

**Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel (CCP) and
Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People (ACOD)**

14 May 2026, 9:00 - 15:00

Meeting held in hybrid format in the Ofcom Belfast Office and via Microsoft Teams

Present

CCP/ACOD (The Panel)

Rachel Burr (Member for Wales)

Judith Clifton

Lenna Cumberbatch

Grant Davis

Michelle Goddard

Robert Hammond (Member for England)

Rhian Johns (apologies for part of item 9)

Carrie Matchett (Member for Northern Ireland)

Sarah O'Neill (Member for Scotland)

David Warburton-Broadhurst

Michael Wardlow

Apologies

Helen Froud (Chair)

UK Regulators Network's 'Next Generation Non-Executive Directors' scheme member ('Next Gen NED')

In attendance

The Panel's Executive Team (items 1 to 11)

Ofcom's Director for Northern Ireland (items 7 to 11)

Representatives of the Ofcom Northern Ireland Policy team (items 7 to 11)

Representatives of the Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland (items 7 to 11)

Representatives of the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (items 7 to 11)

Representative of Advice NI (item 9)

Representative of Digital Assist/Business in the Community NI (item 9)

Item
<p>Welcome and introduction</p> <p>1.1 In the absence of the Panel Chair, for compassionate reasons, the Panel agreed that the Member for Northern Ireland would chair the meeting. The Member for Northern Ireland</p>



welcomed Members to the meeting.

1.2 The Member for Northern Ireland expressed the Panel's support for the Panel Chair during this difficult time.

2. Declarations of Members' interests

2.1 Member Rhian Johns declared joining the Independent Challenge Group for Anglian Water, with immediate effect.

2.2 Member Professor Judith Clifton declared that she had discovered since the last meeting that a member of her extended family had become an operational postal delivery worker in Scotland.

3. Minutes of the meeting on 16 April 2026 and matters arising

3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 16 April 2026 were **APPROVED** as a true and accurate reflection of the meeting with minor amendments.

3.2 A Panel Member in academia would use their expertise to identify key academics and work they are undertaking in AI and Online Safety, to build partnerships to enhance the Panel's impact in protecting and empowering consumers and citizens. The Exec team would support this work as required.

3.3 Panel Members raised concerns about the level of 2G/3G switch-off project data provided at the April meeting and suggested compiling a list of questions for the Ofcom team to address.

3.4 The Panel had been pleased to receive demographic data on citizens affected by the negative impacts of media use, further to Ofcom's presentation to the Panel in April on *Adults' Media Lives* and *Adults' Media Use and Activities* research. However, the Panel discussed the importance of that further data being used by Ofcom to understand disproportionate and hidden harms to sub-sets of consumers and citizens. The Panel would incorporate their learning into their advice to Ofcom, seeking to join the dots between Ofcom's Online Safety and Media Literacy projects where needed to ensure knowledge informs impact.

3.5 The Panel suggested topics for future agenda items, including the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) switch-off and a combined focus on Media Literacy and Online Safety to help connect the issues and better identify potential harms.

4. Chair's Update

4.1 Panel Members discussed the Panel's recent activity and stakeholder engagement across the UK since the last meeting held on 16 April.

4.2 Panel Members expressed concerns about the lack of competition between providers in rural areas, noting continuing closure of AltNets as a risk to consumer choice, service and affordability.

5. Consumer Policy update

5.1 Panel Members discussed consumer impacts and key priority areas and agreed that they had concerns regarding:



- i) Scams - Members look forward to receiving an update and queried how scams are impacting certain groups of consumers, as identified within Ofcom's media literacy data (referred to in 3.4 of these minutes).
- ii) Post - The Panel looks forward to receiving an update from the Royal Mail Stakeholder Forum, as a clash of dates had meant that it could not be represented.
- iii) The Panel discussed Royal Mail's proposals to apply new investment into improving customer service and the consequences on Ofcom's enforcement choices.
- iv) The Panel reflected upon the importance of trust in Royal Mail's Quality of Service in delivering access to democracy through prompt delivery of postal votes. A Panel Member shared details of a London constituency where this trust had failed, causing workarounds in processes and harm to citizens by delaying their papers. This would be shared with the Ofcom policy team.
- v) Migration to Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) - The Panel remains deeply concerned about the process of identifying 'vulnerable' consumers (consumers reliant on a landline) before the end of January 2027 and a Panel Member urged that no-one should be left without access to a reliable landline service, particularly where mobile connectivity is not a reliable substitute. During the Chair's compassionate leave, a Panel Member would compose a list of remaining questions to share with Ofcom once the Chair returned.
- vi) In-contract price rises - Panel Members discussed the importance of Ofcom engaging with the Panel ahead of its review of the in-contract price rise rules, to ensure the Panel understands Ofcom's early proposals, can help promote fairness, and provide the consumer perspective before any decisions are made.
- vii) Communications Infrastructure - Members questioned whether communications providers should operate a year-round (365-day) service, in line with energy providers, to ensure critical infrastructure is maintained and that consumers, citizens and microbusinesses receive reliable connectivity. The Panel discussed differences in the use of the term 'service' noting a nuance between employees being available to provide support and AI systems potentially being used to identify and resolve faults, for example during public holidays.

