Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD response to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee call for evidence in relation to Digital Skills

1. The Communications Consumer Panel (the Panel) and the Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People (ACOD) welcome this opportunity to respond to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee's call for evidence in relation to Digital Skills. The Panel works to protect and promote people's interests in the communications sector. We are an independent body set up under the Communications Act 2003. The Panel carries out research, provides advice and encourages Ofcom, government, the EU, industry and others to look at issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and microbusinesses.

2. The Panel pays particular attention to the needs of older people and people with disabilities, the needs of people in rural areas and people on low incomes, and the needs of micro businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers. Through its Members, the Panel represents the interests of consumers in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. Following the alignment of ACOD with the Panel, the Panel is more alert than ever to the interests of older and disabled consumers and citizens.
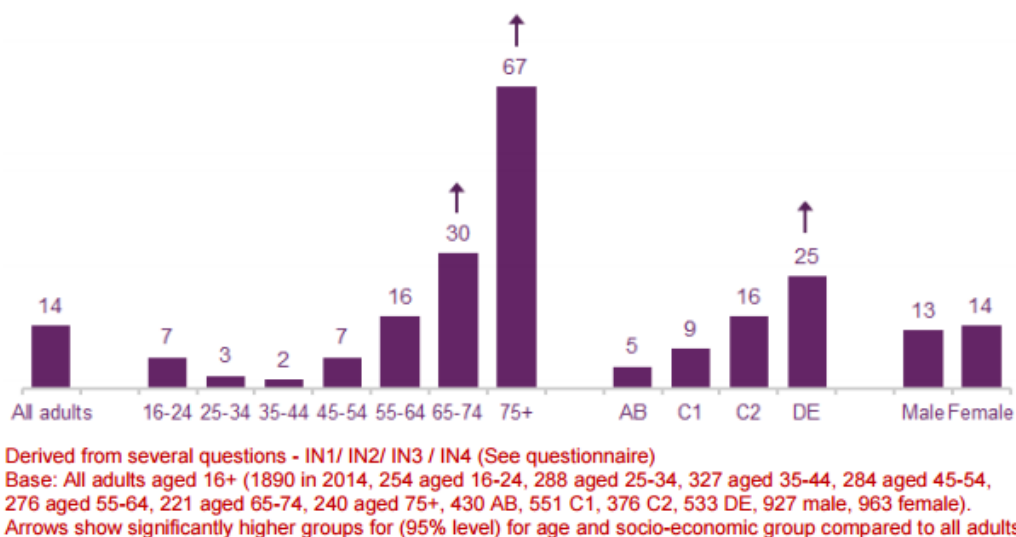
Levels of Digital Engagement

3. While the advantages of online connectivity apply to all groups in the community, they are especially relevant to disabled people, those on a low income and older people - many of whom may be less mobile than younger people. And yet we know that the take-up and participation in the digital world is unequal and levels of use of the internet vary significantly across the population. Older and disabled people, and those in low-income households, are much less likely to use the internet at home.

4. Ofcom's 2015 Communications Market Report (CMR)[1] highlighted that home internet access among UK adults stood at 85% in Q1 2015. The impact of using communications technology should not be underestimated - seven in ten (69%) internet users say that technology has changed the way they communicate and six in ten (59%) say these new communications methods have made life easier. Levels of agreement for all statements are higher among 16-24 year olds and lower among those aged 55+.

5. The Panel and ACOD believe that all consumers should be able to benefit from the opportunities and enjoyment that communications services can bring. According to

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[1] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr14/UK_4.pdf

Ofcom's latest Adult Media Use and Attitudes Report[2], 14% of UK adults remain not online (for any reason) and are more likely to be aged over 65, and in DE households. Two in three people aged 75+ are non-users of the internet. The figure below illustrates this further and shows that while 14% of adults in the UK are non-users of the internet, this this is more likely for those aged 65-74 (30%) and 75+ (67%) as well as among DEs (25%). While not shown in the chart there has been no significant change in this incidence of non-users among all adults since 2013 (17% in 2013 vs. 14% in 2014).

