Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD response to DCMS' call for evidence on Extending Full Fibre Networks

The Communications Consumer Panel (the Panel) and the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People (ACOD) welcome the opportunity to contribute to DCMS' call for evidence on Extending Full Fibre Networks.

The Panel works to protect and promote people's interests in the communications sector, including the postal sector. We are an independent statutory body set up under the Communications Act 2003. The Panel carries out research, provides advice and encourages Ofcom, governments, the EU, industry and others to look at issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and micro businesses.

The Panel pays particular attention to the needs of older people and people with disabilities, the needs of people in rural areas and people on low incomes, and the needs of micro businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers.

Four members of the Panel also represent the interests of consumers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively. They liaise with the key stakeholders in the Nations to understand the perspectives of consumers in all parts of the UK and input these perspectives to the Panel's consideration of issues. Following the alignment of ACOD with the Panel, the Panel is more alert than ever to the interests of older and disabled consumers and citizens.

Response

Our response focuses on the needs of consumers and citizens who are network users, or potential 'would-be' network users, particularly those who are in vulnerable circumstances and including micro businesses.

We welcome DCMS' attention to improving the networks for all users and would-be users. People may not be online for a variety of reasons, including poor broadband availability, affordability, or a lack of access to basic digital skills training. There is still also a gap in basic digital skills, with more than 10 million of the adult population in England alone lacking basic digital skills[1]. We await further details of government funding of basic digital skills training.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-plans-to-make-the-uk-one-of-the-most-digitally-skilled-nations

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Superfast speeds

We note the focus in the call for evidence document, on "superfast" speeds, which DCMS defines as "broadband speeds of at least 24 Megabits per second (Mbps)" whereas Ofcom's definition is "broadband speeds of at least 30 Mbps" [2]. In order to improve the broadband landscape for consumers, it is vital that Government, regulators and industry are clear and consistent in their communication.

It is also essential that the 1.4 million UK homes and offices (5% of properties) currently unable to sign up for broadband speeds of 10Mbps or more - the speed Ofcom has calculated is required to meet a typical household's digital needs – are not left behind.

Ofcom's Connected Nations Report 2016[3] notes that while 89% of households have access to Ofcom's definition of superfast broadband, only 31% of households have taken it up. So, as well as cutting edge infrastructure and investment in providing access to superfast speeds, there remains a need to focus on closing existing gaps in basic availability and to encourage take-up. Government and communications providers still need to invest in this.

We support full fibre as a long term solution, but agree that other technologies that offer equivalent reliability and speeds should not be ruled out if they are capable of extending broadband reach.

Micro businesses

In 2016, there were 5.5 million businesses in the UK[4]. Over 99% of those were small or sized enterprises (SMEs), employing 0-249 people and 3 million (96%) businesses were micro-businesses, employing 0-9 people. We believe that supporting micro businesses is critical to UK employment and prosperity; in 2016, these businesses accounted for 32% of employment and 19% of turnover.

Ofcom's research[5] shows that while superfast broadband speeds are available to 80% of SMEs, these speeds are not reaching the 15% of all UK SMEs which operate from business parks, of which 36% do not have access to superfast speeds and 11% have speeds of less than 10Mbps. We would welcome an easy-to-use scheme that promoted the ability of businesses to creatively aggregate vouchers to support their needs.

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[2] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/infrastructure-research/connected-nations-2016
[3] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/infrastructure-research/connected-nations-2016
[4] http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06152#fullreport
[5] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/infrastructure-research/connected-nations-2016

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We look forward to seeing the detail of how local areas will be able to access new funding - hopefully this can be as straightforward and time efficient as possible.

We support the reforms to the Electronic Communication Code, aimed at extending legislation removing planning barriers.

5G and consumers

We are yet to a see a clear definition of exactly what 5G is and how it will benefit consumers, but would advise that at least equal focus should be placed on a good service being available to everybody, now.

Summary

- ➢ Consumers should be at the heart of any desired outcomes:
    - It is vital that Government consider all the evidence available concerning consumers' and micro businesses' needs, beyond superfast speeds;
    - Universal availability of 10 Mbps should be a more urgent goal than very high speeds for a few; consumers need good speeds and reliable services, quickly;
- ➢ The needs of micro businesses should be considered alongside other consumer groups, as micro businesses face similar barriers as domestic consumers and may also be facing the challenges of operating from business parks;
- ➢ Support for digital participation and basic digital skills needs to go hand-in-hand with technology developments;
- ➢ We support full fibre as a long term solution, but agree that other technologies that offer equivalent reliability and speeds should not be ruled out if they are capable of extending broadband reach;
- ➢ As well as public funding, to cover market failures, companies should continue to be encouraged to invest in and support broadband deployment;
- ➢ We look forward to seeing the detail of how local areas will be able to access new funding - hopefully this can be as straightforward and time-efficient as possible;
- ➢ We support the reforms to the Electronic Communication Code, aimed at extending the legislation removing planning barriers; as much as possible should be done to enable the use of currently unemployed duct networks - including BT's.

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