

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

**on 13 October 2022 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

Helen Froud

Clifford Harkness

Richard Spencer

Sian Phipps

Michael Wardlow

Richard Williams

Apologies

None

In attendance

Jenny Borritt

Fiona Lennox

Chloe Newbold

Magda Styles

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 15 September 2022 and matters arising</b>
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 15 September 2022 were <b>APPROVED</b> , subject to minor amendments.



3.2 The Panel raised significant concerns regarding the resilience of telecoms networks following reports of possible power outages throughout the winter months due to a lack of supply - and the possibility of the outages coinciding with severe weather. In particular, Members were concerned that Ofcom's guidance on protecting access to emergency organisations during a power cut stated that CPs should have at least one solution that allows consumers to access emergency organisations for a minimum of one hour, however some power outages could reportedly last for up to three hours. The Panel sought further information on Ofcom's plans to mitigate the associated risks.

3.3 Following recent discussions with consumer representative organisations at the Panel's National Hubs on the affordability of communications services, Members discussed how digital connectivity had become an essential service and should be recognised as such to ensure that people had a minimum level of digital access.

#### **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 Panel continued to be significantly concerned about the rollout of migration to VoIP and lack of a coordinated consumer awareness campaign. In December, the Panel would host a roundtable to share its latest research findings on consumers' telephony needs with industry and government; and encourage the sector to do more to raise consumer awareness and protect consumers throughout the migration process.

4.3 Having raised concerns with Royal Mail regarding the accessibility of the stamp swap-out scheme, Members were pleased to hear that Royal Mail had adopted the Panel's suggestion of including a stamp swap-out form when it wrote to all UK households advising of the scheme.

#### **5. Consumer and enforcement update**

5.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom's consumer policy and enforcement team. Members were provided with an overview of Ofcom's consumer priority areas and recent activity across the enforcement team.

5.2 The Panel discussed Ofcom's affordability research and flagged that not all cost-saving solutions would be suitable for all consumers. For instance, people with additional access requirements such as those who relied on greater bandwidth were likely to incur additional costs, however downgrading services would not be a viable solution.

5.3 The Panel's Member for Wales advised that Welsh Government had responded to the Senedd's Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee's recommendations



on digital connectivity in Wales - broadband - and the report would be circulated to Ofcom colleagues.

5.4 The Panel discussed its continuing concerns surrounding migration to VoIP and urged Ofcom to push for a coordinated consumer awareness campaign to help consumers prepare for the migration and minimise the risk of consumer detriment. Members asked for further information on how CPs would approach households who were unable to get a fibre connection, lived in areas where mobile coverage was poor, and therefore relied on landline services.

5.5 The Panel was concerned that consumers, particularly those living and working in rural areas, could be significantly impacted by 2G/3G switch-off, and more needed to be done to identify and mitigate the potential risks. Members also remained concerned that the perceived level of UK mobile coverage did not always correspond with consumers' experiences and some areas could become 'not-spots' post switch-off. The Panel asked for the latest insights from Ofcom's crowdsourcing data and highlighted that relying on crowdsourcing data in less populated areas could be problematic as the sample size was likely to be smaller and findings less reliable.

## **6. Mobile Strategy update**

6.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's mobile coverage policy and discussed amongst other things the impacts of convergence; the role of MVNOs; the need for more social tariffs in the mobile sector, given that currently only one provider in the UK offered one; net neutrality; and the approach and impacts of international markets.

6.2 The Panel highlighted its ongoing concerns regarding the reintroduction of EU data roaming charges and the impact they could have on consumers travelling to the EU and/or living near the UK/EU border, Members believed that consumers should be protected from 'bill-shock', particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis and sought to understand how Ofcom proposed to tackle the issue.

6.3 The Panel was concerned how future changes could impact consumers such as people living in rural areas who were reliant on 2G/3G mobile coverage and/or people who were struggling financially and may need to buy new, compatible devices. Members emphasised the importance of identifying people who may be negatively impacted by any future changes so mitigations could be put in place in advance to protect consumers and citizens.

## **7. Panel discussion: Future of ways of working and impacts**

7.1 The Panel discussed future ways of working and provided suggestions on ways to track, highlight and monitor its impacts across the sector. The Panel's Executive team would look into this further.

## **8. Ofcom's Online experiences tracker**



8.1 The Panel received an overview of the findings from Ofcom's Online Experiences Tracker. Members discussed the findings with interest and how the findings would be used to inform Ofcom's ongoing work around online safety.

## **9. Supporting consumers in vulnerable circumstances**

9.1 The Panel received an overview of Ofcom's ongoing work to support consumers in vulnerable circumstances.

9.2 The Panel noted the proportion of consumers identified as 'vulnerable' across the communications sector, and whilst recognising the demographic differences of CPs' individual customer bases, asked if a minimum proportion was expected. Ofcom colleagues advised that although a minimum proportion had not been imposed, they would seek to understand why some CPs had notably lower proportions than others.

9.3 The Panel remained significantly concerned about how CPs identified and recorded vulnerability data, having noted that some CPs continued to adopt the medical model of disability, not the social model of disability.

9.4 Members highlighted that it was important that Ofcom asked the right questions of CPs to obtain useful and tangible data. They also advised Ofcom that it should encourage CPs to identify barriers that consumers can face when accessing and engaging with communications services and consider the impacts, before looking into customers' needs and requirements, and not make assumptions about customers' needs.

9.5 The Panel encouraged Ofcom to assess whether CPs' processes would be considered best practice to help drive improvement across the sector.

## **10. Shared Rural Network (SRN)**

10.1 The Panel received an update on the SRN and how the scheme was progressing.

10.2 The Panel supported the scheme, highlighting the importance of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses having access to digital services without delay. Members were assured that MNOs were legally bound to deliver the coverage targets under Ofcom's license agreements. In addition, Ofcom had the power to issue fines if they failed to meet the targets.

10.3 The Panel recognised that not all consumers would benefit from the SRN and asked how consumers living in areas with no mobile connectivity would get connected. Ofcom colleagues advised that work was ongoing to identify areas with poor connectivity using both crowd sourced and mobile drive testing data.

## **11. AOB**

11.1 The Panel commented on its concerns (see para 3.2) regarding the resilience of telecoms



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networks and proposals to cut power in parts of the UK for three hours during the winter months and looked forward to hearing how Ofcom planned to mitigate the associated risks.