Figure 186: Incidence of non-use of the internet, by demographic group

Derived from several questions - IN1/ IN2/ IN3 / IN4 (See questionnaire)
Base: All adults aged 16+ (1890 in 2014, 254 aged 16-24, 288 aged 25-34, 327 aged 35-44, 284 aged 45-54, 276 aged 55-64, 221 aged 65-74, 240 aged 75+, 430 AB, 551 C1, 376 C2, 533 DE, 927 male, 963 female).
Arrows show significantly higher groups for (95% level) for age and socio-economic group compared to all adults

6. The CMR notes that fifteen per cent of adults did not have household access to the internet in Q1 2015. The majority of these said they did not intend to get access (12%); a further 1% of respondents were not sure if they were likely to get access, and 2% said they were likely to get access in the next 12 months.

7. Ofcom research shows that 44% of adults who did not have a home broadband connection in Q1 2015 did not think they needed one. This was the most frequently-cited reason given for not having home broadband. The second most frequently-cited reason for not having home broadband connection was that the respondent did not want to own a computer (22%), while 21% believed that home broadband was too expensive, 20% said that they were too old to use the internet, and 17% did not believe that they had the knowledge or skills to use it. Twelve per cent said they were likely to get a home broadband connection in the next year. There were no significant differences for any of these answers when compared with last year

8. Ofcom's recently published research on disabled consumers' access to, and use of, communication devices and services has also highlighted that access was generally lower among consumers with a disability than among those without. While internet access has increased among disabled people since Ofcom's 2013 report, it remains significantly lower for those consumers with a disability (65%) than for non-disabled consumers (88%). Further analysis found that not all disabled consumers with access to communication devices and services were making personal use of them. A fifth of disabled consumers said their

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[2] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/media-lit-10years/2015_Adults_media_use_and_attitudes_report.pdf

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disability prevented their use of at least some communication devices and services, with differences seen among consumers with different disability types.

9. Whilst solutions may be complex, the issue itself is straightforward: 23% of UK adults still don't possess the basic digital skills[3] necessary to take advantage of technology. As Go ON UK note, it is not just individuals that are missing out on the benefits of being online. 23% of small businesses don't have basic digital skills. Without these, these SMEs are missing out on their share of the UK's annual website sales of £193 billion. Not only that, but they also risk losing potential business because they can't be found online, may be missing an opportunity to deliver a better, more efficient service to their customers, and may not be maximising their competitiveness. In the charity sector the challenge is even greater - over half of all UK charities are lacking basic digital skills.

Why digital engagement matters

10. We now live in an era in which we are seeing many Government services become "digital by default" and where being online is becoming more and more a necessity of life and less and less of an optional extra. An increasing number of commercial services are only available online - or delivered offline in a way that effectively penalises users, through high cost or lower quality. Those people still functionally offline will be at an increasing disadvantage and risk being left behind in terms of ease, convenience, inclusion, speed and cost.

11. While the Panel has been working with the Government Digital Service to support the development of the assisted digital offer, it is our belief that unless fundamental action is taken, the digital divide risks becoming an ever greater digital gulf as the distance increases between those who are online and those who remain firmly anchored in the offline world. The potential consequences of this exclusion are serious: for individuals, especially those who are more vulnerable; for society; for business; and for the UK economy. Digital literacy, especially on security and privacy matters, is going to be critical. The Panel will shortly be commissioning research to update its previous work[4] on consumers' and citizens' understanding of, and attitudes in these areas.

