**What is excellent customer service and how can Customer Charters help consumers ask for what they need?**

**We recently discussed with consumer-representatives across the UK what excellent customer service looks like and how communications providers can ensure consumers’ service requirements are consistently met efficiently and effectively.**

**We considered the benefits of CPs developing a Communications’ Customer Charter and heard from other sectors who already have Customer Charters in place.**

We believe that excellent standards of customer service are vital for communications consumers, citizens and micro-businesses and more should be done to promote inclusivity across the communications sector and consistently meet consumer’s individual requirements. It has been clear throughout the Covid-19 pandemic that consumers’ individual circumstances can rapidly change - any consumer can become ‘vulnerable’ - and delivering excellent standards of service can help consumers to resolve issues quickly and avoid possible detriment – both financially and emotionally.

In July 2019, Ofcom launched its Fairness for Customers programme and recently urged communications providers to improve customer service operations including complaint handling and support for ‘vulnerable’ consumers. We believe that a Customer Charter – based on high-level principles - could help to deliver excellent customer service across the sector, giving providers the opportunity to go above and beyond – driving competition whilst improving customer service standards.

We took the opportunity to discuss customer service expectations with our Hub participants across each of the UK Nations and explore how a Customer Charter could benefit the communications sector. Hub participants heard from other sectors where Customer Charters were already in place, including Wales and West Utilities, Transport for Wales, Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, SES Water and Scottish Water. We were interested to hear that organisations who had developed a Customer Charter for regulatory reasons, would now develop a Charter whether it was mandatory or not because it had become such an intrinsic part of their business – and how important it was to embed the Customer Charter commitments across the business to avoid it becoming a standalone document.

**Highlighted below are the key issues that emerged from our discussions with Hub participants across the UK Nations of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.**

* 1. **Communications providers should ensure that customer information and processes are designed and delivered in a clear, transparent and accessible format.**
	2. **Customer service teams should seek to understand and meet consumers’ individual preferences and requirements from the outset and throughout the customer journey.**
	3. **Communications providers should promote and seek to embed excellent customer service across the business – both strategically and culturally.**
	4. **Communications providers should ensure that consumers’ experiences and feedback help to drive improvements across the business and sector.**

**Other sectors who had already developed and implemented a Customer Charter across the business told us the key benefits of having a Charter in place:**

* **helps consumers to understand what to expect and the support available**
* **provides consumer information all in one place**
* **can help to embed a customer service culture across the business**
* **can be used as a performance management tool to help drive improvement**
* **promotes engagement with existing and new customers**
* **can be user-tested and ‘consumer endorsed’**
* **organisations are able to go above and beyond baseline requirements**
* **organisations are held accountable to customers**

**A summary of our discussions can be found below.**

* + 1. **Communications providers should ensure that customer information and processes are designed and delivered in a clear, transparent and accessible format.**
* All information should be clear, accessible and easy to understand. It was flagged that text heavy, lengthy commitments are likely to be difficult to read and understand.
* CPs should ensure that contact information can be easily found.
* Organisations should ensure that consumer-facing documents are consumer-friendly e.g. removing small text and including clear, bold statements, and test documents with consumers.
* Many consumers do not engage digitally and therefore, consumer information should be available via offline channels.
* Ofcom’s existing General Conditions were considered thorough; however, many consumers may find it difficult to locate information and/or understand the language.
* Consumers find it difficult to downgrade services e.g. IVR systems are programmed to encourage customers to upgrade.
* Customers are encouraged to use webchat services; however, the service is not always available. In addition, some consumers who use webchat ultimately end up having to use a different channel e.g. telephone.
* Support measures for vulnerable consumers are inconsistent across the communications sector and can cause consumer confusion.
* Processes where customers can nominate a family member to act on their behalf or implement Power of Attorney should be improved to avoid delays in resolving issues.
* CPs should provide consumers with an automated call back service when telephone queues are lengthy and where customer service issues cannot be resolved immediately.
* Processes should be clear and transparent e.g. complaints information should be one-click away and timelines outlined clearly. In addition, customer queries and complaints should have KPIs attached to them, which are publicly available.
* Where organisations have multiple supply chains, industry should consider who the customer is most likely to engage with and utilise that pathway to assist consumers.
* Where significant issues occur, CPs should seek to ensure that processes are resilient, and communications channels remain accessible.
* Processes should be inclusively designed to ensure a frictionless experience for consumers.

