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**Contacting Communications Providers:**

What can we do when we can’t get through?

**A report on the experiences of consumers who have been
unable to use their preferred communications channel
during the pandemic

Communications Consumer Panel 2021**

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# **Executive Summary**

The Communications Consumer Panel listens to the voices of consumers, citizens and micro businesses, and ensures that they are heard by industry, Ofcom, government and others. As well as engaging with stakeholders who work with consumers on a daily basis, we commission independent research on topics where there is risk of harm to consumers – and particularly to groups who may have vulnerabilities or additional requirements.

**The issue**

Our stakeholders told us that, particularly during the pandemic, consumers sometimes struggle to connect in the way they prefer e.g. on the phone, in a shop, webchat with their communications providers. We therefore commissioned research to understand more about this, and to develop a series of recommendations for policy makers and industry.

The research had two strands

* **Survey**: We commissioned research with a representative sample of over 4,000 adults across the UK to understand the issue.
* **Interviews**: We also commissioned in-depth research to talk to people have conditions or circumstances that might mean they had additional requirements when contacting a communications provider, such as having a physical or mental disability, being older, or having lower levels of literacy.

**Objectives**

Our objectives were to understand:

* Which communication channels do consumers prefer and why?
* To what extent have consumers been required to act differently in the last year because of lockdowns?
* What impact does not being able to use a preferred method of contact have on consumers?
* Are consumers likely to revert to their previous contact preferences when the pandemic retreats?

**Key Insights**

A number of key insights emerged from the research:

1. Most customers (62%) prefer contacting their communications provider by telephone;
2. Almost half of customers (46%) who contacted a provider over the last six months were unable to use their preferred method of contact;
3. Long waits are causing frustration and anxiety, which pushes customers to non-preferred channels and makes it harder to achieve a positive outcome;
4. Using a non-preferred channel can impact outcomes for everyone, but especially for those with additional requirements;
5. There are aspects of the telephone experience beyond wait times that make it harder for some customers with additional requirements, such as the challenge of understanding an agent’s accent, which may be difficult or those with hearing impairments, or the need to follow an agent’s instructions when troubleshooting equipment, which may be difficult for those with cognitive difficulties or physical limitations ;
6. Webchat seems to be under-utilised as a channel due to consumers’ low familiarity with it.
7. If face to face options are unavailable, some customers can find contacting providers particularly challenging;
8. Customer confidence is a strong driver of successful outcomes; and
9. Nearly half (47%) of customers with additional requirements using a non-preferred channel were unable to get the information or outcome they wanted.

**Improving the consumer experience**

The key findings have highlighted what communication providers and policymakers could do to improve consumer experiences:

* Improve awareness of how consumers can register themselves as someone who might have additional requirements;
* Create a more ‘human’ customer service experience for those who prefer face-to-face communications but who cannot access a retail store;
* Designate communication services as ‘essential services’ alongside utilities; and
* Help customers navigate the complexity of the communications sector in the way they feel most comfortable.

**Recommendations**

The Panel proposes the following practical steps for communication providers to take to improve the consumer experience:

* **Offer a range of contact channels so the service is inclusive from the outset** – ask consumers in their first interaction what their preferred channel is, and use consumer research to identify needs more accurately;
* **Raise awareness of the impact on consumers of using a non-preferred channel** – particularly, ensuring that customer service agents are aware of the potential impact of customers using a channel they are not comfortable with;
* **Manage waiting times for telephone support** – potentially introducing and promoting a priority telephone number for consumers with additional requirements;
* **Improve service agents’ ability to adapt to customer needs** – providing training on handling customers with vulnerabilities, and giving them time to listen to customers and treat them efficiently and with compassion;
* **Improve hands-on support when face to face options are unavailable** – making a range of options available when retail outlets are closed, including video calling, written how-to guides and potentially waiving fees for engineer visits for some customers;
* **Boosting the availability and effectiveness of webchat as an alternative channel** – do more to raise awareness of the service, and making it clear when it is staffed by a human, target live agent support to those most in need of reassurance and support; and make chat transcripts available as standard;
* **Address potential communication barriers when using the telephone** –taking action to address the problems that some customers find with technical terms, strong accents or when they have a preference for visual over verbal explanations.

**Background and context**

The Communications Consumer Panel is the statutory consumer panel for the communications sector. In this role and as Ofcom’s Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People, we listen to the voices of consumers, citizens and micro businesses and ensure they are heard by industry, Ofcom, governments and others. We do this by commissioning independent research on topics where we have identified potential or actual consumer harm, and by engaging regularly with stakeholders who work directly with consumers on a daily basis.