6. Any Other Business

6.1 There was no other business.

7. Chair and Member for Northern Ireland Welcome

7.1 The Panel Member for Northern Ireland, and Chair of the meeting, welcomed Panel Members and guests which included Members of Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland and Ofcom Northern Ireland policy team colleagues. The Chair extended her gratitude to the Ofcom's Director for Northern Ireland and his team for a warm welcome to the Panel's first visit to Northern Ireland.



8. The Consumer Landscape and Communications Policy in Northern Ireland

- 8.1 The Chair welcomed four representatives of the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI). CCNI provided an overview of their remit and responsibilities and outlined specific challenges for consumers, citizens and small businesses, living and working in Northern Ireland, in terms of cost of living and access to services, from post to digital connectivity. They placed an emphasis on the robustness of their research in informing their policy, strengthening collaboration with the Panel and increased engagement with Northern Ireland (NI) consumers. They went on to outline current and future research projects, notably in digital communications and the affordability of post, which are particularly pertinent to the Panel's work. All attendees recognised the importance of continued relationship-building and shared learning.
- 8.2 Panel Members learned about the uniqueness of Northern Ireland as a Nation, including key structural and geographic challenges, in addition to the affordability pressures and increased reliance on essential communications services.
- 8.3 The Panel noted that Northern Ireland's population is highly dispersed, creating distinct infrastructure challenges compared to the rest of the UK. Members discussed the difficulty of achieving 95% communications coverage in this context, and raised questions regarding the potential role of satellite solutions in addressing the final 5% of coverage. The Panel also noted concerns that areas with the poorest connectivity may coincide with lower-income households.
- 8.4 The Panel noted that rurality and financial inclusion are key issues influencing access to communications services in Northern Ireland. Members raised questions about whether household expenditure data fully reflects telecoms costs, including broadband and mobile services. The Panel expressed concern about evidence of declining awareness of social tariffs among eligible consumers. Members further noted that the requirement for consumers to self-declare eligibility may limit uptake and reduce the effectiveness of these schemes.
- 8.5 The Panel observed that switching rates between providers appear to be low, and noted that this may reflect limited consumer awareness or insufficient communication from providers. Members raised concerns regarding levels of trust in communications providers, the wider industry, and government. The Panel emphasised the importance of improving communication and transparency to support informed consumer choice.
- 8.6 The Panel discussed concerns regarding the potential reform or removal of the safeguard price cap on second class letters. Members noted that replacing the price cap with a benefits-based discount scheme may not adequately protect consumers if prices continue to rise. Members raised questions about the extent to which Northern Ireland stakeholders have been engaged on future postal investment priorities.
- 8.7 The Panel considered the implications of the 2G/3G network switch-off, particularly for rural and vulnerable consumers, and raised questions about the reliability and quality of Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services. The Panel noted that 2G/3G signals currently provide better indoor coverage than 4G and 5G, and expressed concern that connectivity may worsen as a result of the transition. Rural broadband performance, including the need for data on fault rates and trends, were also raised as concerns for the Panel.



- 8.8 The Panel noted that Northern Ireland's geographic and constitutional position, with both a land border with the Republic of Ireland and a trade border with Great Britain, creates unique challenges and opportunities. Members were interested in the extent to which consumers in border areas accessed services from both Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland providers. Similarities between Northern Ireland and Scotland were identified by the Panel, and potential discussion for collaborative approaches were discussed. Members also relayed concerns that Northern Ireland may be falling behind in terms of government funding in digital development.
- 8.9 Panel Members noted that Northern Ireland has higher levels of disability and population ageing compared with other parts of the UK, noting also significantly rising levels of special educational needs and neurodiversity amongst children. Members discussed how these factors may increase reliance on postal services and heighten the risk of digital exclusion, and raised concerns regarding the accessibility and inclusiveness of communications services and digital platforms.
- 8.10 The Panel expressed concerns that digital public services in devolved nations, including Northern Ireland, may be lagging behind other parts of the UK. Members discussed the potential impact on accessibility and service quality, particularly in areas such as healthcare, and highlighted the need for improved infrastructure and more inclusive design of digital services.
- 8.11 The Panel raised questions regarding the prevalence and nature of scams affecting consumers in Northern Ireland, and noted the need for further research to better understand scam-related harms and inform appropriate responses.
- 8.12 On behalf of the Panel, the Northern Ireland Member thanked representatives from CCNI for a highly informative presentation and discussion. The Panel will be very interested in CCNI's research on digital communications and the affordability of postal services when they are published.