**2. Customer service teams should seek to understand and meet consumers’ individual preferences and requirements from the outset and throughout the customer journey.**

* Communications providers should offer a variety of consumer contact channels.
* Getting in contact with CPs’ customer service teams can be a lengthy, stressful and repetitive process and the length of time it takes a consumer to resolve an issue should be monitored.
* Front-line staff should receive training to make easier to ask for, understand and discuss consumers’ individual requirements.
* Front-line staff should be consumer centric and empowered to make decisions on behalf of consumers.
* The communications sector should take the opportunity to learn how other sectors meet consumers’ individual needs, particularly consumers with specific access requirements.
* CPs should work with third sector organisations to understand consumers’ lived experiences.
* The onus should not be on consumers to register for priority services (PSRs), instead services should be tailored to consumers’ requirements. In addition, where consumers are required to sign-up to PSRs, CPs should promote availability of the service and proactively sign-up eligible consumers.
* Many consumers with specific requirements would not identify as ‘vulnerable’ and are unlikely to sign-up to providers’ vulnerability registers/PSRs. In addition, PSRs are not designed to support consumers who experience transient vulnerability.
* Consumers shouldn’t have to declare requirements more than once or to different providers.
* CPs need to ‘check-in’ with consumers throughout the customer journey to ensure that information remains up to date and individual requirements are met.
1. **Communications providers should promote and seek to embed excellent customer service across the business – both strategically and culturally.**
* Organisations should seek senior-level ‘buy-in’ on customer service commitments to ensure engagement across the business.
* Customer service and performance should be aligned to consumer principles e.g. United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Organisation’s customer service principles should be aligned to and embedded within the business’ strategy and priorities – and reflected in KPIs and performance monitoring.
* To truly embed good customer service, organisations should train employees to understand the organisations’ customer service promises and expectations.
* CPs should conduct surveys across the business to help train employees on customer service and target employees who are less customer facing.
* CPs should conduct customer service audits e.g. mystery shopping exercises, each year to ensure processes are embedded; and seek employees’ views on whether the business has a customer service culture.
* When developing or reviewing customer service principles and Charters, organisations should conduct virtual workshops with employees across the business to promote engagement and input.
* Whilst a positive driver, Ofcom’s Fairness Commitments are high-level and more influence is required to secure and deliver positive change.
* Where a regulatory underpinning is present, a better service is more likely and without regulatory underpinning it can be difficult to embed cultural change within an organisation.
* If organisations are required to meet certain regulations or standards, which are audited or monitored on a regular basis then embedding a customer service culture across the business is likely to be felt long-term.
* Communications providers should be held accountable to their customer base.
* Any telecoms fines should be used to fund third sector organisations who support vulnerable and financially vulnerable consumers.
* Any Charter would need to drive a cultural change within many organisations.
1. **Communications providers should ensure that consumers’ experiences and feedback help to drive improvements across the business and sector.**
* Complaints are commonly regarded negatively by both consumers and providers; however, they provide useful insights and the opportunity to learn from consumers’ experiences.
* Consumers should be encouraged to provide feedback/make a complaint so providers can improve services.
* CPs should use complaints intelligence to identify the root causes of consumer issues.
* Customer service and complaints processes should be improved so those less likely to engage e.g. ‘vulnerable’ consumers, do not suffer silently.
* Providing feedback and making complaints via social media channel has become commonplace, and because the information is published publicly, providers generally respond promptly. In addition, consumers avoid lengthy automated channels.
* Auto-compensation should not be an alternative to listening to people’s experiences.

**Other sectors explained the benefits of implementing a Customer Charter – and the process by which the Charters were developed. Hub participants also told us what the consumers, citizens and micro-businesses they represent would expect a Charter to deliver.**

* Customer Charters help to set out what consumers can expect from providers by providing clear information in one document. The information could also help potential new customers decide whether to sign-up to a new provider.
* Developing a Charter should be a consumer-led process and informed via engagement with consumers and consumer-representative organisations. This should be an ongoing process to ensure that the consumer voice is captured – and the Charter does not become a standalone, static document.
* Language used in Customer Charters should be tested with consumer focus groups and ‘consumer endorsed’ to avoid industry jargon or consumer confusion. Consumer focus groups should include a range of consumers with different characteristics e.g. age, competencies and those with specific access requirements
* Customer Charters can be a key driver for performance management and CPs should publicly report on how they perform against the Charter’s commitments – and where performance falls short, secure change and improvement.
* CPs should be able to measure the impact of a Customer Service Charter e.g. if a Charter explains when a consumer would be eligible for compensation, an increase in compensation claims could be an indicator of success.
* Customer Charters should be accessible to all consumers and not only available in text format e.g. BSL, Contact Scotland. Documents should be accessible to people who use English as a second language.
* When developing a Customer Charter, CPs could build on existing industry standards and go above and beyond baseline requirements, which would drive competition and improve customer service across the sector.
* Charters should provide customers with information on the support services available across the organisation e.g. accessible formats; and reference how organisations will meet the needs of consumers with specific access requirements; and those who are ‘vulnerable’.
* Implementation of Charter principles should not be burdensome – good consumer principles should be embedded into the business.
* Charters should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they are fit for purpose. Both senior management and consumers’ expectations will change over time and organisations need to ensure that commitments and information remain current.
* Charters should seek to address consumer issues through consumer engagement. Whilst information on eligibility for compensation claims is helpful, organisations should also seek to learn from consumer to help improve processes.
* A Charter could be a useful tool to provide consumers with information on scams and ways to protect themselves.