Communications services are more important to UK consumers than ever – and their significance has increased further during the pandemic. We have called for industry to provide easy to use, accessible communications channels, enabling any consumer to be able to contact their communications provider without difficulty.

The Panel works with communications providers to help raise standards in customer care, particularly where consumers may have additional requirements/needs. Communications providers are legally required to provide services for consumers who have specific additional requirements[[1]](#footnote-1) but we have urged communications providers to go beyond their basic legal obligations. We have worked with communications providers at the Panel’s Industry Forum to encourage them to design processes and policies inclusively from the outset, embedding fairness, empowerment and inclusivity into their culture, with accountability from senior leadership through to frontline staff.

During the pandemic our stakeholders told us that consumers have sometimes struggled to connect with their communications provider in their preferred way. We commissioned research to understand more about this and those insights form the basis of the recommendations for policy makers and industry in this report.

We commissioned research with over 4,000 people across the UK, to understand the issue. The survey asked participants[[2]](#footnote-2) whether they had used their preferred contact channel and what their experience of using that channel was.

Flowing from that, we commissioned in-depth research to talk to people who needed to contact their provider in the past six months and had been unable to use their preferred channel of communication[[3]](#footnote-3). In addition, participants were recruited to have conditions or circumstances which might mean they had additional requirements when contacting a communications provider. These were:

* + Being older (75+)
	+ Having a physical disability
	+ Having a mental disability
	+ Having lower levels of digital confidence
	+ Having lower levels of literacy/numeracy
	+ Having English as a 2nd language
	+ Financial vulnerability
	+ Reduced hours/furloughed/redundancy due to COVID.

This qualitative research enabled us to get ‘beneath the surface’, to understand more about the experiences of consumers who might have additional requirements that made them more vulnerable in the market.

**Objectives and methodology:**

Our objectives were to understand:

1. Which communications channels do consumers prefer and why?
2. To what extent have consumers been required to act differently in the last year because of lockdowns?
3. What impact does not being able to use their preferred method of contact have on consumers?
4. Are consumers likely to revert to their previous contact preferences when the pandemic retreats?

The findings of both research studies are discussed here, with the Panel’s [draft] recommendations for action.

**Key findings**

* **Most customers prefer contacting their communications provider by telephone.** Telephone is popular because it can serve the needs both of customers looking for reassurance and practical support, and those seeking convenience and control. It tends to be readily available from all providers, and accessible to all including those with lower mobility, low digital skills or limited dexterity.



* Almost half (46%) of customers who contacted a provider over the previous six months were unable to use their preferred method of contact at some point. **The most frequently cited reasons for customers being unable to use their preferred method of contact were:** long wait times/not being able to get through, or the provider not offering that channel. [note: percentages to be added]
* **Long waits are causing frustration and anxiety**. The longer wait times to speak to advisors during the pandemic are causing stress, particularly in the absence of information about how long customers can expect to wait. This may push customers to non-preferred channels, or make it harder for customers to focus and achieve a positive outcome when they do finally reach an advisor.
* **Using a non-preferred channel can impact outcomes for everyone, but especially for people with additional requirements.** Customers with additional requirements are already more likely during the pandemic to report that their provider interactions have been more stressful than usual. If they have been unable to use their preferred channel their experience has often deteriorated further. The survey reveals that one in five of those in this situation gave up on their most recent contact because they were unable to get the help they required.

*“I think I was on for a good 20 minutes, about that. I think it tells you you’re in a queue… I thought it’s going to be quicker to try and do something a different way… I just went onto the app after that. I thought there would be something on there, and there is – but it just sends you to the website.”* Female, 44, mental disability, physical disability

* **There are aspects of the telephone experience beyond wait times that make it harder for some customers with additional requirements**. People with anxiety can struggle if they are put on hold for extended periods, or if the call handler lacks empathy and fails to take account of their needs – for instance, by talking too fast or using jargon. People with impaired hearing and those who struggle with accents may find it difficult to understand what is being said without visual cues. Those with physical or cognitive impairments may find it difficult to complete tasks that the advisor asks them to do when they call to resolve a fault or for practical assistance.

*“I would feel anxious talking to people down the phone… I’m used to talking to people face to face… I would tighten up, don’t know what to say – don’t know what it is about the phone. I’m afraid they’ll ask me something I don’t know.”* Male, 56, low digital skills

*“It’s harder as you get older, like when I was younger it was fine but as I am getting older, it’s as if my mind is not taking it in. Maybe if I’m talking to someone face to face and they have an accent I can sometimes make that out better but because you are not face to face it’s kind of hard to take it all in.”* Female, 67, Physical disability

* **Webchat seems to be under-utilised as a channel due to low familiarity levels with it**. Many customers are unaware that this channel exists, and those that do may think that it only provides automated responses rather than an interaction with a human advisor. It can work well for many customers, allowing people to go at their own pace and particularly useful as it can provide a written record of the contact – an important advantage that should perhaps be offered automatically. But it may work less well with those with lower digital skills, and often requires careful handling by the advisor to put customers at ease and guide them through the process.

