

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 15 September 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

Clifford Harkness

Richard Spencer

Sian Phipps

Michael Wardlow

Richard Williams

Apologies

Helen Froud

In attendance

Jenny Borritt

Fiona Lennox

Chloe Newbold

Magda Styles

Ofcom colleagues

CISAS representatives

Digital Markets Unit representatives

Ombudsman Services representatives

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 20 July 2022 and matters arising
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 20 July 2022 were APPROVED , subject to minor



amendments.

3.2 The Panel's Member for Scotland encouraged greater collaboration and sharing of insights between the UK Nations on migration to VoIP, having highlighted the programme of work in Scotland and publication of a Digital Telecare Roadmap.

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 stressed that to gather a true understanding of mobile coverage across the UK, Ofcom's mobile coverage testing should cover hard-to-reach areas across all of the UK Nations. Members looked forward to discussing further with the team in November.

4.3 The Panel raised concerns that communications providers (CPs) commonly incorporated annual price increases linked to inflation into broadband and mobile consumer contracts and questioned the fairness of the price rises in the context of the cost-of-living crisis and recent rise in inflation. Members asked that the Panel's concerns be passed to Ofcom's affordability team for discussion at the next update in November.

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 remained extremely concerned about the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on communications consumers, which was compounded by low consumer take-up of social tariffs across the sector. Members asked for further information on Ofcom's plans to promote social tariffs across the UK Nations and discussed possible ways to increase consumer take-up such as adopting a target-based approach to encourage CPs to promote available support more widely.

5.3 Members were assured that Ofcom's Fairness Commitments were utilised as overarching principles across Ofcom's programme of work to help deliver fair outcomes across the communications sector. The Panel continued to be supportive of the Commitments and assessing signatories' performance against them.

5.4 The Panel reiterated its concerns that people would face significant roaming charges since the EU roaming consumer protections had fallen away following the EU exit and welcomed further details on how Ofcom would seek to understand the impacts of the changes.



5.5 The Panel asked whether Ofcom's compliance monitoring programme into access to emergency services during power outages also focused on larger providers, having raised concerns that more needed to be done to ensure that people could access emergency services post-migration to VoIP.

5.6 The Panel discussed its ongoing concerns surrounding migration to VoIP including the lack of consistent consumer messaging across the sector; and the potential impacts on consumers and citizens who relied on landline connectivity and/or devices that were unlikely to work post-migration e.g. telecare and alarm devices. Members urged Ofcom to secure progress in this area, reiterating the need for an easy to understand, accessible communications consumer awareness campaign to help alleviate public safety concerns and ensure that consumers, citizens and micro-businesses - such as those who currently sell equipment that may no longer be compatible post-migration - take the necessary steps to mitigate the potential impacts of the migration. The Panel would soon publish its latest research on migration to VoIP and invited a further discussion with Ofcom's policy team thereafter.

5.7 The Panel asked whether post-migration it would be possible to detect during a power outage if people with additional support requirements, such as those living in rural areas with poor mobile coverage or users of telecare devices, had a functioning battery back-up.

5.8 The Panel highlighted that it continued to monitor with interest any developments surrounding 2G/3G switch-off and the need to identify and mitigate the potential impacts of the switch-off on consumers and citizens across the UK. For instance, Members raised that some smart energy meters rely on 2G/3G connectivity and could become obsolete post-switch-off.

6. Migration to VoIP research

6.1 The Panel received an overview of the key findings from Ofcom's research on consumers' attitudes and experiences of migrating to VoIP in Openreach's trial areas of Salisbury and Mildenhall.

6.2 The Panel noted the findings with interest and emphasised that to ensure consumers and citizens engaged with and understood the migration to VoIP process and the possible implications, the changes should not be described as an upgrade and any information needed to be provided in plain language. In addition, the research findings should be fed into and help to shape a consumer communications awareness campaign.

6.3 The Panel stressed the importance of capturing the experiences of older people and/or people with additional access requirements who had migrated to VoIP.

6.4 The Panel suggested holding a stakeholder roundtable where both Ofcom's and the Panel's



research findings could be shared more widely. The Panel's Executive team would discuss further with Ofcom's policy team following the meeting.

7. Introduction to the Digital Markets Unit

7.1 The Panel received an introduction to the Digital Markets Unit (DMU), which would oversee a new regulatory regime for the most powerful digital firms, promoting greater competition and innovation in the digital markets and protecting consumers and businesses from unfair practices.

7.2 The Panel highlighted the importance of capturing the consumer voice early-on to help shape the DMU's regulatory framework.

7.3 Members were interested to understand how the regulatory regime would seek to protect consumer data across digital markets e.g. healthcare data.

8. Ofcom's plan of work 2022/23

8.1 The Panel was updated on Ofcom's plan of work and noted that it would soon be published for consultation, to which it would provide a response.

8.2 Members highlighted the importance of considering any equality implications of the proposals; feeding in the consumer voice; and tracking and measuring success.

8.3 The Panel reiterated concerns that the cost-of-living crisis was likely to impact consumers, citizens and micro-businesses across the communications sector and should be clearly referenced in the plan of work, along with postal services and the potential impacts of climate change on the communications sector.

9. CISAS update

9.1 Representatives of CISAS provided an overview of the complaints landscape and support for consumers with additional support requirements. Members discussed how cases were categorised and noted the case studies with interest.

9.2 The Panel discussed CISAS' approach to supporting consumers with additional support requirements and advised that the term 'vulnerable' could be considered pejorative and that it was important to distinguish between support requirements and reasonable adjustments. A Panel Member with extensive expertise on accessibility and inclusion matters offered to hold a discussion offline.

10. Ombudsman Services update

10.1 Representatives of Ombudsman Services (OS) provided an overview of the complaints landscape and support for consumers with additional support requirements.



10.2 The Panel commended OS' approach to resolving consumer issues and noted the case studies with interest, some of which related to the affordability of communications services, and Members discussed how digital connectivity had become an essential service for many consumers, citizens and micro-businesses.

11. AOB

11.1 There was no other business.