

Panel Bulletin



Update on Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD activities

Workplan 2019/20 and our plans to strengthen the consumer voice in communications

This month, the Panel published its [2019/20 workplan](#) following a public consultation. We've now published a discussion document which elaborates further on our plans to strengthen the consumer voice in the communications sector, following an increase in the Panel's funding, as announced by Ofcom in its Annual Plan. [Our response](#) to BEIS' Modernising Consumer Markets Green Paper, last July, called for more collaboration between consumer groups, regulators and industry and better use of data for the benefit of consumers. In this discussion document, we set out the role we think we can play in facilitating this.

We would welcome your views on [our proposals](#) by **13 May**.

New Chair Rick Hill, MBE

Following the retirement of Jo Connell, OBE DL, we are delighted to announce that Rick Hill MBE has been appointed the new Chair of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD. Rick has been the Panel's Member for Northern Ireland since September 2014. He has previously been Chair of Northern Ireland Screen Commission, Chair of The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, Chair of Consumer Focus Post and member of the Consumer Focus UK Board, a member of the BBC Audience Council for Northern Ireland and BBC Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland. He was made MBE for services to Broadcast Media in 2014.

Outgoing Chair, Jo Connell said: “I am extremely pleased to be passing the baton to Rick Hill. As an existing member of the Panel, Rick will provide seamless continuity ensuring our plan and ethos continue. He has a wealth of experience in consumer advocacy and is ideally suited for the strengthened consumer advocacy role the Panel now has.”

Rick Hill said: “I am delighted to be the incoming Chair at a time when Ofcom is increasing investment in the Panel so that we, in turn, can strengthen the consumer voice in our sectors and improve outcomes. I also want to pay tribute to Jo Connell for her leadership which has delivered this strengthened role”

Lord (Terry) Burns, Ofcom Chairman said: “The Panel’s role is critical in helping to hold Ofcom to account and ensure we maintain a strong focus on the consumer.

“I am delighted to welcome Rick as Chairman. He brings enormous experience and understanding of the needs and interests of consumers. We look forward to working with Rick as the Panel enters an exciting phase in its development as a leading consumer advocate.

“I am very grateful for Jo’s contribution over the past nine years. Under her leadership, the Panel and the Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People have become a stronger voice for consumers, particularly those in more vulnerable circumstances.”

Margot James MP, Minister for Digital and Creative industries said: “We are determined to improve the consumer experience in telecoms, and a strong consumer voice is a crucial part of this effort. The appointment of someone with Rick's experience, alongside the 50% increase to the Panel's budget, will be instrumental in delivering this. We will continue to consider what additional measures Government can take to support the work of the Panel and UK consumers.” The full news article is available [here](#)

New Member Dr David Holden

New member Dr David Holden attended his first meeting in March, David has direct and extensive experience of working on large-scale consumer insight projects for Vodafone, BT, O2, EE, France Telecom, 3, Sky, Inmarsat, Talk Talk, Carphone Warehouse, Ericsson, Nokia, Virgin Media, Cable and Wireless and Alcatel.

David currently also sits on the Civil Aviation Authority’s (CAA)/HAL Consumer Challenge Board (CCB), tasked with providing scrutiny to ensure that the current £15bn Heathrow

expansion plans, regulatory price review and five-year business plan is driven by the understanding and prioritisation of the needs of its current and future consumers.

The full news article is available [here](#)

Recent improvements in fairness for consumers in the communications sector

- Advice given by the Panel helped lead to an agreement to provide more realistic information for people buying broadband, which came into effect on [1 March](#). This will make it easier for customers to understand what they get before they buy and terminate the contract if they don't receive the speeds they were promised.
- Further activity in March saw the Panel delivering presentations on its [Still Going Round in Circles](#) research at meetings of Ofcom's Advisory Committees for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, concluding with a stakeholder event in Edinburgh to discuss solutions to the issues raised in the research.
- We were pleased to see [Ofcom acting to cap](#) the maximum cost of 118 services at £3.65. While we believe the cap should have been lower, we see this as a step in the right direction to protect consumers. The steep rise in the cost of directory enquiry services and the lack of transparency about the costs, had been of concern to the Panel. We believe that it is vital that these services are affordable to the millions of people in the UK who rely on them, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances or people who don't have access to the internet.
- Ofcom published third annual [Comparing Service Quality Report](#) which compares service levels in the telecoms sector. The Panel Chair commented that although the report shows a good level of customer satisfaction, there are still many areas that require a significant level of improvement and providers should work to achieve higher standards. The full news article and suggestions can be found [here](#).

Our consultation responses

Response to DCMS' consultation on the Statement of Strategy Priorities for telecommunications, the management of radio spectrum and postal services

DCMS have an ambition for the UK to have world class digital infrastructure and to become a world leader in 5G. This is fully supported by the Panel. We've suggested that it would be helpful to provide definitions of aspirations to ensure that we can clearly assess progress and measure success.