12. The Panel has long highlighted that digital engagement is a key component of modern society. The lack of engagement amongst some groups – because of poor access, affordability, a lack of skills, confidence or motivation - impacts not only on them directly, but also on the overall strength of the economy, impacting the broader population. The Tinder Foundation, alongside Go ON UK, has published a new report *The economic impact of Basic Digital Skills and inclusion in the UK*[5] that sets out the huge financial and social benefits of everyone in the UK having the digital skills they need to survive in our digital world. The report estimates that over the ten year period between 2016 and 2025, 4.9 million of those who do not possess Basic Digital Skills will get online without additional help, but the remaining 7.9 million (15% of the adult population) will

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[3] http://www.go-on.co.uk/issue/

[4] Online Personal Data: the Consumer Perspective http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/online-personal-data/online-personal-data-1

[5] http://www.tinderfoundation.org/our-thinking/research-publications/economic-impact-basic-digital-skills-and-inclusion-uk

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need support to gain Basic Digital Skills at an estimated cost of between £45 and £334 per person. The report sets out the six main benefits to individuals and to the Government of equipping 100% of the population with Basic Digital Skills.

Consumer Framework for Digital Participation and Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement

13.   In 2010, to help government and others increase the number of people using the internet, the Panel developed the Consumer Framework for Digital Participation[6]. The Framework sets out the citizen and consumer needs that underpin digital participation. It starts with the consumer experience and breaks down the journey that people make in getting online and then enjoying the benefits. It specifically addresses the issue of what consumers themselves have said they need to get online. Targeted at government and industry, the Framework brings together all the different elements that are needed to provide the help and support for people to get online and get the most benefit from the internet.

The Consumer Framework for Digital Participation
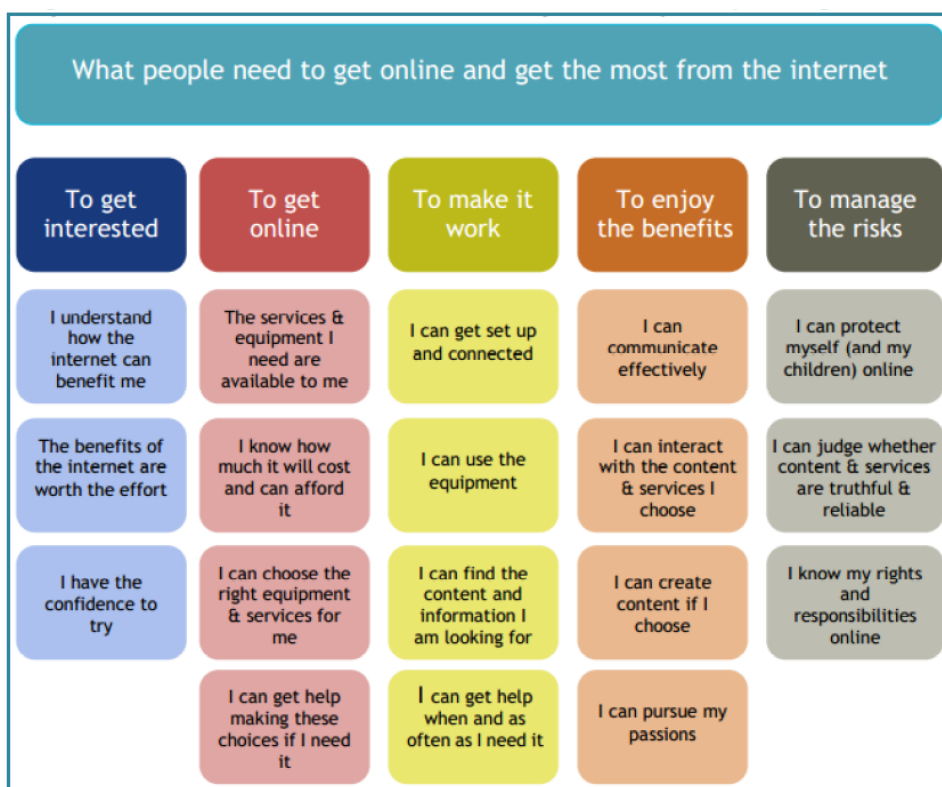
14.   The Framework was a key element of the National Plan for Digital Participation and was used by the Digital Participation Consortium to help target and prioritise its work. The intention was that, by putting consumers first, the Framework would enable policymakers and service deliverers to:

