



MARCH 2015 BULLETIN

Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD Work Plan 2015/16

Following a public consultation the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD have published their work plan for 2015/16.

Jo Connell, the Panel's Chair, thanked stakeholders for their comments on the Plan, highlighting that these played a significant role in helping shape the work programme for the coming year.

The Work Plan explains the Panel's and ACOD's roles, outlines the different ways in which Members engage with issues, explains how our priorities are chosen for the year and sets out the key areas that we intend to address.

This year, the key areas of engagement are:

- Broadband/mobile coverage and quality of service
- Nuisance calls, scams and ease of reporting
- Treating consumers fairly and customer service
- Privacy and security of personal data
- Digital engagement/ detriment
- Micro businesses' experiences of communications.

You can read the Work Plan [here](#).

Agreement reached on caps for charges run up on lost and stolen mobiles

The Panel has been urging the Government and mobile companies to take action to curb consumers' bills for charges run up on lost and stolen mobiles. So we're pleased that the Government has announced a deal with the 'Big 5' mobile networks - EE, O2, Three, Virgin

Media and Vodafone - to bring in protection for their 27 million customers on monthly contracts.

The plan is that, if your phone gets lost or stolen and you report it to the police within 24 hours, the companies will cap liability at £100.

Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture and Digital Industries said "This is good work by the mobile networks who are taking their responsibilities to their customers seriously, realising they need some peace of mind when things go wrong in this way. I know some have questioned why the cap isn't zero. I hope that in time the cap will be lowered further, but mobile phone users need to do their part by doing simple things like setting a PIN on their phones, or installing a tracker App, and always telling the police the moment their phone goes missing."

Further details can be found on Gov.uk

Ofcom announces Strategic Review of Digital Communications

Ofcom has announced an [overarching review of the UK's digital communications markets](#), to ensure that communications providers and services continue to meet the needs of consumers and businesses.

The review will consider a range of issues in the sector. Ofcom anticipates that it will focus on three aspects in particular:

- ensuring the right incentives for private-sector investment, which can help to deliver availability and quality of service;
- maintaining strong competition and tackling obstacles or bottlenecks that might be holding the sector back; and
- identifying whether there is scope for deregulation in some areas.

This will be Ofcom's second major assessment of the wider telecommunications sector. The first began in December 2003 and [concluded in September 2005](#). It led to new rules which allowed competing providers to access BT's network, on equal terms, in order to offer phone and broadband services to consumers.

The first phase of the review will examine current and future market factors that may affect digital communications services, and current regulatory approaches. To inform this work, Ofcom says it intends to engage over the coming months with a wide range of stakeholders - including industry, consumer groups, the UK Government and devolved administrations - through meetings and workshops. This phase of the review is expected to conclude with a discussion document in summer 2015.

Ofcom expects to conclude the review's second phase by outlining initial conclusions around the end of the year.

A [press release](#) and further details can be found on the Ofcom website.

Budget 2015

The Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered his 2015 budget this month and the communications sector was a prominent issue. The budget included a provision for £3.5 million to explore ways of protecting vulnerable people from nuisance calls. Panel Chair, Jo Connell, subsequently attended a conference on the subject, co-hosted by Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy and Mike Crockart MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Nuisance Calls.

The event brought together senior key stakeholders who all have a close policy interest in nuisance calls, including charities, voluntary organisations, financial service providers, communications providers and call blocking technology providers. Discussions focussed on exploring how vulnerable consumers could be protected from such calls, including how any scheme to do so could be funded and administered.

Other key announcements included:

- action to support the delivery of broadband in rural areas, including subsidising the costs of installing superfast capable satellite services
- raising the Universal Service Obligations (USO) to 5Mbps
- an extension of the broadband connection scheme will be available in a total of 50 cities by 1 April 2015

Alongside the Budget, the Government also published its [Digital Communications Infrastructure Strategy](#). The 2015 budget can be found in full [here](#)

Government responds to the consultation on tackling partial not-spots in mobile phone coverage

The government has published [its response to the consultation on Tackling Partial Not-Spots in Mobile Phone Coverage](#). (Pdf)

The consultation received 1,041 responses before the closing date of 26 November 2014.

