Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD response to the House of Lords Digital Skills Committee's call for evidence in relation to Digital Skills in the UK

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 Lords Digital Skills Committee's call for evidence in relation to Digital Skills in the UK. 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 2014 Communications Market Report[1] highlighted that while home internet access among UK adults stood at 82% in Q1 2014, take-up varied across age, gender and socio-economic group. The biggest differences were between the youngest and eldest age groups: 94% of those aged 16-24 had access to the internet compared to only 32% of those aged over 75. However, internet take-up among this latter age group has risen by five percentage points between 2012 and 2014, the largest rise of any of the age groups. There were also differences in internet take-up by socio-economic group. AB households were the most likely to have an internet connection (93%) while DE households were the least likely (67%).

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

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5. Ofcom's 2013 research on disabled consumers' ownership of communications services found that for older (65+) less affluent disabled people, internet access levels are at their lowest (23%) which is significantly lower than among non-disabled people of the same age and socio-economic group (37%)[2].

6. Whilst solutions may be complex, the issue itself is straightforward: approximately 21% of the UK population lack basic digital literacy skills (source: BBC/Go ON UK survey[3]).

Why digital engagement matters

7. 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.

8. While the Panel is currently 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 matters, is going to be critical.

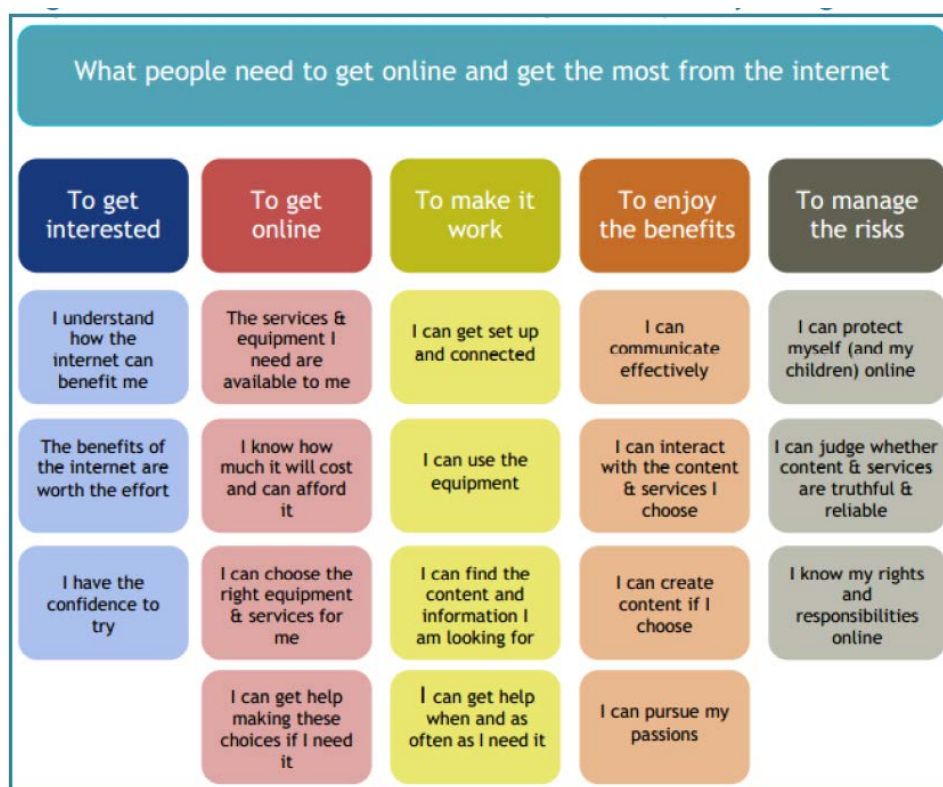*Consumer Framework for Digital Participation and Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement*

9. In 2010, to help government and others increase the number of people using the internet, the Panel developed the Consumer Framework for Digital Participation[4]. 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.

[2] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/telecoms-research/tce-disabled-13/
[3] http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/overview/assets/bbcmedialiteracy_20130930.pdf
[4] http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/downloads/what-we-do/previous-projects/access-and-inclusion/FINAL%20DP%20SUMMARY.pdf

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Figure 1: The Consumer Framework for Digital Participation

What people need to get online and get the most from the internet

To get interested	To get online	To make it work	To enjoy the benefits	To manage the risks
I understand how the internet can benefit me	The services & equipment I need are available to me	I can get set up and connected	I can communicate effectively	I can protect myself (and my children) online
The benefits of the internet are worth the effort	I know how much it will cost and can afford it	I can use the equipment	I can interact with the content & services I choose	I can judge whether content & services are truthful & reliable
I have the confidence to try	I can choose the right equipment & services for me	I can find the content and information I am looking for	I can create content if I choose	I know my rights and responsibilities online
	I can get help making these choices if I need it	I can get help when and as often as I need it	I can pursue my passions	

10. 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:

   ➢ **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.

11. Subsequent research by the Panel in 2011/12, Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement[5], 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

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

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with services online. Some will continue to need support to overcome challenges and go on to maximise the benefits of being online.

12. 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.

13. 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

14. In terms of digital engagement support, we would encourage Government to investigate 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 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.

15. Ofcom's 2014 Communications Market Report[6] highlights 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.

16. 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

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

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a free helpline for users of Government digital services to provide technical as well as specific service support.

17. 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.

Businesses and digital support

18. The Panel is currently undertaking qualitative research across the UK to explore:
    ➢ which communications technologies and services micro-businesses use and to what extent; and their importance to the business
    ➢ the experiences of micro-business of the communications sectors and services – including fixed line, mobile phones, fixed broadband (including superfast) and mobile broadband.
    ➢ the barriers/challenges and the opportunities
    ➢ what – if anything – should/could be done to improve communications experiences to contribute to greater growth?

We intend to publish the research in early Autumn and will, of course, be delighted to share and discuss our findings with you in due course.

Infrastructure

19. 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.

20. 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.

21. 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.

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22. The needs of consumers and citizens must be central to policy making, so 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. Ofcom's May 2013 Broadband Speeds research[7] states that the average download speed in rural locations is 9.9mbps - but this is an average and there are many examples of much poorer performance. Unsurprisingly, Ofcom's Consumer Experience report published in January 2014[8] reports the level of dissatisfaction with broadband speeds amongst consumers in rural areas is almost double the average – 32% v 18%.

23. There are other related factors too – by June 2013, 73% of UK premises were in a postcode served by next generation access networks enabling superfast (30 Mbps or higher). We've welcomed the UK Government's undertaking to extend superfast so that 95% of UK premises will have it by 2017 and to explore with industry solutions to reach 99% of premises by 2018. But 2018 is still four years away and how will citizens and micro-businesses in the last 5% (i.e. those who are not included in the undertaking to extend superfast to 95% of UK premises by 2017) - be affected? We are concerned by the risk that they will, for a long time, remain disadvantaged – and while the percentages may seem relatively low, the absolute numbers are high.

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

25. We would also encourage the much greater availability of free public Wi-Fi, together with appropriate advice about relevant security. We understand that the Schools for the Future programme had hoped to extend free Wi-Fi to parents and local citizens but was unable to fulfil this ambition for funding reasons. This appears to us to be an interesting initiative worthy of further investigation.

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

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[7] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/telecoms-research/broadband-speeds/broadband-speeds-may2013/
[8] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/consumer-experience/tce-13/TCE_Research_final.pdf

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