

Communications Consumer Panel response to Ofcom's consultation on Simplifying non-geographic numbers

The Communications Consumer Panel (CCP) welcomes Ofcom's consultation into *Simplifying non-geographic numbers*. The Panel has been concerned for some time that calling non-geographic numbers can be confusing and costly for consumers.

There is currently significant scope for consumer confusion as:

- phone companies are able to choose their own price structure for non-geographic calls;
- there is often a lack of clarity about whether such calls are within a bundle allowance;
- call costs are often significantly higher from mobiles; and
- information about pricing is often complex and can be hard for a consumer to locate.

The Panel notes that research for Ofcom found that only 13% of people thought they knew the cost of calling an 080 number from a mobile. Charges for 0800 calls from mobiles particularly affect people on lower incomes, who are more likely to rely on a mobile at home and use it to make calls to essential services. The proposal to make freephone calls (080 and 116 numbers) free from all telephones (fixed and mobile) is a significant improvement.

According to the consultation, such confusion also appears to affect people's likelihood of calling non-geographic numbers. This potentially impacts not only upon vulnerable consumers as they are less likely to call essential services due to the perceived charges (particularly from mobiles) but also restricts the amount of new, innovative services choosing to enter the market, which has a detrimental impact on consumers generally.

Simplifying non-geographic number ranges by making pricing structures clearer and removing confusing inconsistencies will be of benefit to consumers and citizens. Splitting the price of other non-geographic calls into an access charge - paid to the phone provider and a service charge - paid to the company providing the service, will make charging structures clearer for consumers.

The Panel also welcomes Ofcom's intention to implement a 'fair and reasonable' condition on terminating providers. This should help to ensure that the service providers with freephone contact numbers are not faced with unreasonable charges for the provision of freephone services, resulting in them moving to other number ranges, and to the ultimate detriment of consumers.

Should the decision be made to implement the proposals, the Panel would stress that consumers should not be subject to any additional costs or loss of service.

Clearly communicating these changes to consumers is key. The Panel would strongly encourage the provision of a consumer information programme. It is also vital that operators embed communicating these changes in their consumer communications strategy. The proposal notes that consumers will be advised of the cost of the access charge for their package when buying a new phone service. It is essential that, as with broadband speeds, consumers are clearly advised of such charges - and well before they make a decision to purchase a new service. The Panel would also exhort the provision of information about access charges to existing consumers. Clarity around such charges will also hopefully encourage competition between phone providers in the cost of connecting such calls.