



Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD's response to on extending the range of mobile phone repeaters that can be used without a licence and on measures to improve information for consumers.

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

We welcome the opportunity to respond to Ofcom's consultation on extending the range of mobile phone repeaters that can be used without a licence and on measures to improve information for consumers.

We believe that consumers, citizens and micro-businesses need access to basic, secure, affordable, reliable, resilient communications services that are both accessible and usable across a variety of devices. Improving indoor mobile coverage is an important component to achieving reliable communications services.

Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has propelled us into a digital world and proven how essential digital connectivity is for consumers across the UK. Communications services have become integral to consumers' everyday lives whether they need to stay in contact

with family and friends, work from home, learn remotely, watch a television series; or access public services and/or healthcare. We are extremely conscious that some consumers and citizens are unable to benefit from opportunities offered by the digital world due to a lack of access to digital infrastructure or poor connectivity. This is of particular concern as we continue to move at pace into a digitised world.

Mobile-based services have continued to grow significantly in recent years. Ofcom's recent research found that in 2020/21 10% of UK adult internet users only access the internet via a smartphone.¹ This increasing reliance on mobile services among consumers, citizens and micro-businesses means that reliable mobile connectivity is more important than ever.

We welcome the proposals outlined in the consultation - extending the range of repeaters available for people to buy and install without a licence will provide consumers, citizens and micro-businesses with additional connectivity solutions to improve indoor mobile coverage. We hope that the proposals will help to drive competition in the mobile repeaters market and promote competitive pricing that consumers can benefit from.

We note that compliant repeaters are currently significantly more expensive than non-compliant repeaters available on the UK market, so we consider driving down costs to consumers - who may be unaware of the compliance regime - an important benefit and protective measure. This is particularly important where the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in many consumers, citizens and micro-businesses suddenly becoming financially vulnerable yet increasingly reliant on reliable digital connectivity.

People living and working in areas with poor connectivity

Our strategic plan 2021-22² outlines our commitment to push for better coverage across the UK and engage with Ofcom, Government and network providers on implementation of the Shared Rural Network, Broadband USO, and other connectivity initiatives and solutions across the UK's nations and regions - ensuring that the voices of rural consumers are heard. We remain concerned that people with no indoor mobile coverage and no broadband connection would find themselves unable to participate digitally.

We are aware that a significant number of rural consumers, citizens and microbusinesses are unable to benefit from digital connectivity due to a lack of infrastructure or poor connectivity. We recently responded to DCMS' call for evidence

¹ [Ofcom's Adults' Media Use and Attitudes report 2020/21](#)

² [Strategic plan 2021/22](#)

on connecting very hard to reach areas³ and highlighted that all consumers should have equitable access and the option to connect digitally if they wish to. We hope that Ofcom's proposals to expand the mobile repeaters market and raise consumer awareness will help to improve connectivity for people living and working in rural areas.

In September 2020, the Panel's National Hubs⁴ focused on rural connectivity and participants were provided with an overview of connectivity initiatives across the UK. We heard from a range of consumer-focused organisations across the UK and found that many participants were unaware of ongoing and upcoming connectivity initiatives in their area.

We published a summary of our discussions across each of the UK Nations and highlighted below are some of the key messages:

- **Some rural areas lack access to digital infrastructure and require affordable and reliable connectivity interventions across mobile and broadband to help rural consumers get digitally connected.**
- **Consumers lack awareness of UK and Nation-specific connectivity schemes and how these could apply to their circumstances. Inclusive information on initiatives should be available from trusted sources in clear, jargon-free terms.**

We believe that information about connectivity solutions should be available to consumers, citizens and micro-businesses in clear and accessible formats. The information should include guidance on any practical steps required to take advantage of these solutions and/or initiatives.

Improving information for consumers

We welcome Ofcom's proposal to work with relevant industry partners to develop a voluntary testing standard, and publish a list on the Ofcom website of static indoor mobile phone repeaters that comply with Ofcom's licence exemption requirements and we note the information on mobile repeaters that Ofcom currently publishes. here: '[Mobile phone repeaters - what you need to know - Ofcom](#)'.

Making consumers, citizens and micro-businesses aware of connectivity solutions available to them is paramount to improving coverage across the UK. We believe that including a list of compliant mobile repeaters on Ofcom's website will allow consumers to refer to a trusted source, without fear of being duped or scammed. Consumers need to be clearly informed about what a repeater can and can't do and

³ [Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD's response to DCMS' call for evidence on improving connectivity for very hard to reach premises](#)

⁴ [The Panel's National Hubs - Communications Consumer Panel](#)



how to best use them - similar to how best to place your router in terms of a wireless signal.

We would also highlight the benefits of sharing information with consumers, citizens and micro-businesses via trusted, well-known sources, such as third sector organisations and price comparison websites. Many of these organisations communicate with end-consumers on a day-to-day basis and are extremely well positioned to alert consumers to relevant and useful information.

We regularly engage with a range of consumer-focused organisations via our National Hubs and would be happy to share information with our stakeholders in future.

We would also urge any consumer information to be written jargon-free, in plain English and Welsh; and in a range of accessible formats.