**Ofcom’s affordability team also provided participants with an overview of its recently published research on the affordability of communications services in the UK –** [**click here to view**](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/information-for-industry/policy/affordability-of-communications-services)**. Outlined below are the main points raised by stakeholders:**

* Many consumers are financially vulnerable and would benefit from a low-cost tariff – particularly in light of increasing utility bills and cuts to welfare benefits.
* That many consumers remained digitally excluded due to affordability issues.
* That it would be useful to track the experiences of ‘vulnerable’ consumers in the research – particularly as the term ‘vulnerable’ was likely to have changed and broadened since the pandemic.
* That information on whether affordability issues were more pronounced in rural or urban areas across each of the UK Nations and combined would be useful to see (Ofcom subsequently provided this information and no significant difference was found).
* That many mobile handsets and accessories can be costly, and affordability issues are compounded by providers allowing small monthly payments for long periods of time.
* Accessibility features that assist d/Deaf people tend to feature on the latest handsets, which are costly and unaffordable for many. It was suggested that CPs offer these handsets at a discount for customers with specific access requirements.
* The performance of accessibility features on older mobile phones can be poor – in some cases, accessibility features didn’t work at all e.g. Relay UK doesn’t work on older handsets, which forces consumers to buy a new model.
* It was recognised that the communications sector was taking steps to address communications consumers affordability issues – however, if poor take-up of social tariffs continued then CPs/Ofcom should do more to promote targeted tariffs and remove any barriers to engagement.
* Cross-industry collaboration to tackle affordability issues is increasingly important when people’s circumstances are likely to worsen post-pandemic. It was suggested that Ofcom work collaboratively with other regulators e.g. UKRN.

**You can find an up to date list of all broadband and mobile providers who offer social tariffs** [**on Ofcom's website here**](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/advice-for-consumers/costs-and-billing/social-tariffs) **– please share this information with your networks to help promote awareness.**

**Stakeholders who contributed to the discussions are listed below.**

* **Ofcom**
* **Ofcom’s Advisory Committees**
* **QMU Dispute Resolution Centre**
* **RNIB**
* **The Rural Community Network**
* **Rural Health and Care Wales**
* **Scottish Water**
* **SCVO**
* **SES Water**
* **Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland**
* **Transport for Wales**
* **Ulster Farmers’ Union**
* **Wales Cooperative Centre**
* **Wales and West Utilities**
* **Wavelength**
* **Welsh Government**
* **Which?**
* **Advice Direct Scotland**
* **The Alliance**
* **Christians Against Poverty**
* **Citizens Advice Scotland**
* **Competition and Markets Authority**
* **Consumer Council for Northern Ireland**
* **COSLA**
* **Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**
* **Digital Health and Care Wales**
* **Essential Services Access Network**
* **Independent consumer representatives**
* **Mencap**
* **Mind**
* **Money and Mental Health Policy Institute**
* **National Association of Deafened People**
* **NI Local Government Association**
* **NFU**

**For more information on previous discussions across the Panel’s National Hubs – please see below.**

* In June and July 2021, Hub participants fed into **our think-piece on making communications services inclusive and accessible –** [published here](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/news/latest/post/763-our-top-tips-on-making-communications-services-inclusive-and-accessible-for-all-consumers)**.** To read a summary of our discussions and see who took part [please click here.](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/stakeholder-engagement/the-panels-national-hubs)
* In May, we held our first UK-wide Hub, bringing together consumer representatives across each of the UK Nations to discuss**the potential impacts of migration to voice-over IP on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses.** [Please click here to read a summary of our discussions and see who took part.](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/downloads/ccp-acod-uk-wide-hub-summary---migration-to-voice-over-ip.docx)
* In April, our discussions focused on **digital inclusion, skills and confidence; and the importance of equipping consumers, citizens and micro-businesses with the necessary tools to participate digitally**. [Please click here to read a summary of our discussions](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/downloads/ccp-acod-national-hubs-summary---digital-inclusion-confidence-and-skills.docx), including the key messages and a list of stakeholders who took part.
* In January and February 2021, our discussions focused on the **affordability of communications services and consumer debt -**[please click here to read a summary of our discussions](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/.well-known/the-panels-national-hubs---affordability-of-communications-services-and-debt-%28summary%29.docx). The summary outlines the key messages that emerged from our discussions and includes a list of stakeholders who took part.
* In September and October 2020, participants discussed**rural connectivity and the types of issues and impacts that communications consumers living, studying or working in rural areas face -** [please click here to read a summary of our discussions.](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/downloads/summary-of-the-panels-national-hubs---rural-connectivity-%28including-intro%29.docx) The summary includes a list of stakeholders who took part and further information on available connectivity initiatives across the Nations.
* In December 2020, the Panel published research on **scams and fraudulent activity, exploring how consumers have been targeted across communications channels**. Our discussions with Hub participants on the impacts of scams on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses fed into our research recommendations. [Click here to access our cover report, recommendations and full research findings.](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/research-and-reports/scammed-exploited-and-afraid-)
* In early 2020, during the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, we discussed **the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on communications consumers -**[please click here to read a summary of our discussions.](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/downloads/ccp-acod-national-hubs---covid-19-consumer-issues-%281%29.docx)
1. [United Nations guidelines for consumer protection | UNCTAD](https://unctad.org/topic/competition-and-consumer-protection/un-guidelines-for-consumer-protection) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)