Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD (CCP-ACOD/the Panel) Response to Ofcom's Telecoms Access Review 2026-2031

Background

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 and we have dual membership with Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People.

The Panel pays particular attention to underserved communities, people with access requirements, and people who may be more susceptible to harm, and the needs of micro businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers.

We carry out research, provide advice, and encourage Ofcom, governments, industry, and others to look at issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens, and micro businesses. 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 each Nation to understand the perspectives of consumers in all parts of the UK and input these perspectives to the Panel's consideration of issues.

Our response

The Panel welcomes the opportunity to respond to Ofcom's Telecoms Access Review 2026-2031. We believe that a competitive market can be empowering for consumers who are able to benefit from it.

We recognise the great improvements that have been made by Ofcom in improving telecoms access in recent years, with 70% of premises now having access to at least two networks (one network from another provider in addition to Openreach), and 22% of premises with access to at least three networks.

While recognising the great progress made in driving competition, we have three specific concerns and, in this response, we provide recommendations to help address these issues.

Rollout and competition in rural areas

We support Ofcom's aim to continue to promote efficient commercial deployments to further extend coverage in the remaining, harder to reach, or under-served areas.

We also agree that private sector investment in gigabit-capable networks is unlikely to deliver everywhere, and more remote rural areas may not see the same investment as more urban areas.

The current and proposed ongoing solution is for these areas to rely upon public funding schemes. However, we are concerned that this is in effect accepting that people in remote areas will not have the same level of access to fibre broadband and where they do, they will have greatly reduced choice. The same issue exists with mobile service for rural consumers, meaning the same customers are being impacted twice.

Underpinning our concerns are the following points:

- While the Government has shown commitment to fund rollout, we are concerned that against an increasingly volatile and unpredictable geopolitical context, the availability of funds for the Government to deliver across the UK is not guaranteed. Therefore, rural rollout could be cut or delayed in future because of financial and/or political decisions.
- Whilst Physical Infrastructure Access (PIA) has proved highly successful in driving build by alternative networks (alt-nets) in non-rural areas it is not structured in a way that makes rural build commercially viable. Therefore, any commercial build in rural areas is extremely unlikely, other than by Openreach which has the advantage of existing infrastructure and future savings from copper removal and exchange closure.
- Even where alt-nets have been awarded Project Gigabit contracts there is no guarantee of success, with examples of alt-nets having to pull out post-award. Examples are FullFibre, Voneus and Freedom Fibre.
- A significant proportion of public funding for rural rollout is given to Openreach. Therefore, that proportion is unlikely to have any alternative other than Openreach. Where alt-nets are chosen for public funding, ultimately there is likely to be two choices as Openreach will need to rollout everywhere in order to meet their copper removal and exchange closure strategy.
- Where there is competition, the rollout has been fast. As there is limited competition in rural areas there is less incentive to rollout quickly.

As a result of these concerns, we would like to see further changes to increase the levels of competition in rural areas. Ideally these should use commercial mechanisms rather than relying upon public funding in order to de-risk future rural build.

Regulation transfer from copper to fibre

While we support Ofcom's proposal to progressively transfer regulation (including price protections) from copper to full-fibre services, given the level of fibre rollout and customer dependency, we believe the regulation should be the same across both copper and fibre now rather than in the future.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

For all broadband products, copper and fibre, the KPIs shown are repair, provision, and appointment standards. This means that in theory a service could fault every day but meet KPIs if it is repaired quickly. Therefore, we believe there should additionally be 'availability' targets for VoIP and FTTP and that these should be consistent with historical targets for PSTN and copper broadband.

Summary

We recognise the progress made by Ofcom in improving telecoms access and competition in this sector and highlight our three recommendations to Ofcom in response to this Telecoms Access Review, to ensure stronger competition and consumer benefits going forward:

- Address the lack of access to a competitive market in remote and rural areas - we recommend further changes to increase the levels of competition in rural areas, ideally using commercial mechanisms rather than relying upon public funding in order to de-risk future rural build.
- We recommend that regulation transfer from copper to fibre should be the same across both copper and fibre and should be implemented without delay.
- We recommend additional 'availability' targets for VoIP and FTTP and that these are consistent with historical targets for PSTN and copper broadband.