Communications Consumer Panel

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 15 February 2024 at 10.30 am

Meeting held in hybrid format at Riverside House and via Microsoft Teams

Present
Consumer Panel/ACOD
Rick Hill (Chair)
Kay Allen
Amanda Britain
Rachel Burr
Judith Clifton
Lenna Cumberbatch
Helen Froud
Michelle Goddard
Robert Hammond
Richard Spencer
Michael Wardlow

Apologies
None

In attendance
The Panel's Executive Team
Ofcom colleagues

Item
1. Welcome and introduction   1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting.
2. Declarations of Members' interests   2.1 There were no new declarations of interest.
3. Minutes of the meeting on 17 January 2024 and matters arising   3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 17 January 2024 were **APPROVED** following minor amendment.

4. Chair's update

4.1 The Chair and National Members provided an overview of the Panel's recent activity and stakeholder engagement across the UK.

4.2 The Panel continued to highlight grave concerns on the lack of clear messaging and support within the VoIP transition and suggested more should be done to identify and ensure consumers, who have already migrated, have access to the services they require. A meeting has been arranged between the Chair, Executive Director and Lord Grade.

4.3 The Panel remain concerned with the assurances and commitments given by Communications Providers (CPs) on the cessation of non-voluntary migrations encapsulating consumers who have not used their landline service within the last 12 months. The Panel believe these consumers could potentially be the most isolated individuals/households within the UK. CPs are unaware of how many people this could affect. The Panel look to further understand consumer awareness of the migration to VoIP by completing a third wave of research, which follows previous research completed in 2023 ([listening to the needs of landline consumers](#).)

4.4 The Panel believe CPs need to collaborate on a consistent way to identify consumers who need extra assistance, as currently CPs do not hold a shared definition of what constitutes a 'vulnerable' consumer.

4.5 The Panel are keen to continue to highlight the interconnecting risks faced by consumers who suffer a multitude of communications services complications, such as the reliability of mobile networks, 2G/3G switch off, fixed broadband and postal services, and feel it is a governmental duty to ensure consumers and citizens are protected.

5. Consumer Policy update

5.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom's consumer policy team on its key consumer priority areas.

5.2 The Panel was pleased that Ofcom has reviewed its approach to Alternative Dispute Regulation, however, remain disappointed with the findings around signposting to ADR schemes on CPs websites. In addition, the Panel reiterated the need for an ADR scheme within the Online Safety regime.

5.3 The Panel continue to raise further concerns with the delay to One-Touch Switching. CPs had missed the published deadline and no further deadline had been published. The Panel raised concerns about transparency and fairness for consumers and requested an update from the One-Touch Switching scheme on the actions taken by Ofcom to remedy the situation.

5.4 The Panel continue to stress the need for a National Campaign to raise consumer awareness of the migration to VoIP, not only to address the needs of telecare alarm users, but to highlight the consumers who rely on a

landline service to contact people in an emergency. Recent figures of consumers left without power after Storm Isha highlighted a potential risk to life if consumers were unable to contact emergency services, relatives or community helpers if their landline or battery backup failed.

5.5 The requesting highlighted the risk to telecare users in expecting them to check their device, which is an unacceptable burden and danger to consumers who are more at risk. The Panel has advised that better communications and assistance is required by CPs and telecare providers to minimise the potential risk to life.

5.6 The Panel remain disappointed and frustrated with the continued delay of the Shared Rural Network as some providers are yet to meet targets. The Panel requested an update on Ofcom's strategy to connect consumers in remote or difficult to reach areas, and encouraged Ofcom to keep to their aim of ensuring everyone is connected regardless of their geographical location.

5.7 The Panel questioned the lack of consumer information provided on improving broadband connectivity, especially in respect of consumers living in rural areas where copper lines are degrading causing the unreliability of a landline or broadband service and reside within a weak mobile signal area. The Panel had contributed to Ofcom's consultation on improving broadband information (in terms of language around types of technology used). However, the Panel would like to know from Ofcom whether there are any plans to improve consumer information on the process of getting connected – particularly in rural areas, where there is a less competitive market and a reliance on smaller providers.

5.8 The Panel relayed concerns on the lack of interconnection between networks and would urge the National Infrastucture Commission to advise Government on how critical infrastructure fits together. The Panel believes that all UK individuals should be able to receive a reliable, affordable connection that keeps up with consumer demands.

5.9 Mobile 2G/3G switch off remains a constant concern to the Panel especially within rural and remote locations where 3G is switched off, and no other providers are available and/or consumers do not have access to a 4G enabled device.