*“[Webchat] was a new experience for me; I hadn’t done it before…. It was a little bit frustrating to be honest because there was times when the person had responded to me and then I’d typed out my response and they didn’t respond for like two to three minutes so I am sitting there holding my phone looking at a screen and nothing is happening.” Male, 51, made redundant during the pandemic*

*“They had to put me through to another department on the webchat and I was a bit in limbo for a little while and I wasn’t sure if I was connected and again that was a good 10 minutes… there needed to be something on there to let me know that I hadn’t been disconnected and there wasn’t so I just hung around and hoped I’d get on there”* Female, 41, mental disability, physical disability

* **If face to face options are unavailable, some customers can find contacting providers particularly challenging**. Some less confident customers feel they achieve better outcomes in store – they find it easier to build a rapport with staff, and to inform the provider if they are struggling. In store, customers can be shown how to do something, or it can be done for them if need be. The research suggests that engineer visits may be required for customers that may struggle to resolve their issues themselves.
* **Customer confidence is a strong driver of successful outcomes**. Less confident customers appear to struggle more to understand what is being discussed, particularly when it is technical in nature, and to be more likely to give up before their issue is resolved. Lack of confidence can be exacerbated by highly scripted or robotic service experiences, making people feel unable to control the process, or when there’s a lack of clarity from the advisor about what has been agreed.

*“I don’t download anything because I’m too scared... I’m too scared because of viruses and that sort of stuff… technology’s not good for me.”* Male, 41, mental disability, low digital skills

*“It just went round in circles … it was like chatting to a robot, which in fact it was as it actually said ‘I am a robot’ at the start”* Male, 72, low digital skills

* **Customers have attitudinal preferences when contacting providers.** These range from reassurance and practical support to convenience and control.
* **Channel preference tends to be driven by a combination of customer needs and the ability to access different channels**. People needing reassurance and practical support seekers tend to be more drawn towards in-store contact. People who preferred to be able to control their contact and for it to be convenient were drawn to online channels like webchat or email. Those who struggled with manual dexterity might have problems interacting using a phone keypad, while those without a computer would be unable to access webchat. But in general, both groups tended to opt for telephone if their first choice of channels was not available.

*“On the email I could have looked and it would have told me, I’ve got no record of it now at all.”* Female, 66, physical disability

* **When customers are unable to use their preferred channel, resolving their issue takes longer and leads to higher levels of stress, and poorer outcomes**. The attitudes of individual frontline customer support agents can be key:

*“He couldn’t find any record of me asking for it be cancelled… so he said what I can do is cancel it but I won’t be able to remove the payment for the products because it’s been a month … at this point I was getting pretty frustrated because he was just saying I can’t find any records and I was saying you need to look properly so eventually I just hung up at the time.*

*So I called up again and I spoke to someone different now… she just sat there and listened and let me get it all out… she was able to find it [the notes] and she put the credit into my account… so she sorted that out and asked me if I needed any more help and I said no thanks you’ve basically fulfilled everything I’ve needed thank you very much.”* Male, 22, reduced hours due to Covid-19/furlough

* **When consumers couldn’t use their preferred channel of communication, some would delay contact with their communications provider.** People with a preference for face-to-face interaction, in particular, may put off dealing with critical issues until their preferred channel became available or they had no choice other than to try a less-preferred method of contact:

*“I was due for an upgrade but I hadn’t done anything about it as the shop was shut but then I realised my payments had gone up so I had to deal with it immediately”* Female, 32, low fluency/English as 2nd language
* **Using a non-preferred channel can have a significant impact on outcomes for all customers, but the impact on consumers with additional requirements is particularly clear**.

*“It’s an embarrassment too to me. When I’m talking to the likes of [provider] stores I could say to them look I have a bit of problem here understanding things. I just need you to explain to me a bit better, they will. But when you’re on the phone they don’t have time for you.”* Male, 41, mental disability

* **Almost half (47%) of customers with additional requirements using a non-preferred channel were unable to get the information or outcome they wanted.** This is significantly higher than both customers with additional requirements using a preferred channel (31%) and customers without additional requirements communicating via a non-preferred channel (35%)

**Case studies**The research found that while there was a range of reasons and circumstances that influenced consumers’ preferences for a particular communications channel, there were two broad drivers that help to explain what a consumer prefers:

* reassurance and practical support and
* convenience and control

The case studies below tell the story of two consumers at opposite ends of this spectrum, and who have additional requirements.

