



Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD response to DCMS' consultation on new build developments: delivering gigabit-capable connections

The Communications Consumer Panel, established by the Communications Act 2003, is a group of independent experts with direct sectoral experience. We ensure the citizen and consumer voice is represented in communications policy development.

The Panel's job is to ensure that the sector works for consumers, citizens and micro businesses - and in particular people who may be in a more vulnerable position in society. We carry out research, provide advice and encourage Ofcom, governments, the EU, industry and others to look at issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and micro businesses.

The Panel pays particular attention to the needs of older people and people with disabilities, the needs of people in rural areas and people on low incomes, and the needs of micro businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers.

Four members of the Panel also represent the interests of consumers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively. They liaise with the key stakeholders in the Nations to understand the perspectives of consumers in all parts of the UK and input these perspectives to the Panel's consideration of issues. Following the alignment of ACOD (the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled people) with the Panel, the Panel is more alert than ever to the interests of older and disabled consumers and citizens.

Response

The Panel strongly supports initiatives designed to ensure that all consumers can benefit from a good internet connection in their home, mindful that many of the UK's micro businesses will be run by individuals from their residential address. Processes that ensure the timely and efficient connection of new build sites, thus providing an internet connection to residents as soon as they move in, would be welcomed by the Panel.

The Panel supports the Government's stated target of making gigabit-capable networks available to 15 million premises by 2025, with nationwide coverage by 2033. Ensuring that the appropriate infrastructure is in place to achieve this target is a key part of the strategy succeeding.

The Panel supports the proposal to require developers to engage proactively with network operators as part of the engagement process with local authorities.

The Panel is of the view that in order to ensure that new build sites offer the relevant infrastructure it is necessary to require all property developers to pay for and deliver gigabit-capable connections on their sites. The consultation paper demonstrates that the availability of such connectivity is not currently a key issue that buyers consider when deciding whether to purchase a property; although as the paper points out, this may be due to a lack of information in turn making it difficult for buyers to make informed decisions when assessing a new build home's level of connectivity. For whatever reason, however, it may be assumed that at present demand-side market forces will not ensure

that housing developers include gigabit-capable connections on their sites.

The Panel supports the proposal that developers would be obliged to provide a simple connectivity plan for their developments to local authorities (“LAs”) as this seems to be a common-sense approach that does not introduce an overly burdensome administrative requirement into the planning process.

In the interests of getting the best deal for consumers the Panel supports the proposal that the connectivity plan would need to demonstrate that housing developers had consulted with at least two network providers to provide gigabit-capable networks. We are also in favour of the “duty to connect” concept if commercial terms between the operator and the developer cannot be agreed. We would also suggest that social housing is protected from corner-cutting by developers.

We would urge that early consideration is given to the fairness of operators’ contracts on consumers - provision of a service should include a guarantee regarding the quality of that service, no barriers to switching or exiting and no sharp practices. The Panel is in favour of the proposal that costs should be split between developers and operators. In any event we are keen to ensure that costs are not passed on to consumers.

In summary, we support the proposals and hope that timely progress can be made to ensure that new builds come ready with high speed reliable connectivity as a matter of course. A poor internet service is not something homebuyers should have to discover after completing their purchase.