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[6] http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/downloads/what-we-do/previous-projects/access-and-inclusion/FINAL%20DP%20SUMMARY.pdf

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- **Highlight the particular needs of different groups:** different groups of people need different things to help them get online and get the most out of the internet.
- **Identify gaps and overlaps in current provision:** there are lots of different digital participation projects and initiatives being delivered by many different organisations across the country.
- **Target new provision:** identifying the particular needs of different groups and gaps in current provision, to enable new activity to be targeted in a way that achieves the maximum impact with the available resources.
- **Assess progress:** the Framework can be used to assess progress and evaluate activity and initiatives against how well they meet consumers' needs.

15. Subsequent research by the Panel in 2011/12, Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement[7], consolidated stakeholders' experiences and learning in supporting online participation among people who are less digitally engaged, and gathered information about supporting people to take the next steps online. The study confirmed that some people's online journeys are long and complex. Starting the journey does not, in itself, guarantee that people will become confident internet users, able to function and interact with services online. Some will continue to need support to overcome challenges and go on to maximise the benefits of being online.

16. The elements of the Framework categorised as 'to make it work' and 'to enjoy the benefits' appeared to represent the tipping point for many of those we spoke to in our research. But these elements currently appear to attract less attention and resource than the initial push to get people online. If a user's journey is not supported adequately, so that it is sustained and developed, the initial investment in training may go to waste. The Panel has encouraged Government and providers to continue to use the Consumer Framework for Digital Participation to assess progress made and address gaps.

17. Building on both the Consumer Framework and informed by our 'Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement' research, the Panel identified a number of areas for strategic focus and made a series of recommendations for government, policy makers and those delivering on the ground. In the Panel's view:

- the challenge to increase participation is underestimated;
- meeting the challenge is underfunded; and
- people who remain unable to access online services will suffer increasing detriment if the challenge isn't met.

Digital Engagement support

18. In terms of digital engagement support, we would encourage further consideration of the opportunity to further consolidate and extend the availability of support at points of need, for example by strengthening the relationship between Job Centres and Benefits Offices and the providers of expert help e.g. UK Online Centres - so that those most in need, and potentially those who are currently most digitally unengaged and hard to reach, can (a) get assistance with what they're there for; and (b) receive encouragement to learn skills

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[7] http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/bridging-the-gap-sustaining-online-engagement/bridging-the-gap-sustaining-online-engagement-2

to help them in future, so that they can better "do it themselves" , resulting in greater confidence and steps on the path to overcoming general digital reluctance.

19. Ofcom's 2014 Communications Market Report[8] highlighted how, as a result of growing up in the digital age, 12-15 year olds are developing fundamentally different communication habits than older generations. It is vital that educationalists are aware of, and engaged with, this trend and what it means for how children are taught. However it is also important to bear in mind that a) being able to use devices technically does not always equate to having an appropriate level of cognitive skill to safely, securely and successfully manage online engagement in all its forms and b) it is likely that not all young people will remain fully digitally engaged throughout their lives.

20. We would also strongly support the establishment and/or consolidation of comprehensive digital help and free access at locations people might regularly use, e.g. schools and colleges open to local citizens after school hours, post offices and libraries under a unified programme of government digital help for citizens. We believe, too, that there should be a free helpline for users of government digital services to provide technical as well as specific service support.

21. We believe that libraries have a vital role to play, in conjunction with other locally based agencies as noted above, in supporting and encouraging people who are not fully digitally engaged. They have the potential to deliver a well-supported, safe and sustained learning environment that excludes no-one. Commercial organisations, including banks and communications providers, also have a role to play – as in the Go ON UK model. As society changes, this is more important than ever before, so that we ensure that more vulnerable consumers and citizens are empowered and are not left behind.