Ofcom publishes its Annual Plan 2015/16

Ofcom has published its [2015/16 Annual Plan](#), outlining its strategy and work programme for the next financial year.

The Annual Plan will focus around four key areas:

Ensuring communications continue to deliver for consumers and businesses

Ofcom is undertaking an overarching [Strategic Review of Digital Communications](#) to help ensure the UK's digital communications markets can meet the needs of consumers and businesses.

The sector has transformed over the last decade and the review will assess the implications of current and future developments and to what extent regulation is needed. It also considers investment, competition and innovation across fixed and mobile telecoms to ensure the sector delivers positive outcomes for consumers and businesses.

Separately, Ofcom will continue work to make sure switching is as easy as possible for consumers of fixed and mobile services, including bundles. This will involve completing implementation of 'gaining provider led' switching processes for fixed voice and broadband services, and proposals for further reforms, as needed, later in 2015.

Meeting the needs of SMEs

Ofcom will continue its work to ensure competition in communications markets and promote choice for consumers. This includes assessing whether providers are meeting the communications needs of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

In areas where a market is not best serving SMEs, Ofcom will assess what can be done through a range of initiatives, including the business connectivity market review and promoting improvements in network availability.

Protecting consumers from harm

Ofcom will focus on protecting consumers from harm in areas such as nuisance calls and unexpectedly high mobile bills. Clearer pricing for phone numbers starting 08, 09 and 118 will be introduced in the summer, and '080' and '116' calls will become free from mobiles.

As well as maintaining audience confidence in broadcast content, Ofcom will promote child safety online working with other organisations.

Promoting availability of services for consumers and businesses

Working with Government and industry, Ofcom will promote better mobile coverage.

Ofcom has also started a review of factors affecting Royal Mail's ability to deliver the universal postal service. This considers Royal Mail's efficiency and developments in the parcel delivery sector. Ofcom says it continues to monitor the development of direct delivery competition, and can intervene swiftly to secure the universal service if competition is threatening its future.

Separately, Ofcom will progress efforts to promote wider availability of high speed broadband to serve consumers and businesses.

Addressing the growing demand for spectrum

Demand for spectrum, and in particular spectrum for mobile internet services, is growing rapidly. To help meet this demand, Ofcom is planning to award spectrum for mobile data services in the 2.3 GHz and 3.4 GHz bands and will take steps towards making the 700 MHz band available for future mobile broadband use.

Ofcom is also representing UK interests in international negotiations during November 2015 to agree how best to use spectrum effectively in the future.

[A summary of Ofcom's Annual Plan 'at a glance' is available online \(pdf\).](#)

BT fined over text relay delay

Ofcom has fined BT £800,000 for failing to provide an improved text-to-voice service for its customers with hearing or speech impairments between April and September last year. The service, called 'Next Generation Text Service', helps users have more natural conversations using speech as well as text, and is accessible on devices such as PCs, laptops, tablets and smartphones.

In October 2012, Ofcom told all UK landline and mobile phone providers to launch their service by 18 April 2014. BT missed the deadline having encountered technical problems with the sound quality of emergency calls. It launched Next Generation Text on 24 September 2014.

In June 2014, Ofcom opened an [investigation](#) into why the improved text relay service was not available as required from April. BT must pay the £800,000 financial penalty to Ofcom and it will then be passed on to HM Treasury.

Further details can be found [here](#)

New guidance about cyber security published for small businesses

The Department of Business, Industry and Skills has published new guidance for small businesses on how to put simple cyber security measures in place.

