**Summary of the Panel’s National Hubs – Covid-19 consumer issues**

**Data protection**

* Concerns for consumer freedoms in a scenario where governments use consumer movement data for monitoring purposes - how this will be balanced with data protection?
* How secure are platforms being used in the health sector? E.g. appointments via Skype and FaceTime; and walkie talkies being used in hospitals.
* The benefits of using telecoms data to identify vulnerable consumers.
* Use of interpretation services requires additional data protection permissions.

**People who have additional support needs (vulnerable consumers)**

* A consumer can flag vulnerability on Gov.uk website, however if a consumer cannot access the website then there is a risk that vulnerability will be overlooked.
* Definition of ‘vulnerability’ across industries differ, which creates confusion.
* Individuals with no, low or limited digital access and skills should be classed as vulnerable.
* Many consumers have become disconnected from carers; who are unable to access information on behalf of vulnerable people, as providers’ policies require the bill payer to handle their own affairs, unless a prior arrangement has been set up.
* Charities that support vulnerable people are struggling to keep running.
* Consumers with access support needs have said that video sharing platforms are not accessible.

**Connectivity**

* Network resilience – can the communications providers cope with the increased demand?
* Resilience of post network for consumers who are offline and/or prefer to communicate by post.
* Rural communities rely on good broadband to stay connected.
* Will Migration to Voice over IP services be delayed? If so, how long can consumers rely on copper-based connectivity?
* Smartphones are the sole internet connected device in some households, as found in Ofcom’s recent research, however home schooling is likely to be easier using laptops and iPads.
* Many businesses use home broadband and, if services are disconnected, they are likely to lose income.
* Businesses finding it difficult to identify the correct broadband package.
* Relocated small businesses have heard from Openreach that they are not installing any new landlines. Some of these businesses are unclear what they can do – and what they are allowed to do – in terms of using residential services to run their businesses from home.

**Effective communication with customers**

* The onus is on consumers to contact communications providers for information unlike in other sectors.
* Call centres are closing, resulting in difficulty contacting providers.
* Consumers are finding it difficult to switch and CPs are not contacting consumers towards the end of their contact.

**Scams/profiteering**

* Increased number of scams, targeting consumers by phone, e-mail and text e.g. refund scams for cancelled holidays.
* Low consumer awareness of online security and how to stay protected online.
* Concerns that businesses are exploiting consumers by charging excessively for products and/or providing misleading information e.g. counterfeit PPE equipment.

**Digital exclusion**

* Face-to-face digital skills classes are no longer possible. How can consumers who need to learn basic digital skills receive support?
* Digital training should avoid using technical terms, be written in plain language include subtitles/captions.
* Long wait times for telephone helplines and many application processes are digital only.
* Job centres have closed and access to/completion of online claim processes can be difficult for many.
* How will families who are offline teach out-of-school children, particularly if lessons are online?
* Those who are digitally excluded are more likely to be vulnerable, older and isolated.
* Challenges supporting farmers who are not online, without face to face contact and with unreliable mobile signal – have to try to call them when they are near the landline.
* Some businesses who have relocated can no longer access a digital connection due to ‘not spots’ in some areas.

**Dissemination of fake news**

* Detrimental to consumers’ mental health
* Communications equipment has been damaged and could affect connectivity and broadcasting.
* Individuals with communication barriers (whose first language is not English, including individuals whose first language is BSL) are more likely to be at risk of fake news. To compound this, we have heard that the deaf community is more reliant on social media for news.

**Barriers to communication for people with sensory loss**

* Consumers with hearing loss are being encouraged to use telephone services, however demand for Relay UK is not being met and calls are taking 3-4 times longer. Further, not all people with hearing loss are comfortable with communicating via telephone.
* BSL users are having to communicate in English, which is not always their first language.
* Use of BSL translation is not consistent across broadcasters. In particular, live BSL translation is absent during some Covid-19 updates from UK Government, but is available during government updates from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
* Information needs to be accessible to screen readers e.g. infographics.
* Subtitles and captions are not widely used across news services.
* A lot of consumers with hearing loss rely on social media and are therefore more at risk of scams and fake news.
* A variety of communications methods should be available for consumers e.g. online chat, Easyread and BSL video relay.

**Affordability**

* Concerns that household data usage will rise due to children being out of school.
* Many consumers may be facing financial difficulties and could be disconnected if unable to pay bills.
* If bill holidays are implemented, consumers will be accumulating debt. This is a particular concern where consumers have lost income that will not be regained long-term.
* Businesses have been encouraged to close premises and consequently require postal redirects, which are costly.
* Many businesses use home broadband and, if services are disconnected, they are likely to lose income.
* Affordable and accessible digital solutions for some businesses are limited.
* Measures introduced by CPs to help support consumers need to be disseminated effectively.
* Concerns that hospitalised consumers were experiencing bill shock as a result of expensive patient line numbers.