**Case study 1 – ‘Reassurance and practical support seeker’**

**The consumer:** ‘Janet’, aged 67, lives with her son in Scotland.  She lives with Cerebral Palsy which means she is unable to use her right arm, she has recently had an operation for cancer and has a heart condition.

**Channel Preferences:** Face to face (used the telephone out of necessity during pandemic)

Janet prefers to communicate face to face with her communications provider as she can struggle to understand people on the telephone and also finds they struggle to understand her own accent.

Janet says she also struggles when it comes to fixing faults herself on the telephone, as physically she is often unable to do what is required. If she finds it too difficult, she has to wait and call back at a time when her son is there. She would prefer to have an engineer come out to resolve the issue.

On her most recent contact to her landline provider to fix a fault, she had to use the phone due to stores being shut. Her landline and broadband are with her mobile provider and she normally gets her son to drive her to the store to chat through any issues.

**Contact Experience:** On the first phone contact both Janet and the call agent struggled to understand each other so she asked to speak to someone else. She tried to repeat the issue to the second person but they also struggled to communicate so she asked to speak to the supervisor. The supervisor then called her back approximately an hour later.

The supervisor asked her to check her connection which she did after telling them it might take a while as she might struggle. It was eventually fixed by them sending her a new ‘modem’ which her son set up for her and the landline phone is now working better.

**Impact of not being able to use the preferred method of contact: Difficulty, stress, physical pain, delay.**

Janet felt that it all took longer than it would have done face to face (she estimated it took two hours in total), she found the experience ‘stressful’, and was not confident it had been sorted until the new ‘modem’ arrived. She felt it would have been quicker and easier face to face as you “know who you are speaking to in the shop”. She also had to stand up during the call due to where her landline is which she finds tiring and she doesn’t use her mobile due to not getting very good reception in the house.

*“I’ll say ‘I’ve got Cerebral Palsy’ and they say ‘what is that’ and I say ‘I cannae use my right arm’. They say ‘right that’s fine’ and then they go and ask you to hold one button in and press that button and use the remote control. Och it’s a nightmare!”*

**Case study 2 – ‘Convenience and control seeker’**

**The Consumer: ‘**Pauline’ is aged 66, married, lives with her husband in Wales. She has bone cancer, rarely leaves the house and is in bed a lot with the pain - “I can’t lift a saucepan.”

Pauline says she finds she gets very ‘uptight’ when dealing with communications providers and ‘doesn’t know what to say’. She also lives with anxiety as a result of her condition. She lacks digital confidence and has low confidence when dealing with providers.

**Communications Channel Preferences: Email (used the telephone out of necessity during pandemic)**

Pauline seeks convenience and control in contacts with providers. She prefers email to get in touch as she can do it in her own time and has a record of what is said, so this makes it easier for her to remember and less stressful. She also prefers to email providers as she struggles to hear what they are saying on the phone - she can hear better using video calling and uses this on her mobile to chat to her family. However, it can take a while to get a reply to an email, so when there is something more time critical, she is forced to call up despite finding the telephone stressful and challenging. On occasion Pauline gets worked up to the point that she has to put the phone down and abandon the contact.

**Contact Experience:** Pauline called her broadband provider recently as her grandchildren had come over and were wanting to play online but the connection was too slow. Her husband had also seen that her bill had gone up and £70 had been taken from her account and she didn’t know why.

She considered emailing but thought it would take too long to resolve the issue using email (particularly as things have been slow during Covid) and her grandchildren were impatient to get it fixed. Her grandson pressured her to call up instead. Her husband had recently mentioned that their most recently bill had been higher than normal so she also thought she could mention this on the call.

Pauline phoned the provider and found that they had somehow put her on a different package with reduced speeds. She remained confused as to why she had been charged £70, but she got put back onto a cheaper contract and in the end they resolved the slow connection issue.

**Impact of not being able to use the preferred method of contact: although it was Pauline’s choice to use her less preferred contact channel this time, the experience was stressful and caused anxiety.**

At her own admission she was uncertain as to what had happened on the call Pauline found the contact stressful and confusing - and didn’t feel that the person on the other end of the call understood how she was feeling. It took a long time and she could also hardly hear. In order to resolve the issue she had to threaten to leave the provider during the call. The issue was eventually resolved so she was OK in the end as ‘the children were happy’. She doesn’t have a written record of what happened to help her remember. Overall, she found the experience stressful.