Infrastructure

22. Consumers' use of fixed internet and mobile voice/data has changed significantly in recent years and these services are now essential components of many people's everyday lives. The Panel has previously called for digital engagement and usage to be on an equal footing with broadband roll out and speed in respect of policy and funding. Access to good quality services remains vital and in relation to this, in the Panel's view, sub-optimal delivery of communications services as a result of inadequate infrastructure – be it a lack of fast broadband or the absence of mobile voice and/or data coverage - has long since ceased to be a matter of simple irritation for consumers and micro-businesses, and is now an issue of real detriment.

23. We're pleased to see that Ofcom's Connected Nations 2015 report[9] recognised that while there has been good progress on the availability and take-up of communications services, there is still more to do to improve broadband and mobile availability and quality for consumers and businesses around the country.

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[8] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/communications-market-reports/cmr14/uk/

[9] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/infrastructure/2015/downloads/connected_nations2015.pdf

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24. The needs of consumers and citizens must be central to policy making, so it is vital that delivery of a high quality service experience is consistently achieved and consumers and citizens are not excluded or deterred from effectively participating in the digital world. It is vital that citizen interests are taken into account in relation to both the provision of infrastructure and quality of experience.

25. Consumers, citizens and micro-businesses are increasingly reliant on mobile devices. Excellent network coverage and call quality combined with the provision of better information will help people make better choices – and make greater use of the functions and applications that they want, which in turn we believe will drive up service levels and ensure a thriving competitive market. Along with the Mobile Infrastructure Project, the Panel has welcomed the 4G coverage obligation of 98% indoor coverage UK wide, and 95% in each Nation by the end of 2017 as tools to increase rural broadband and mobile voice/data coverage. We have encouraged close monitoring of their roll out and efficiency. However there is still some way to go and it is vital that consumers and citizens in the widest sense should not be left behind, left out or left wanting. Ofcom's Connected Nations 2015 report[10] states that more than seven in ten premises (73%) can now receive a 4G signal from three of the four networks, up from 44% last year, as operators continue to roll out faster mobile broadband. However, the report shows there is more work to be done on mobile coverage and quality of service.

26. We've consistently called for a commitment to a Universal Service Obligation for broadband of 10 Mbps, so we welcomed the UK government's announcement[11] and look forward to seeing more detail about the policy intention in the forthcoming consultation. *Ofcom's Connected Nations 2015 report*[12] states that many consumers and SMEs are still unable to receive even standard speed broadband. In the UK as a whole, around 2.4 million (over 8% of) premises cannot receive a speed greater than 10Mbit/s, with around 1.5 million (or 48% of) premises in rural areas being affected. This divide between the best and worst performing services suggests that intervention may be required to ensure that everyone has access to broadband.

27. The report also notes that although superfast services are now available to the premises of almost seven-in-ten small and medium sized enterprises or SMEs (68%, almost 900,000), almost a half of SMEs (around 130,000) in areas like business parks are unable to receive speeds above 10Mbit/s. Ofcom estimates that by 2017, when 95% of all UK premises will have superfast broadband, around 18% of SMEs will still not have access to a superfast service.

28. We hope that the actions outlined in the Government Digital Inclusion Strategy will help as awareness and understanding of the respective organisations' roles increases. However,

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[10]

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/infrastructure/2015/downloads/connected_nations2015.pdf

[11] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-plans-to-make-sure-no-one-is-left-behind-on-broadband-access

[12]

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/infrastructure/2015/downloads/connected_nations2015.pdf

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whilst it is important that Government supports other organisations, Government must first ensure that its own work embodies best practice; and it should make funding available so that policy statements translate into tangible outcomes. The Social Value Act 2012 provides a basis to encourage investment/shared investment into schemes to make them sustainable and links should also be established to the work of local democracy groups. The transformation of the UK into a leading digital nation with digitally able citizens cannot be achieved without serious commitment – and investment to support it.

29. We would also encourage the much greater availability of free public Wi-Fi, together with appropriate advice about relevant security. We have been encouraged by the initiatives announced concerning libraries and the NHS estate and hope that these will be rolled out as soon as possible, together with Wi-Fi availability in schools and colleges.

30. Finally, we would encourage greater co-ordination, collaboration and transparency of existing government and industry initiatives.

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