Further points we made in response to the consultation included:

- Our support of the 'outside-in' approach suggested by government, and our suggestion that national roaming is included so a wider range of consumers can benefit.
- The Panel would like to see a culture of fairness embedded into all CP policies. This would be underpinned by an understanding of the type of situations that can make it more difficult for consumers to navigate and use services in the communications sector.
- A clearer definition of vulnerability needs to be used across the sector and flow through to CP's vulnerability policies - including a recognition that consumers may move in and out of periods of vulnerability based on their circumstances.
- We have urged DCMS and Ofcom to push for a commitment by CP's to invest in making communications services easier to use, fair and affordable, for all consumers.
- Industry and Ofcom need to work together to secure the long-term sustainability of postal services, but we also urge closer attention to the needs of today's postal services users. [Our full response is here](#)

Response to Ofcom's consultation on the Award of the 700 MHz and 3.6-3.8 GHz spectrum bands

We have encouraged Ofcom to use the opportunity that this spectrum award brings to require that increased mobile coverage is brought to harder to reach communities as a matter of priority. In addition to this, we believe that no provider should have control over spectrum without using it to improve consumers' and micro businesses' experiences. The Panel believes that market intervention is required beyond setting coverage obligations on the winners of spectrum auctions and we have continued to recommend that national roaming be implemented to fulfil this role. The auction winners should provide a service that is reliable for consumers and businesses to use, resilient from attack

offer easy access to recourse for consumers and micro businesses in instances where their services fail to provide as promised. [Our full response is here](#)

Response to Ofcom's consultation on the Annual Plan 2019/20

Ofcom's principal duty - "to further the interests of citizens in relation to communications matters and to further the interests of consumers in relevant markets, where appropriate by promoting competition" - is perhaps more important than ever given people's increasing reliance on communication services.

In our view Ofcom's draft plan is clear and consumer focussed. Although we welcome its clarity and broadly support it, we would like to see quicker and stronger action in some areas. In particular we:

- welcome Ofcom's commitment to universal coverage and fairness to consumers;
- look forward to engaging with Ofcom to enable us to act on the plans we set out for strengthening the consumer voice, in our response to the BEIS Green Paper, 'Modernising Consumer Markets'.
- support Ofcom's engagement in UKRN and with stakeholders and governments across the UK, to ensure the protection of consumers - particularly people in more vulnerable circumstances - and we will continue to work with CPs to encourage them to understand and fulfil the needs of all their customers;
- welcome Ofcom's future-focus in terms of the risks of online harms and in ensuring the resilience of networks.
- urge Ofcom to move faster on pricing practices in respect of handset and airtime charging;
- urge a greater focus on Royal Mail quality of service performance against targets;
- urge Ofcom to continue to give nuisance calls a high priority;
- expect Ofcom to include the issue of non-co-terminus contracts in its pricing review;
- urge Ofcom to do all it can to bring about the mandatory promotion of the Priority Fault Repair Service by CPs. [Our full response is here](#)

Response to Ofcom's helping consumers to get better deals in communications markets: consultation on end-of-contract and annual best tariff notifications, and proposed scope for a review of pricing practices in fixed broadband

We encouraged Ofcom to consider all the consumer insight available through research and behavioural insights in this and other sectors to inform its consumer empowerment work. Our response was informed by a number of findings from our research '[Still Going Round in Circles](#)' published in 2018 and '[Digital Footprints](#)' (2016).

Our recommendations included;

- End of contract notifications should be sent within a reasonable timeframe to allow consumers to act. These should include details of the services that the CP is providing, and other contracts held with the provider. Further information should include how to terminate the contract and any charges that could be incurred.
- All notifications should be in clear and easy to understand language that is not annexed or formatted in a way that might be easy to overlook.
- CP's should avoid language that is too legalistic or unclear to customers. They should also provide information on how to follow up with questions and avoid marketing pitches.
- CP's should issue notifications in formats that are accessible to all customers - including people with additional communication support needs. All of these should offer contact options that are available in number of ways. This could be in the form of a standard paragraph offering alternative format versions and including a free phone number.

[Our full response is here](#)

Response to the Welsh Commissioner for Older People's consultation on making Wales the best place to grow older

The Panel has a representative of each UK Nation to represent the specific concerns and needs of people in that Nation. Our member for Wales is Karen Lewis.

Access to communications services

It can be difficult for older consumers to stay informed and make their voices heard if they cannot access communications services. Ofcom's [Connected Nations Report 2018](#) found that:

- Around 3% of premises in Wales cannot access a decent fixed broadband service that delivers a download speed of at least 10Mbit/s and upload speed of at least 1Mbit/s.
- 93% of homes and businesses in Wales are in areas where superfast, or better, broadband is available, but only 38% of homes are using these services. This is the lowest level of superfast broadband take-up in any of the UK nations - Northern Ireland 45%, England 44%, and Scotland 40%.
- Mobile coverage in Wales is gradually improving but too many parts of the country still struggle to get a good mobile connection. Ofcom defines an area as having good call coverage if nearly all voice calls complete without interruption and there is a data connection speed of at least 2Mbit/s. 10% of Wales' landmass has no good 4G coverage from any operator. This has improved from 22% a year ago but rural areas are still badly affected.

We encouraged the Commissioner to press for more extensive, high quality mobile and broadband coverage across Wales in order to help older consumers to stay connected and to access the services that they need.

Another important facet of helping older consumers to stay informed is making sure that communications providers are proactive in assisting consumers who have additional access needs (such as requiring bills etc printed in large type) or who are in vulnerable circumstances.

Digital inclusion/including older people who are not online

The latest National Survey for Wales (2017/18) shows that older people make up the largest segment of people who are not online in Wales. While initiatives are in place to tackle this exclusion, such as the Digital Companions scheme¹, delivered by Digital Communities Wales, with 75% of digitally excluded people being over 75 and only half of single pensioner households (51%) having access to the internet, we see this as an area that the Commissioner should focus on particularly.

[Our full response is here](#)

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This is the bulletin of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD. Established by the Communications Act 2003, the Panel consists of eight experts who carry out research, provide advice and encourage Ofcom, Government, the EU, industry and others to look at communications issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses. The bulletin is an update on the Panel and ACOD's activities and developments in the sector.

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