9. Digital Participation in Northern Ireland

- 9.1 Panel Members welcomed contributions from Advice NI and Digital Assist (Business in the Community), who both provided an overview of their work to support digital participation and inclusion across Northern Ireland.
- 9.2 The Panel noted that Advice NI supports individuals in accessing their rights and entitlements, with digital exclusion increasingly acting as a barrier to doing so. Members noted that there is a shift towards 'digital only' services rather than 'digital first', which risks excluding consumers in vulnerable situations, and recognised that digital exclusion often exists alongside broader inequalities, which compounds challenges for affected individuals.
- 9.3 Panel Members noted that the impact of digital issues on young people is often underestimated and that schools are seeking to keep children safe online. Members highlighted that young people are willing to engage but are not always equipped with the knowledge or tools to do so safely. They noted that digital skills can be strong in some areas and much more limited in others, for example where young people may be confident in social media tools but less prepared for digital banking, protection from scams and other key areas of adult life and citizenship online. The Panel noted that



Advice NI is undertaking ongoing evaluation and research, including work with older people and migrant communities, and identified that digital literacy encompasses accessibility, affordability, skills and trust.

- 9.4 The Panel further noted that community-based approaches are central to improving digital inclusion, including training older people and migrants to become digital champions for their communities. Members learned that insights from digital champions are valuable in shaping programme delivery and identifying emerging issues, such as a demand to understand more about scams and AI.
- 9.5 Panel Members noted that digital champions delivering training to their communities had identified concerns around online safety, particularly among parents and carers of children with additional educational needs. Members discussed the need to better equip individuals with the skills to use digital services safely and noted that young people are using digital services extensively but are not always adequately supported to navigate risks such as online interactions and excessive screen time.
- 9.6 Members noted that the closure of bank branches in Northern Ireland over the past five years has had a significant impact to consumers, particularly in rural areas. Members heard that this has increased reliance on digital services and the need for support in using digital tools, such as banking apps.
- 9.7 Panel Members highlighted that digital exclusion is closely linked to wider issues of poverty and inequality and raised concerns that poverty is not a protected characteristic, despite its significant impact on individuals' ability to access digital services. The Panel discussed the need for more proactive approaches to inclusion, particularly for vulnerable groups, including those with neurodiverse conditions.
- 9.8 Concerns were noted by the Panel regarding lack of access to devices among children and young people, noting that expectations of access to devices and data could be set very high. Members observed that limited access to technology can negatively affect life chances and future opportunities. Comparisons were made with Scotland, where initiatives provide devices such as iPads to school children. The Panel discussed the importance of ensuring equitable access to devices and connectivity.
- 9.9 Members noted that authentication processes can make digital services more complex and less accessible for some users and raised questions about how businesses can design more inclusive and user-friendly systems. The Panel emphasised the importance of co-design approaches to ensure services reflect the needs of diverse users.
- 9.10 The Panel discussed concerns relating to financial vulnerability, including the affordability of devices and data. Members noted that individuals experiencing domestic abuse may be particularly vulnerable to financial control, affecting their access to digital services, and highlighted the need to consider both device access and ongoing connectivity costs.
- 9.11 Panel Members noted that funding decisions play a critical role in shaping digital inclusion outcomes within education and discussed how resources are prioritised and the potential long-term benefits of investing in digital inclusion for sectors such as healthcare.
- 9.12 The Panel considered the need to better understand and measure the long-term impacts of digital exclusion. Members raised the potential value of frameworks such as



minimum digital living standards (MDLS) to capture these impacts and noted that there is currently limited evidence on the scale of future, and potentially life-long, detriment to consumers, citizens and micro-businesses.

9.13 Panel Members highlighted the importance of embedding digital inclusion within local communities and developing coordinated approaches. Members discussed initiatives such as the [Connection Project](#), which aims to build an inclusive roadmap to a fully digital UK, and emphasised the need for collaboration across organisations, the sharing of research, and engagement with a broader range of stakeholders.

9.14 Members agreed that research and insights should be shared across all participating organisations and recommended engaging with additional stakeholders to broaden collaboration and inform future work. They would be particularly interested to read Digital Assist's latest research on digital inclusion in due course.

9.15 On behalf of the Panel, the Northern Ireland Member thanked the representatives from Advice NI and Digital Assist, for a highly informative discussion.

10. Thoughts from the day

10.1 Panel Members and participants reflected on the discussions from the meeting and highlighted that digital and communications challenges in Northern Ireland are deeply interconnected, with rurality, affordability and vulnerability consistently shaping consumer experiences. There was a strong sense that digital exclusion is no longer a standalone issue, but one that intersects with wider inequalities, including income, disability and access to services, and is increasingly exacerbated by a shift towards 'digital-only' systems. Participants emphasised the importance of community-led approaches, improved consumer awareness, and more inclusive service design, particularly for those most at risk of being left behind. Concerns around infrastructure gaps, affordability pressures, declining trust, and the pace of technological change—such as the transition away from legacy networks—reinforced the need for coordinated action, better evidence, and stronger collaboration across policy, industry and community stakeholders to ensure no consumers are disadvantaged in an increasing digital society.

11. Chair's Close

11.1 The Member for Northern Ireland reiterated thanks to the Panel's guests for stimulating discussions which provided a great deal of rich information for Members to reflect on. Appreciation was extended to ACNI for joining the meeting and for their valuable input and insights. The Ofcom Northern Ireland team was also thanked for their informed perspectives and contributions as well as hosting the day and providing invaluable support.

11.2 Panel Members expressed their appreciation for the meaningful engagement during the day, which enhanced their understanding of the communications issues affecting consumers, citizens and microbusinesses in Northern Ireland.