



An overview of the Panel’s recent activities Chair’s highlights - Spring 2023

The Communications Consumer Panel is the statutory consumer panel for the communications sector. Panel Members are appointed by the Secretary of State and hold dual membership with the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People. Find out more about the Panel and its Members on our website [here](#).

The Panel’s policy areas of focus

We have published for consultation our [draft strategic plan 2023-24](#). Our discussions with stakeholders earlier this year helped to shape our proposed areas of focus for the year ahead, and through our regular engagement with Ofcom, governments, industry and others, we will continue to highlight the interests of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses and feed back what we’re hearing through our stakeholder networks and research and insights programme. We really welcome your input on our plans for the year ahead and the deadline for responses to the consultation is Monday 3 April.

Our proposed main policy areas of focus are outlined below.

<p>Affordability of communications services and consumer debt</p>	<p>We believe that communications services should be a basic right for all UK citizens. We remain extremely concerned about the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses and continue to urge communications providers (CPs) to protect financially vulnerable consumers from possible exclusion in the communications sector. We have fed into and support Ofcom’s changes to its Treating Vulnerable Customers Fairly guide to bolster the support that CPs should make available to consumers who are struggling financially and we look forward to further understanding the impacts of these changes.</p> <p>We have highlighted to Ofcom, industry and government our belief that more needs to be done to promote low-cost tariffs across the communications sector, having heard from our stakeholders that awareness is low. In addition, CPs need to tailor support to individual requirements as, for some consumers such as those who use interpreters and require greater bandwidth, common cost-saving solutions e.g. downgrading packages, will not be sufficient. We have commissioned research to explore the experiences of consumers who are struggling financially in the communications sector, including their awareness of and experiences of applying for social tariffs. We’ve also raised concerns with Ofcom that recent changes to</p>
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	<p>mobile roaming rules are likely to result in increased costs for consumers who travel abroad and/or live-in areas such as Northern Ireland where consumers commonly inadvertently roam onto a non-UK network - and have urged Ofcom to ensure that sufficient consumer protections are in place.</p> <p>We have highlighted to Ofcom our concerns regarding mid contract prices and the additional financial pressures they are likely to put on consumers who are already struggling financially. Similar to other stakeholders, we believe that, in this context, consumers should have the option to switch freely. We have welcomed Ofcom's review into the fairness of inflation linked price increases for phone and broadband customers and will monitor how the review progresses.</p>
Migration to VoIP	<p>We continue to urge Ofcom, government and industry to implement a coordinated consumer communications campaign, similar to the Australian model, to help raise awareness of the migration process. We believe that CPs need to proactively identify people who may need additional support throughout the migration process such as people with specific support requirements e.g. telecare users, and people living in rural and remote areas who may not be able to contact emergency services during a power cut. We shared our latest research on migration to VoIP and consumers' telephony requirements with key stakeholders including CPs, DCMS and other industry bodies at a roundtable event we hosted in January. We are now undertaking further research in this area to provide new evidence to inform the debate and we will share this with you soon.</p>
Postal services	<p>We believe that all consumers should have access to affordable and reliable postal services, regardless of where they live. The Panel is concerned about the resilience of postal services, quality of service and the impacts of postal strikes and a recent cyber-attack on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses. We have heard from our stakeholders that recent postal strikes have significantly impacted quality of service and some consumers have missed important healthcare appointments as a result. We have raised our concerns with Royal Mail and Ofcom.</p> <p>We continue to engage with Royal Mail, UK Government and others on how postal users in Northern Ireland have been impacted following the EU exit. We published research to explore these issues further and you can find our research findings and recommendations on the Panel's website here. We have welcomed the news that the UK and EU have reached an</p>



	agreement in principle in the form of the Windsor Framework, including in relation to the requirements on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses sending parcels between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.
2G/3G switch-off	We have raised concerns regarding the possible consumer impacts of the 2G/3G switch-off on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses, particularly those who are reliant on services delivered via 2G/3G connectivity and may live in areas where 4G coverage is poor or non-existent. We believe that making consumers aware of the impending changes using a variety of communications channels and identifying consumers who could be impacted by the switch-off early-on will help to mitigate potential harm.

The Panel's research and insights programme

We commission independent research to identify and highlight areas of consumer harm in the communications sector and provide an evidence base to drive change for the benefit of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses. Our research and insights programme seeks to capture a wide range of voices from across the UK including those who have additional support requirements and/or are less digitally skilled or confident.

We recently commissioned research to explore specific areas in the communications sector that have been flagged to us by our stakeholders and through our insights programme where consumers, citizens and micro-businesses may experience detriment. More information on the research projects can be found below and we look forward to sharing our findings with you.

