

**Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD**

**on 23 May 2019 at 10.30**

**Riverside House, 2A Southwark Bridge Road, London SE1 9HA**

**Present**

Consumer Panel/ACOD

Rick Hill (Chair)

Kay Allen

Amanda Britain

David Holden

Chris Holland

Karen Lewis

Richard Spencer

Craig Tillotson

Richard Williams

In attendance

David Edwards

Fiona Lennox

Howard White

A spokesperson from Christians Against Poverty (item 5)

Ofcom colleagues

Item
<p><b>1. Welcome and introduction</b></p> <p>Rick Hill welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting. Jenny Borritt was usually in attendance and had sent apologies.</p>
<p><b>2. Declarations of Members' interests</b></p> <p>Craig Tillotson informed Members that The Smart Request Company Limited, a FinTech for which he was Chief Executive, was now trading as Ordo. There were no other declarations.</p>
<p><b>3. Minutes of the meeting on 25 April 2019 and matters arising</b></p> <p>Subject to amendment, the minutes of the meeting of 25 April were <b>APPROVED</b> for signature by the Chair. Matters noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discussions were ongoing about the arrangements for supporting the Panel's wider programme of work.</li><li>• In relation to communications disruption on Colonsay, more information would be provided to Members.</li><li>• Two Panel members had attended Ofcom's recent roundtable event on vulnerable consumers and on how to tackle challenges. They reported on proceedings. Ofcom's plan to publish a set of good practice guidelines was discussed.</li></ul>

- PwC was undertaking qualitative research on the experience of low-income consumers on behalf of the Panel. An outline report structure would be shared with Members.

#### 4. Consumer update

The Panel was updated on Ofcom's consumer priority work areas. Topics discussed by Members included:

- Nuisance calls; it was noted that Ofcom had engaged with the Metropolitan Police on Project FALCON (Fraud And Linked Crime ONline) and with mobile network operators. Ofcom was taking stock of its nuisance calls strategy; would attend the June Panel meeting to elaborate further; and at the Panel's request, would reach-out to Microsoft about scam calls purporting to come from that company.
- Complaints handling; the Ofcom team would be meeting Plusnet later that day to discuss issues including call handling times. The Panel would also be meeting with PlusNet.
- Annual best tariff notifications; it was noted that there were learnings from the recent UKRN conference and that Ofcom had engaged with Ofgem on this issue.
- Mobile handsets; the Panel asked Ofcom to ensure that the analytical approach used in its initial handset research fully captured the potential detriment to consumers. The Panel would pursue this matter with Ofcom.
- Migration to all-IP networks; it was noted that the Broadband Stakeholder Group (BSG) was working on messaging to consumers and BSG would be invited to discuss this with the Panel. Network resilience and service quality would also be important issues.
- Switching; a Member queried whether there was scope to allow customers to pass on any details related to vulnerability or accessibility requirements to their new provider as part of the switching process and this would be passed on to the Ofcom team.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Class stamp safeguard cap; the Panel asked to be kept informed of developments in relation to Ofcom's consideration of a breach by Royal Mail.
- Fairer outcomes for consumers; the Panel requested inclusion of Ofcom's work programme in the monthly progress update report provided to Members.

#### 5. Christians Against Poverty

A colleague from Christians Against Poverty (CAP) spoke about CAP services; the impact of debt; and the findings in CAP's *Stacked Against* report, revealing the breadth and depth of vulnerability and the nature of multiple complex needs. The Panel noted that 30% of CAP clients delayed seeking help with debt for a period of three or more years.

Issues raised by the Panel included the importance consumers attached to purchase of their communications services; the need for CPs to respond positively to both short- and long-term vulnerability; the importance of having CP frontline staff with the skills and empathy to respond to customers with debt issues and a

commitment to that approach from the top of organisations.

## 6. Network Resilience

Members were briefed on network resilience issues in the context of migration to all-IP networks. Issues covered included switch-off of UK PSTN networks; deployment of Session Initiation Protocol (SIP); hybrid networks; and ongoing Ofcom engagement with stakeholders.

Issues raised by Members included a concern about the resilience of all-IP networks in contrast to the greater perceived resilience of switched networks like PSTN; cyber security and potential for penetration by ‘bad actors’; replacement consumer equipment and who might pick up the cost. It was agreed that the issue of network resilience would return to a Panel meeting agenda in due course.

## 7. Adult Media Use and Attitudes

At the end of May Ofcom would be publishing *Adults’ Media Use and Attitudes 2019* quantitative and *Adult Media Lives 2019* qualitative research reports. Members were briefed on key findings and noted that Ofcom would be hosting a Making Sense of Media event in July to present findings to stakeholders and to discuss related third-party research.

Members expressed concern about the continuing nature of the digital divide, with little progress made since 2014. Currently, older people were less likely to be online but Members commented that the challenges were not static and that some people who were online now might find themselves unable to keep up with new devices or services in the future. Other concerns were digital poverty and lower levels of critical skills amongst some groups e.g. awareness of ‘paid for’ material on price comparison sites. A member queried the use of the term ‘online’ and whether researchers should be asking about use of messaging services or apps.

## 8. Vulnerability

The Panel was updated on Ofcom’s work in this area. Members made a number of comments, including:

- A need for the mandatory signposting of priority fault repair.
- CPs’ policies on vulnerability should be available in accessible formats and easier to find on their websites.
- Vulnerability was not just ‘nine to five, Monday to Friday’ and CPs needed to recognise that and respond by being available when consumers might need access to them.
- A need for CPs to record access needs and barriers, and not disabilities.
- The importance of evaluating CPs’ approaches to vulnerability.
- The value of dialogue on vulnerability between the different regulated sectors.
- Data from CPs on the proportion of their customers registered as vulnerable could be read as a measure of how well CPs were performing in this area.

- There was an opportunity to encourage CPs to collaborate on joint marketing/information about services available to vulnerable customers. The Ofcom team would share a draft guidance document with the Panel.

## 9. Retail Voice Only Networks

Members were updated on steps to address concerns in the standalone landline phone services market that voice-only (landline, but no broadband) and split purchase customers (separate landline and broadband arrangements) were not getting value for money. These included two recent remedies: a line rental price reduction of £7 per month for voice-only BT customers and the introduction of annual customer statements.

Issues raised by members included levels of detriment; customer incentives to switch and whether CPs should take proactive steps to move their customers to better value tariffs; and how likely customers were to engage with letters about potential savings.

## 10. The Panel's workplan

The Panel had gone out to consultation on its proposed steps to strengthen the consumer voice in communications and had received a number of detailed responses. Members discussed the responses. The updated workplan would be shared with members and published shortly thereafter.

## 11. Comparing Service Quality Report

Ofcom had recently published a Comparing Service Quality (CSQ) report, *Choosing the best broadband, mobile and landline provider*. The Panel expressed disappointment at the lack of comparative granular data on call waiting times in the report. [Note: information on the time taken to handle issues can be found in [Quality of customer service- Complaints handling chart pack](#)] It was noted that Ofcom hoped to improve the accessibility of future iterations of a related CSQ interactive tool on the Ofcom website.

Members commented on the data, including the presentation of complex messages and numbers/proportions of customers for comparative purposes and on complaint resolution, where a large proportion remained unresolved on first contact; and on the value of 'mining' social media to determine consumers' concerns.

## 12. Any other business

A member raised concerns about the nature of a recent automated voicemail received from a CP requesting that contact be made to arrange an engineer visit. This would be flagged to Ofcom.

A Member had attended a recent BBC-hosted Global Access Awareness event and would share further information.