



An overview of the Panel’s recent activities

Chair’s highlights - Winter 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

Our [strategic plan 2022-23](#) outlines the Panel’s main areas of focus over the forthcoming year and how, through our regular engagement with Ofcom, governments, industry and others, we 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.

Our current main policy areas of focus are outlined below.

<p>Affordability of communications services and consumer debt</p>	<p>As the cost-of-living crisis continues, we remain extremely concerned about the impacts on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses. We recently checked in with consumer representatives from across the UK to understand any steps that the communications sector could take to ease the financial pressures facing the consumers they represent. We heard a clear message that more needs to be done to promote available support to those who are struggling financially. In addition, communications providers (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.</p> <p>We’ve also raised concerns with Ofcom that recent changes to 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. Ofcom has published consumer information on the recent changes here.</p>
<p>Migration to VoIP</p>	<p>We continue to urge Ofcom, government and industry to implement a coordinated consumer communications campaign to help raise awareness of the migration process. We believe that communications providers need to proactively identify people who may need additional support throughout the</p>



	<p>migration process. We are also concerned about the safety of people who rely on their landline in an emergency, particularly those who have additional support requirements such as telecare users and/or live-in rural areas with poor mobile connectivity. We recently published our latest research on migration to VoIP and consumers’ telephony requirements and have been sharing the findings with key stakeholders to help identify areas where consumers could benefit from further protections.</p>
<p>Postal services</p>	<p>We believe that all consumers should have access to affordable and reliable postal services, regardless of geographical location. We have heard from our stakeholders that postal services in Northern Ireland have been impacted following the EU exit so we commissioned research to explore these issues further and you can find our research findings and recommendations on the Panel’s website here. We are also concerned that ongoing postal strikes are likely to have a significant impact on consumers and delayed letter deliveries could result in consumers missing important healthcare appointments.</p> <p>Following Royal Mail’s announcement that it will phase out non-barcoded stamps, we highlighted to Royal Mail and Ofcom the importance of ensuring that the swap out scheme does not exclude consumers with additional access needs and/or those who are digitally excluded. We were pleased to hear that Royal Mail had opted to include a stamp swap-out form when it wrote to all UK households about the swap-out scheme and has also stocked swap-out forms in local Post Offices.</p>

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.

As referred to above, we recently published [our research findings on postal services in Northern Ireland](#) - this was a quantitative project on consumers’ experiences of postal services in Northern Ireland and any impacts of the EU exit on postal consumers.

We’ve also recently published [our research on migration to VoIP and consumers’ telephony requirements](#). This was a quantitative research project to further



understand consumers' requirements regarding migration to VoIP and telephony during power cuts. Ensuring that consumers, citizens and micro-businesses are able to transition to VoIP safely with minimal risk continues to be a priority for the Panel and we have been sharing our findings widely with Ofcom, governments and industry to highlight where people could be better protected throughout the migration process.

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](#).

Future research projects

We have started scoping out research projects for the forthcoming year. Topics of focus include consumers' experiences of applying for social tariffs, the experiences of communications consumers living in rural areas and any detriment they face; how younger people navigate the communications market; and consumer's experiences of using smaller broadband providers. We look forward to sharing our findings with you.

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.

Our Hubs recently focused on the affordability of communications and the role of CPs in supporting consumers who are struggling financially. Ofcom's affordability policy team provided Hub participants with an overview of Ofcom's ongoing work to help communications consumers who are struggling to afford their communications services. We also asked Hub participants to share what steps Ofcom or industry could take to help consumers, citizens and microbusinesses who are struggling financially, any barriers they face when trying to access support and any examples of best practice in other sectors.

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 provide an opportunity for us to reflect on the progress that we have made over the past year across the Hubs and share how participants' inputs have helped the Panel to feed the voices of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses into the communications sector. We would also like to hear any feedback that Hub participants have on the Hubs themselves.

The Panel will also soon be reviewing its strategic plan for the forthcoming year and will invite contributions from Hub participants on the top communications issues facing the consumers they represent, to be considered during its review of the plan.

Please see below for the dates of upcoming Hubs.

- The Panel's Consumer Stakeholder Hub for Wales - 18 January at 10.30 am
- The Panel's Consumer Stakeholder Hub for Northern Ireland - 24 January at 10.30 am
- The Panel's Consumer Stakeholder Hub for England - 1 February at 2.00 pm
- The Panel's Consumer Stakeholder Hub for Scotland - 3 February 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 further information on our website [here](#).

The Panel's Annual Report 2021-22

We have published our [Annual Report 2021-22](#), which provides an overview of our activities over the last year and how our initiatives to help strengthen the consumer voice in the communications sector are making an impact.