- **Migration to VoIP** - following the Panel's research last year on migration to VoIP and consumers' telephony requirements, we are undertaking a further phase of this research, assessing developments in awareness and boosting the samples of offline consumers and people living in the devolved nations.
- **The experiences of communications consumers who are struggling financially and may benefit from social tariffs**, including how they navigate the market, their awareness of social tariffs and experiences of applying for them.
- **The experiences of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses using communications services in rural and remote areas** to help provide a holistic overview of the potential issues that people living in rural and remote areas face.
- **Understanding the requirements of younger consumers in the communications sector**, how they navigate the communications market and any barriers they face.



We will also soon publish several other research projects that explore areas of the communications sector where we believe consumers are at risk of harm. Further information on the projects can be found below.

- **Consumers with additional support requirements in the communications sector** - our research, both qualitative and quantitative, considered what the term 'vulnerability' means to consumers and any barriers consumers face when trying to seek support from CPs. Earlier this year, we shared our key research findings with the Panel's National Stakeholder Hubs ([a summary of our discussions can be found here](#)) and the Panel's Industry Forum.
- **Consumer perceptions of security and privacy of their online data** - we previously commissioned research looking into [consumers' perceptions of digital privacy](#) and we have commissioned a follow-up quantitative project to see how consumers' views have changed over five years. In July 2022, we held a UK-wide Hub on digital privacy and staying safe online where we discussed the online experiences of consumers, citizens and microbusinesses across the UK. A summary of our discussions can be found on our [website here](#).

Think piece: excellent customer service across the UK's regulated sectors

We have commissioned a specialist in customer service and consumer advocacy to write a cross-sectoral think-piece on what excellent customer service looks like in UK regulated sectors. This builds from on from our think-piece, published last year on Making Communications Services Inclusive and we look forward to sharing it with you.

The Panel's stakeholder engagement and collaboration

The Panel's National Stakeholder Hubs

The National Stakeholder Hubs - a series of roundtable discussions attended by a range of consumer, citizen and small business representatives - are held across each of the UK Nations and seek to strengthen the voices of UK consumers, citizens and micro-businesses in the communication sector. The themes of meetings are driven by current issues affecting those using communications services, and we hold UK-wide Hubs, where we consider certain issues to be of mutual interest to all of the UK Nations.

We recently took an opportunity to reflect on the National Hubs with stakeholders who attend the Hubs and represent the interests of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses. We provided an overview of our engagement and impacts over the past year and beyond and considered how we can better promote the voices of consumers living across the UK in the communications sector. We also asked Hub participants to share the top communications issues facing the consumers they represent in the year



ahead so we could feed these into our review of the Panel's strategic priorities for the forthcoming year.

We would like to thank all stakeholders who attended the sessions and contributed to our discussions. A summary of our discussions and the key points raised has been circulated to Ofcom and will be fed back to industry, governments through our channels of engagement. You can read the full summary on our website [here](#).

Upcoming Hubs for your calendars

Our next round of Hubs will focus on developing a digital minimum living standard for UK households to help tackle digital inequalities. Representatives of the University of Liverpool, Good Things Foundation and Welsh Government will provide an overview of the work they have been doing to understand the basic 'basket' of goods, services and skills people across the UK require to participate in the digital world. We'll also hear from Which? on the insights they've gathered on the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on consumers living in each of the UK Nations.

Please see below for the dates of upcoming Hubs.

- The Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Northern Ireland - 18 April at 10.30 am
- The Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Wales - 19 April at 10.30 am
- The Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Scotland - 28 April at 10.30 am
- The Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for England - 3 May at 10.30 am

The Panel's UK Consumer Advocacy Hub

We meet on a quarterly basis with consumer advocacy organisations across the UK. The Panel's Consumer Advocacy Hub is chaired by the Panel and attended by Which?, Citizens Advice, Citizens Advice Scotland and Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and more recently Consumer Scotland. These meetings provide an opportunity to share and understand the key issues affecting consumers nationally and feed these into Ofcom and industry where appropriate.

The Panel's Industry Forum

We continue to facilitate discussion between CPs at the Panel's Industry Forum. The Industry Forum provides an opportunity for CPs to discuss issues of interest or concern under Chatham House rules to help them work together, learn from other sectors and the Panel's suggestions, and drive-up standards.

These meetings continue to focus on supporting consumers with additional service requirements, an area where we have urged CPs to take greater steps to understand

and consistently record the requirements of consumers across the communications sector.

The Panel's policy inputs

The Panel engages with Ofcom's policy teams monthly and the minutes of these meetings can [be found here](#). We also regularly respond to consultations on matters relating to consumers, citizens and micro-businesses in the communications sector and you can find the Panel's consultation responses on our website [here](#).

The Panel will soon be responding to Ofcom's consultation on improving broadband information for customers ([see here](#)). The deadline for responses is 3 May 2023.