*“I hated it, first of all they say press so and so and so and so for this that and the other and I thought I haven’t got a clue what you press for that. And so I thought I would press one and you would get through to someone and it worked…it really winds me up.”*

*“I got so worked up it was terrible… usually when I email anyone I’m OK, not so bad, but because [broadband] was off and I had to phone them that did make it worse.”*

# **Recommendations**

The key findings have highlighted that changes by communications providers and policy making could make a significant improvement to consumers’ experiences:

* improving awareness of how consumers can register themselves as someone who might have **additional requirements;**
* creating a **more ‘human’ customer service experience** for consumers whose preference would be face-to-face communication, but who cannot access a retail store, for example, video chat as an option;
* Communications services being seen as an **‘essential service’** alongside utilities: the rest of the UK needs to be brought in line with the NI in terms of communications retail premises being considered as part of an essential service in a crisis such as a pandemic; and
* **Helping customers navigate the complexity of the communications sector in the way they feel most comfortable** – offering a choice of channels to make being a consumer easier and using that information smartly.

Practical steps the Panel recommends are undertaken to improve the consumer experience are:

**Communications providers should provide a range of contact channels to provide a service that is inclusive from the outset.**

* Communications providers should ask consumers in their first interactions what their preferred channel is. This information should then be available to agents dealing with customers, so that they are aware when a consumer is contacting them through a non-preferred channel.
* Research as well as communications providers’ own consumer outreach activities should be used to inform communications providers on what is needed by consumers and why.

**Raising awareness of the impact of using a non-preferred channel**

* It can be harder for consumers to achieve a positive outcome when contacting communication providers if their preferred channels are not available. For instance, if someone is used to going to a retail store to resolve their mobile phone issues in person, the experience of having to do this over the phone or via webchat can lead to them becoming stressed or discouraged before their issue is resolved.
* Communications providers should ensure that customer service agents are aware that some customers may be using a channel they are less confident with, and the possible implications of this.

**Managing waiting times for telephone support**.

* Ofcom should encourage providers to find ways to cut waiting times, particularly for those customer groups where waiting might cause additional issues and potential negative consequences.
* Communications providers should have a priority telephone number for consumers with additional requirements and should promote this along with other services such as text relay and video relay.
* Governments should recognise telecoms as an essential service and should require communications providers’ websites and apps to meet recognised standards.

**Improving service agents’ ability to adapt to customer needs**.

* Customers can be highly reliant on service agents adapting to their individual needs. Service agents need to be able to spot customers who require extra help.
* Providers should provide training for all customer-facing staff, including on sensitivity to less visible conditions such as anxiety, or life circumstances such as low literacy or financial vulnerability.
* Agents should be given time to treat all customers with respect and actively listen to what the customer needs, treating them efficiently and compassionately.

**Improving hands-on support when face-to-face options are unavailable**.

* Some customers need providers to do more to bridge the gap in terms of practical help when in-person retail outlets are closed. Providers should make a range of options available when retail outlets are closed, including video calling, sending links to relevant information or how-to guides in written or video format, or (in some circumstances) waiving fees for engineer visits for older or less confident customers.
* Plain English and Easy Read guides should be available for consumers who have low literacy or low fluency in English.

**Boosting the availability and effectiveness of webchat as an alternative channel**.

* Webchat can be a good alternative for some customers, but this research suggests it is being under-utilised at present. Providers should do more to promote and explain webchat as a contact option (for instance, while customers are on hold on the phone), making clear that the service is staffed by a human agent responding in real time where this is the case, and targeting live agent support towards customers needing more reassurance and support.
* Providers should always offer consumers the option to receive a record of their webchat conversation.

**Addressing potential communication barriers when using the telephone**. This research has highlighted factors that can cause

* Providers should take action to address the problems that some customers face when talking to providers on the telephone, including the use of technical terms, strong accents or a preference for visual over verbal explanations.
* Providers should improve training for staff to be aware of customers who are becoming stressed by telephone interaction, provide the options of access to UK-based customer service agents for customers struggling with strong accents, links to support information or video calls.
* Providers should train customer-facing staff not to use jargon or intimidating language and should use consistently easy to understand language in all their consumer communications.
1. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/what-is-ofcom/consumer-vulnerability> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Survey participants had been recruited face to face before the pandemic [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The in-depth research involved 20 interviews conducted by telephone, online or using pen and paper. We also drew on some insight from 20 interviews commissioned in parallel for Ofcom which use a similar guide but which explore the experiences of people who are potentially ‘vulnerable’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)