The guide, "[Small business: what you need to know about cyber security](#)" explains the threat from cyber attack and shows how businesses can protect themselves. It includes advice on:

- using strong passwords
- updating software
- providing simple staff awareness and training
- managing risk
- using the Cyber Essentials scheme to protect against common online threats

The advice also covers how to protect:

- business information
- cash flow
- customers
- reputation

Cabinet Office and Government Digital Service launch Digital Friends initiative

The Cabinet Office and Government Digital Service has launch the ‘Digital Friends’ initiative to encourage civil servants to teach their digital skills to friends, family, neighbours or colleagues who are offline.

Under the Digital Friends scheme, civil service staff are encouraged to find someone they know who needs help to go online, and give them basic advice and support on skills. This may include browsing the web, email and online safety. They can share their experiences on Facebook and Twitter using [#DigitalFriends](#).

Details on how to participate in the initiative can be [found here](#).

Tech4Good Awards

The Tech4Good Awards recognise organisations and individuals who use digital technology to improve the lives of others. The awards were created by [AbilityNet](#) with the help of [BT](#) and a number of businesses, charities and non-profit partners and [sponsors](#), because the organisers want to know about companies that are utilising the empowering influence of digital technology - whether it’s at home, at work, in education.

Entry for the Tech4Good Awards 2015 is open to any charity, business, individual, social enterprise, school, college, university or any other public body with a base in the UK. You can nominate yourself or anyone else for as many Awards as you like.

The organisers rely on the general public to let them know who should win these Awards. Tell them about your local community project, a volunteer with your organisation that goes above and beyond their duties to support service users, a new start-up that’s using digital technology to help disabled people, or a charity that’s found an innovative way to help people of all ages to acquire the digital skills they need.

- [Accessibility Award](#) Software, hardware or other digital innovation that transforms the lives of disabled people.
- [BT Ingenious Award](#) The organisers are looking for smart ideas that make a real difference by connecting people anywhere in the world.
- [Community Impact Award](#) Charities, businesses or individuals using digital technology to transform their community.
- [Digital Skills Award](#) Innovative ways of helping people of any age to acquire the skills they need for the digital age.
- [Digital Health Award](#) Using computers, the internet and other digital technologies to deliver health and well-being to individuals or communities.
- [IT Volunteer of the Year Award](#) Celebrating those amazing individuals who use their digital skills to make a difference to the lives of others.

- [Young People's Award](#) The organisers want to hear from young people under 23 who are using technology to make a difference to the lives of others.

The Awards can be followed on Twitter at [@Tech4GoodAwards](#) and use the hashtag #Tech4GoodAwards to join in the conversation

Entry closes **Friday 8th May 2015 at 5pm.**

Calling the Shots?

New research from Citizens Advice has examined what prompted the 21,500 mobile phone problems reported to the Citizens Advice consumer service in England and Wales last year. The report, [Calling the shots?](#), states that there is widespread confusion over who is responsible when things go wrong with their mobile. The report highlights the issues people face over faulty phones, bills run up by thieves, and people trapped into paying for poor service.

Citizens Advice is warning that though average mobile phone bills are down, longer contracts mean bigger financial decisions and has called for mobile phone companies to look at how they treat customers whose bills turn into problem debt.

Ofcom approves PhonePayPlus Code of Practice

Ofcom has provisionally [decided to approve \(pdf\)](#) the new PhonepayPlus Code of Practice, which applies to the regulation of premium rate services in the UK.

Although Ofcom has overall responsibility to make sure that consumers are protected by ensuring appropriate rules are in place and enforced, the regulator has designated PhonepayPlus to carry out the day-to-day regulation of premium rate services. This is done through a Code of Practice that establishes certain standards for the operation of premium rate services in the UK.

PhonepayPlus periodically reviews the Code to ensure it continues to operate in consumers' best interests and provides a fair and proportionate regulatory regime for industry.

Ofcom has provisionally approved the new Code, having assessed it against the relevant legal tests. A copy of the new Code will now be submitted to the European Commission and, subject to its comments, is scheduled to take effect on 1 July 2015.

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