

**Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD**

**on 23 March 2023 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

Clifford Harkness

Richard Spencer

Sian Phipps

Michael Wardlow

Richard Williams

Apologies

Helen Froud

In attendance

The Panel's Executive team

Representatives of the Phone-Paid Services Authority

Ofcom colleagues

Item
<b>1. Welcome and introduction</b>
1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting.
<b>2. Declarations of Members' interests</b>
2.1 There were no new declarations of interest.
<b>3. Minutes of the meeting on 23 February 2023 and matters arising</b>
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 23 February 2023 were <b>APPROVED</b> , subject to minor amendments.
3.2 The Panel discussed recent updates from Ofcom colleagues on migration to VoIP and asked for clarification on how Ofcom's migration to VoIP policy team was expanding its



understanding of consumers' experiences of migration to VoIP through social media monitoring. The Panel's Member for Scotland also commented that while there were lessons to be learned from the Scottish Local Digital Office's coordination role in the rollout of VoIP in Scotland, there was always room for improvement.

#### **4. Chair's update**

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

4.2 The Chair flagged concerns that the UK Government's plans to alert people to emergencies using mobile services was likely to exclude people using older 2G/3G handsets that were not compatible with the alert system and was engaging with the relevant Ofcom colleagues to further understand the consumer implications.

#### **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's Member for Wales highlighted ongoing work in the water sector to help address poverty and provide support to consumers who were struggling with their finances and mental health - and encouraged cross-learnings with other sectors.

5.3 Whilst discussing Ofcom's review of mid contract price rises, the Panel questioned the readability of CPs' terms and conditions and highlighted an example in the banking sector where an organisation assessed whether consumer information met the reading age of a nine-year-old and asked if Ofcom could take a similar approach. Ofcom colleagues advised that, as part of the review, they would consider best practice examples, including the reading age and clarity of information shared with consumers.

5.4 The Panel noted that Ofcom was exploring ways to systematically gather evidence from other organisations on the affordability issues facing consumers in the communications sector and were interested to hear how the work progressed.

5.5 Members asked for further information on the work Ofcom was doing to protect consumers in debt from disconnection.

5.6 Members asked for further information on Ofcom's next steps under its mobile coverage policy, particularly in relation to its plans to try and map where people go with mobile devices and were unable to access mobile coverage.

5.7 Members noted that some smaller providers in Openreach's VoIP trial areas were not engaging with Openreach and consequently Ofcom had taken steps to remind these CPs of



their obligations. The Chair thanked Ofcom colleagues for sharing its correspondence with the Panel. Members asked if Ofcom had previously engaged with these providers.

## **6. Enforcement update**

6.1 Ofcom's enforcement team provided Members with an update on Ofcom's enforcement programme, including its investigation into mid contract price rises. Members flagged that some CPs' consumer communications on in contract price rises were not clear and transparent and were likely to result in consumer confusion.

6.2 The Panel raised its ongoing concerns that Royal Mail was consistently not meeting its quality of service performance targets. Members noted that complaints to Ofcom on postal services were low and unlikely to reflect the scale of consumer and citizen dissatisfaction, and encouraged the team to gather complaints data from other sources. Further, some postal users were likely to have low expectations and/or find it difficult to make a complaint so identifying other ways of gathering feedback would help to build a fuller picture of postal users' experiences.

## **7. Public Policy update**

7.1 The Panel received an update on the latest public policy developments, which covered a recent restructure of UK Government departments, telecoms consumer advocacy and migration to VoIP.

7.2 Members asked for a progress update on the implementation of the Online Safety Bill and any consumer-related developments.

## **8. Panel research update**

8.1 The Panel received progress updates on its recently commissioned research projects and discussed possible areas of focus for the year ahead. Further discussions on future research topics would take place at the Panel's strategy day later in the year.

## **9. Ofcom's Impact Assessment Guidance**

9.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's recently published consultation on its new impact assessment guidance.

9.2 The Panel, particularly Members who had extensive expertise in equality and access requirements, discussed the proposed guidance and fed in its views and suggestions. Comments included:

- that promoting equality of opportunity is an ongoing statutory duty and should not only be considered in the early stages of policy development, but throughout.
- the importance of considering intersectionality in equality of consumer outcomes and not only focusing on protected characteristics individually.



- that to ensure impacts assessments were embedded across the organisation, responsibility at Board-level was required.
- that the guidance should also reference the UK Nations and small businesses.

9.3 The Panel offered to provide practical support and training to Ofcom colleagues if the team felt it would be useful.

9.4 The Panel welcomed the consultation and would provide a response in due course.

## **10. Phone Paid Services Authority update**

10.1 Representatives of the PSA provided Members with an update on its recent activities, including its ongoing work to understand and mitigate the consumer impacts of Information Connection Signposting Services (ICSS).

10.2 Members remained concerned about the impacts of ICSS on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses, and were interested to understand the steps that organisations were taking to help tackle unfair ICSS practices and protect consumers from consumer confusion and bill shock. It was noted that the PSA was currently consulting on changes to its Code to help reduce consumer detriment caused by ICSS, and the Panel would provide a response.

10.3 The Panel welcomed further engagement with the PSA and its Consumer Panel in the lead up to PSA's regulatory responsibility transferring to Ofcom, to help further understand the issues facing consumers in the phone-paid services market.

## **11. AOB**

11.1 There was no other business.