

**Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD**

**on 22 March 2018 at 10.30**

**Riverside House, 2A Southwark Bridge Road, London SE1 9HA**

**Present**

Consumer Panel/ACOD

Jo Connell (Chair)

Amanda Britain

Jaya Chakrabarti

Rick Hill

Chris Holland

Craig Tillotson

Richard Williams

In attendance

Jenny Borritt

David Edwards

Adam Gayton

Fiona Lennox

A colleague from the Competition and Markets Authority (item 9)

Ofcom colleagues

**1. Welcome and introduction**

The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting.

**2. Declarations of Members' interests**

Chris Holland reminded Members of his role as Independent Complaint Reviewer for the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR) in anticipation of item 5 on ADR.

**3. Minutes of the meeting on 22 February 2018 and matters arising**

Subject to minor amendment, the minutes of the meeting of 22 February were **APPROVED** for signature by the Chair.

Members **NOTED** that:

- the Panel's consultation on its draft work plan would close the following day; subsequent to review of submissions, the work plan would be recirculated to Members; and the aim was to publish the work plan by the end of March;
- Ofcom's access and inclusion team would be invited to meet the Panel to discuss the team's research plans;
- Futuresight was in the process of drafting a report based on the findings of its research on effective complaints handling by

communications providers (CP) and undertaken on behalf of the Panel;

- a Member had met with the Ofcom project team to discuss in detail Panel concerns relating to Ofcom's review of the market for standalone landline telephone services; those concerns were outlined and assurances had been received that these matters had been considered at length prior to Ofcom's policy decision; and it was Ofcom's view that the policy objective had been met and was not in breach of competition law;
- a Member had met officials in the Northern Ireland Executive to discuss broadband rollout, a further meeting was expected to take place before the Summer.

#### 4. Consumer update

Issues arising from the update grid and related issues included:

- complaints handling, the Panel encouraged Ofcom to publish as much complaints data as possible, and there was discussion of how Ofcom categorised complaints and of the monthly industry ADR metrics received by Ofcom;
- the transparency of customer billing and unit call charges;
- review of standalone landline call charges;
- implementation of automatic compensation, it was understood that EE and Plusnet would be joining the scheme;
- and whether there was consumer confusion about the term 'fibre' in the marketing of broadband services.

#### 5. ADR update

Members:

- **NOTED** the positive impact of Ofcom's programme of improvements, following a review, on signposting and the increased number of complaints reaching ADR;
- held the view that there were more improvements to be achieved;
- strongly encouraged Ofcom to provide more meaningful data to allow consumers to compare CPs;
- discussed issues including volumes of ADR cases pursued in the absence of deadlock letters;
- and the accessibility of ADR schemes, ie consumers' ability to engage with the ADR schemes via alternative formats.

#### 6. Call costs (directory enquiries)

Ofcom colleagues updated Members on work undertaken to understand the market for directory enquiries, including research, complaints analysis and data collected from industry. It was **NOTED** that:

- DQ service charges had increased significantly in recent years, in a context of declining DQ call volumes and revenues; there had been

numerous instances of bill shock; and the Panel had significant concerns about the impact on consumers.

Issues raised in discussion included:

- voice announcements on call charges;
- costs to deliver DQ services;
- the state and future viability of the DQ market;
- and access to a free DQ service for consumers with a visual impairment or other disabilities.

The Panel welcomed Ofcom's work but was concerned that:

- older and vulnerable consumers made up a large proportion of DQ users; and were less likely to be online with access to an alternative means of obtaining the telephone number they needed.

## **7. Price Comparison Websites**

Members were updated on Ofcom's accreditation scheme for price comparison websites (PCW) and covering issues including:

- the requirements for accreditation;
- how the scheme was administered;
- why sites chose to be accredited by Ofcom;
- and related work undertaken by other regulators, an example being the review of digital comparison tools undertaken by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

Issues discussed included:

- the accessibility of PCWs;
- access to price comparison information for consumers who were not online or with limited access to the internet;
- and the efficacy of the scheme when the well-known comparison sites had not sought accreditation.

## **8. Home broadband**

Members were briefed on the findings of Ofcom's research into the performance of residential UK fixed broadband services. The research was expected to be published shortly, including visual tools and a consumer guide.

The Panel expressed significant concern about the detriment suffered by consumers unable to receive a decent broadband service and issues discussed included:

- broadband interventions based on 'value for money' criteria and how these should be defined;
- the need to target farms as rural businesses, many were on residential services;
- an apparent decline in average download speeds;
- and whether customers were on the best broadband deal to meet their requirements.

## 9. Digital Comparison Tools

A colleague from the CMA briefed Members on the findings from a 1-year CMA study and report on digital comparison tools (DCT), ie digital intermediary services used by consumers to compare and potentially switch or purchase products from a range of businesses. The CMA's analysis had drawn on sources including research and stakeholder events such as roundtables and workshops. Competition was found to be effective in the provision of DCTs but these had developed and were used in some sectors more than others, eg 44% of consumers had used a car insurance site in the previous 12 months, 16% had used a broadband DCT.

## 10. Comparing Service Quality

Ofcom colleagues:

- shared emerging findings to be published in a report on communications provider-specific performance metrics;
- and outlined Ofcom's proposed approach to communicating the findings, which would include separate briefing sessions with individual CPs and fact sheets for consumers; and work undertaken to obtain new information from providers for future publications.

Issues discussed included:

- what constituted a good score (Ofcom did not have benchmark values) and drivers of positive scores;
- performance variation on the same network, eg by Mobile Virtual Network Operators;
- types of consumers making complaints;
- a possible joint Panel/Ofcom event at which the Panel could present the findings of its current research project on effective complaints handling;
- and the importance of informing consumers and driving up CP performance.

## 11. Panel research

Members had previously raised topics for Panel research to be undertaken in the new financial year. There was careful discussion of these topics and Members took account of suggestions made in responses to the Panel's draft work plan to date, set against criteria including the Panel's remit and issues of timing, duplication, impact and potential for follow-up activity by the Panel.

## 12. Any other business

A Member reported briefly on an event she would be attending.

.....Chair .....Date