

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 20 July 2023 at 10.30 am

Meeting held via Microsoft Teams

Present

Consumer Panel/ACOD

Rick Hill (Chair)

Kay Allen

Amanda Britain

Helen Froud

Michael Wardlow

Richard Williams

Apologies

Richard Spencer

In attendance

The Panel's Executive Team

Ofcom colleagues

Representatives of Jigsaw (item 9)

Item
1. Welcome and introduction 1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting. 1.2 Approval had been received from DSIT for four new Panel members and for Rick Hill and Amanda Britain to extend their terms for an additional nine months.
2. Declarations of Members' interests 2.1 There were no new declarations of interest.
3. Minutes of the meeting on 19 June 2023 and matters arising 3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 19 June 2023 were APPROVED .



3.2 The Panel remains concerned about whether prices quoted in end of contract notifications really do represent the best price a CP can offer. It was noted that with negotiation consumers can reduce the price further but that this was detrimental to those customers who could not negotiate - for whatever reason.

4. Chair's update

4.1 The Chair provided an overview of the Panel's recent activities. The Panel's National Members also provided updates on recent activity and stakeholder engagement across each of the UK Nations.

4.2 Letters highlighting the Panel's concerns about VoIP and its recent research into VoIP and rural connectivity had been sent to 45 relevant Government Ministers, Parliamentarians, and members of the devolved nations. The team would circulate the list of recipients.

4.3 The Panel requested further letters be sent to the Local Government Associations providing them with the information and recommendations of the migration to VoIP and rural experience research.

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 A verbal report was provided to the Panel concerning the recent emergency services outage which resulted in the launch of two investigations, one via Ofcom and the other via DSIT.

5.3 A consultation on mobile roaming alert protections for UK consumers had been launched by Ofcom - the Panel looked forward to receiving an update in due course.

5.4 The Panel was concerned that the effect of increasing inflation on mid contract price rises had not been given more focus during the long period of low inflation.

5.5 The Panel noted Ofcom's work concerning the social tariffs offered by providers and the continued work planned and monitoring of CPs within this area.

5.6 The Panel was particularly concerned about the risk of consumers in vulnerable financial circumstances disappearing from view without being offered the



support they need. Ofcom will continue to work with CPs to help them engage more with customers facing disconnection.

5.7 Scams are becoming fast moving and more sophisticated and the Panel noted the current limits on regulation and enforcement. The Panel note that Ofcom will continue to work with CPs on protecting consumers against scams such as blocking spoof numbers from calls originated from overseas callers.

5.8 The Panel remains concerned with the number of mobile 'not spots' and the delayed SRN timeline and was keen to receive an update from Ofcom.

5.9 Ofcom's proposals in relation to Royal Mail's 2nd class price caps remain a concern for the Panel as it doubts this will produce the best result for consumers.

6. Personal Communications Services Project

6.1 Ofcom provided information on its work on online communications services (OCS) such as messaging apps that work over the internet rather than via mobile or fixed line networks. Data suggested a significant shift from SMS towards online messaging.

6.2 The Panel noted the relatively small number of providers in the market. The Panel emphasised that inclusive design should be of paramount importance for designers when launching or updating a product, alongside protection of minors.

7. Online Content Gateways Update

7.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on online content gateways such as smart speakers, voice assistants and connected TVs.

7.2 The Panel stressed that the accessibility and usability of digital devices such as smart speakers and smart TVs using voice assistance is vital. Individuals with cognitive impairments or those who require additional assistance may find it difficult to use such services due to their design, in addition to cost and a lack of choice in the marketplace.

Consumer Protection and Compliance Monitoring programme (CPMC) Update

8.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's compliance monitoring programmes with CPs.



- 8.2 The Panel believe it is important that CPs publish information about the right of exit terms in their standard contract summaries to help consumers better understand these processes.
- 8.3 The Panel is concerned by information about complaint cases not progressing within CPs' systems and consumers not able to complete the journey towards ADR - especially relevant for those who have additional access requirements or those less confident in making complaints.
- 8.4 The current ADR timeframe remains 8 weeks which the Panel considers is too long. A 4-week period would be more appropriate. The Panel encouraged Ofcom to widen its data collection approach and ask CPs for data which really reflected the harms experienced and impact on consumers.

9. Jigsaw Research Updates - Social Tariff Research Update and Young Consumers Navigating the Communications Market Summary of Findings

- 9.1 The Panel received an update from Jigsaw on the social tariff research it had commissioned. Recruitment had been difficult. The majority of participants were found to have a social tariff on their broadband package rather than mobile.
- 9.2 Jigsaw also provided an update on the recent research undertaken on how young consumers navigate the communications market.
- 9.3 The Panel discussed the findings of both research studies and discussed its concern about the lack of awareness of social tariffs. It believed that CPs could do more to help those with a low income obtain the best outcome.
- 9.4 Due to the amount of information provided in both research report updates the Panel requested additional time for discussion in the next Panel Meeting.

10. Enforcement Update

- 10.1 An update on Ofcom's enforcement was provided to the Panel. The Panel noted that Ofcom had now closed its compliance monitoring programme to assess the availability of access to emergency services during power outages. As part of the programme, it obtained information from over 30 CPs to assess whether the requirements of General Conditions A3.2(b) - and its expectations set out in 2018 in the [consultation and guidance document \(PDF, 1003.8 KB\)](#) on protecting access to emergency organisations when there is a power cut at a customer's premises - were being met. From its research, and the information obtained from CPs, Ofcom was able to establish:



- How providers are communicating and ensuring that their customers understand the risk that VoIP services, without specific backup, will not work in the event of a power cut
- The resilience solutions offered by providers and how customers can request them
- How providers are identifying customers who are landline dependent and consequently at risk.

10.2 The programme had not identified any significant compliance concerns which Ofcom considered require formal investigation and the engagement had resulted in improvements being made to the measures CPs were taking to ensure they were compliant. Ofcom had also issued an [open letter \(PDF, 191.2 KB\)](#) to all CPs to remind them of their responsibilities and obligations under GCA3.2(b) and GCA3.3.

10.3 The Panel was disappointed that there had not been earlier discussion of this issue as its most [recent research](#) suggested that significant improvements were required to the process.

10.4 The team updated on delays to the implementation of the One-touch switching (OTS) process. The Panel was concerned by the delay and queried whether Ofcom should have taken action sooner. It encouraged Ofcom to be more proactive in ensuring this project was delivered as soon as possible.

11. AOB

11.1 The Chair paid tribute to a member of the Panel's Exec Team who was moving to another role. She had provided significant support to him, Panel members, the Nations' Hubs and many stakeholders within her role as a Panel and ACOD Coordinator. She was a very well-respected member of the Team who would be sorely missed.

11.2 A Panel member noted [Purple Tuesday](#) would take place on 7 November 2023.