6. **Public Policy Update on the Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum's (DRCF's) activity, including plans for the AI & Digital Hub**

6.1 The Panel welcomed representatives from DRCF and an update from Ofcom on the development of the DRCF Workplan 2024/2025 alongside an annual report on the DRCF's work during 2023/2024.

6.2 The Panel were pleased to see the outputs of the forthcoming DRCF workplan which aided in providing a perspective for the forthcoming year and also suggesting providing a reflection on past achievments.

6.3 The Panel re-emphasised the importance of both inclusion and diversity and to ensure practises are implemented correctly and a process is embedded to measure both diversity and inclusion.

6.4 The Panel raised concerns in relation to the use of AI, how it detects consumer characteristics and to ensure genuine AI is being developed by putting human beings and human preferences at its heart.

6.5 The Panel and DRCF discussed continuing collaboration to ensure consumers' interests are kept to the forefront of industry's and governments' agendas.

7. Device Information update

7.1 The Panel received information from Ofcom on the range of technical abilities that exist which allow companies running apps or websites to access data from a device and use it for their own purposes and how consumers can make themselves aware of these.

7.2 The Panel asked questions around devices listening to conversations, the process of subscribing/unsubscribing and spam emails, and how citizens and consumers can remain relatively safe in an electronic environment.

7.3 Concerns were raised by the Panel in respect of companies harvesting data when consumers are unaware, what is being done to protect consumers and which regulator has the authority to act.

8. Audience Experiences of Access Services

8.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on its review of accessibility best practise guidelines which provide advice to broadcasters on the quality of their subtitling, audio description and signing.

8.2 The Panel were encouraged with the work being undertaken by Ofcom and were pleased to learn the guidelines would be made a public resource and signpost providers to their use.

8.3 The Panel asked Ofcom for information on the numbers of respondents who used British Sign Language (BSL) as their first language and English as their second, and respondents who were born hearing and had learnt BSL at a later point in their lives.

8.4 The Panel felt the reported conclusions appeared to emulate results from 20 years ago and urged Ofcom to use the research to facilitate advancements within industry to support consumer needs.

8.5 Diversity and inclusivity were noted by the Panel as one of the key changes to the guidelines, and questioned how broadcasters would be encouraged to include additional elements of audio description, BSL or subtitles, especially for consumers wishing to watch programmes at the time of broadcast rather than at other times of the day/night.

8.6 The Panel queried if Ofcom had considered implementing a provision to rate providers against the accessibility best practises to encourage healthy transparent competition.

9. Public Policy Update

9.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on the key public policy developments since their previous update in October 2023.

9.2 The Panel questioned the rise in mobile coverage in Scotland and whether the figures were in line with expectations and how they compared with the rest of the UK.

9.3 The industry fees regime response timeline in connection to the online safety regulation was queried by the Panel and an update at a later meeting would be welcomed.

9.4 The Panel requested information on who had taken over as Rural Connectivity Champion, noting that the Champion they had engaged with had now been appointed as the Prime Minister's new Anti-Fraud Champion.

9.5 The Panel reiterated concerns on the timelines for setting up the alternative dispute resolutions (ADR) in the Online Safety Act (OSA) 2023.

9.6 The Panel welcomed the collaboration of mobile network operators (MNOs) and UK Government on refining their approach to the planning process and emphasis of the benefits associated with mast sites, however, advised that further engagement of local communities should be encouraged to establish the best use of funds, use of facilities and collaboration in preventing loss of landscape.

10. Power Resilience of the Mobile Network

10.1 The Panel received information on Ofcom's resilience guidance and call for input on mobile power resilience.

10.2 Serious concerns were relayed by the Panel on the need to improve power resilience to protect citizens. This was especially highlighted by the recent storm (Isha) where over 100,000 people suffered a power outage across Scotland, Northern Ireland and north-west England, and around 89,000 people still had no power after 48 hours. The Panel advised that key lessons needed to be learned on the needs of rural consumers especially with the regular maintenance and testing thereof of backup generators and batteries which underpin communications services to avoid neighbourhoods, including island communities facing power outages.

10.3 The Panel urged Ofcom to consider how to motivate industry to rectify outage issues more quickly and efficiently, and how best to inform and enable consumers to ensure provisions are put in place for a power failure.

11. CCP/ACOD Strategy/Plan of Work Session

11.1 The Panel discussed topics of interest and focus for their forthcoming strategy and plan of work for 2024/2025.

12. AOB

12.1 There was no other business.