encourage government and industry to work together urgently to find a resolution."

A [press release](#) summarising the full report can be found on Ofcom's website.

Rhys Evans joins Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

The Panel is delighted to welcome Rhys Evans as the new member for Wales of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD.

Rhys has worked on a range of consumer issues on behalf of vulnerable consumers across a number of sectors including retail, communications and energy in his previous role of Wales Director of Consumer Futures (formerly Consumer Focus Wales).   He was previously Chair of the Consumer Direct Wales Advisory Board, and has advised the Welsh Government on a number of consumer issues.

Government to clamp down on nuisance calls

Imposing fines of up to £500,000 on the companies behind cold calls and nuisance text messages is to become easier under changes to the law being made by the government.

The law currently requires the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) to prove a company caused 'substantial damage or substantial distress' by their conduct before action can be taken. From 6 April, that legal requirement is to be removed.

Nuisance calls and texts remains a significant concern for consumers – in some cases they are not only annoying, but can also cause distress especially amongst vulnerable people in society.

The latest data and research shows that;

- Around four out of five people surveyed by consumer group Which? said they are regularly cold-called at home, with a third left feeling intimated

- There were 15,642 complaints related to nuisance calls and texts made to the ICO in November 2014

- In total, there were over 175,000 complaints related to nuisance calls and texts made to the ICO for 2014

Further details of this announcement can be found on the [Gov.uk](#) website.

The Panel has welcomed these changes having supported the initial proposal. You can read our response [here](#) (pdf)

StepChange publishes new report on nuisance calls

As part of their "Got Their Number" campaign, the debt charity StepChange, commissioned a comparative policy analysis of legal and regulatory approaches to nuisance calls in numerous countries around the world (pdf).

The report demonstrates that the UK, despite some recent advances, still lags behind other countries in its approach to nuisance calls. However, the report presents policy makers with some practical options to improve consumer protection and international co-operation.

In its response (pdf) to the report, StepChange highlights which of these options would best protect financially vulnerable families bombarded with nuisance calls. They call for:

- The UK to switch from an opt-out to an opt-in telephone preference service

- To further increase the powers of regulators to fine offenders and ensure fine levels are related to the seriousness of offences

- To increase the ability of the watchdog to identify wrongdoing

- To increase the security offered to consumers considering a high-risk product offered over the telephone.

Further details on the report can be found on the StepChange website.

House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Skills publishes 'Make or Break: The UK's Digital Future'

The House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Skills has published its report, 'Make or Break: The UK's Digital Future', which warns that the country is not addressing its significant skills shortage and an incoming government urgently needs to resolve this.

The report urges the government to adopt a new Digital Agenda, focusing on investment in hard infrastructure like broadband and connectivity and soft infrastructure - digital inclusion and high level skills taught at school from an early age by:

- making digital literacy a core subject at school, alongside English and Maths;

- viewing the internet as important as a utility, accessible to all; and

- putting a single 'Digital Agenda' at the heart of Government.

The report also noted that there are certain sectors of society, and UK regions, falling behind at great cost to the economy; and that industry has a vital role to play in developing the right skills in the workplace, in further and higher education, and in schools.

The report also suggests that there is a lack of coordination on digital initiatives – the current digital 'activity' within Government includes four Government Ministers, a Taskforce, a Committee, and a Unit. The Committee cites this as evidence for creating a single Digital Agenda driven by one Cabinet Minister.

The Communications Consumer Panel submitted evidence (pdf) to the Inquiry which was based on its own Bridging the Gap research into digital engagement. The Panel has previously identified a number of areas for strategic focus and made a series of recommendations for government, policy makers and those delivering on the ground. It is the Panel's view that:

- the challenge to increase participation is underestimated;

- meeting the challenge is underfunded; and

- people who remain unable to access online services will suffer increasing detriment if the challenge isn't met.

Carnegie Trust publishes new report on digital exclusion

The Carnegie UK Trust and Ipsos MORI have published new research on digital exclusion in Scotland.

The new study examines barriers to internet use and how these barriers can be overcome. Their findings are based on 400 in-depth interviews with internet users and non-users in Dumfries and Kirkcaldy.

In its conclusions, the Trust sets out the central issues that need to be considered in any effective strategy to tackle digital exclusion.

Mayor of London publishes Digital Inclusion Strategy for London

The Mayor of London has published a Digital Inclusion Strategy for London that includes a call for an army of volunteers to become digital champions and help train people in the use of the internet.

The Mayor's strategy highlights that around one in ten people in the capital have never used the Internet and almost two million Londoners do not have basic online skills.

There is no single reason for people being digitally excluded and often it can be a combination of reasons such as not being able to afford the connections or being able to access training. While surfing the net comes naturally to some - 99 % of 16 to 19 year olds have used the Internet - the strategy highlights the groups who are less likely to log on. It states that only 39% of people over the age of 75 have been online. Disability has also been identified as a barrier to Internet connectivity, with almost 30 % of disabled adults having never used the Internet.

As part of the strategy, Team London, the Mayor's volunteering programme is looking to mobilise Londoners to become Digital Champions who will train people in becoming digitally literate. Londoners interested in becoming a Digital Champion should log on at the following address for further information:
http://volunteerteam.london.gov.uk/opportunities/3552

Free Wi-Fi to help commuters stay connected

The Department of Transport has announced that rail passengers will benefit from free Wi-Fi on trains across England and Wales from 2017.

Train operators are being asked to set out how they will meet the commitment to provide this important service for passengers. All train operators bidding for new franchises and direct award agreements will have to include this specification in their bid.

Where there is no new franchise agreement due in the next 2 years, almost £50 million of funding will be released from the Department for Transport to ensure Wi-Fi is available on selected services from 2017. The operators in this group are:

- Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern (TSGN)

- Southeastern

- Chiltern

- Arriva Trains Wales

The £47.8 million funding is money that Network Rail has been required to return to the government for missing punctuality targets set by the Office of Rail Regulation. It is the first time such money has been reinvested into improvements targeted at passengers.

Further details can be found on the government website.

Lord Young publishes report on UK small firms

Lord Young's report on small firms reviews the changing face of business over the last five years. The report states that 5.2 million small firms are now established in the UK.

The report states that our changing relationship with the internet has brought down barriers that might previously have stopped a good idea from being turned into a viable business.

Ofcom varies mobile operators' licences to improve coverage

Ofcom has varied the licences of the UK's four mobile network operators to improve mobile coverage across the country.

This follows an agreement reached between the Government and EE, O2, Three and Vodafone in December 2014 to increase mobile coverage.

Further details can be found on Ofcom's website.

Safer Internet Day 2015

Safer Internet Day 2015 was held on February 10th, with the slogan 'Let's create a better internet together'.

Co-ordinated in the UK by the UK Safer Internet Centre, the celebration saw over 800 organisations get involved to help promote the safe, responsible and positive use of digital technology for children and young people.

Over a hundred countries participated in Safer Internet Day, reaching millions across the UK and globally. The day offers an opportunity to highlight the positive uses of technology and explore the role we all play in helping to create a better and safer online community.

Further details can be found on the Safer Internet Day website.

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