Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 17 September 2020 at 10.30

Meeting held online, due to COVID-19 pandemic containment measures

Present
Consumer Panel/ACOD
Rick Hill (Chair)
Kay Allen
Amanda Britain
Clifford Harkness
David Holden
Sian Phipps
Richard Spencer
Craig Tillotson
Richard Williams

Apologies
None

In attendance
Jenny Borritt
Fiona Lennox
Chloe Newbold
Ofcom colleagues

Item
1. Welcome and introduction   1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting.
2. Declarations of Members' interests   2.1 Kay Allen declared that she held an advisory position at PurpleSpace, a networking and professional development hub for disabled employees (relevant to item 9).   2.2 Rick Hill advised that he was no longer vice-Chair of the Independent Press Standards Organisation.
3. Minutes of the meeting on 16 July 2020 and matters arising   3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 16 July 2020 were **APPROVED,** subject to minor amendments.   3.2 The Panel discussed its ongoing research - an accessibility audit of communications

providers' apps – noting that the technical reports would be circulated to Members and communicated to CPs during quarterly catch-up meetings. The Panel would also consolidate the research findings into a report for circulation to CPs and consider the root causes of accessibility issues arising from the audit.

3.3 The Chair had previously corresponded with BEIS on how postage to and from Northern Ireland would be affected post-Brexit following concerns that associated paperwork requirements could impact consumers and microbusinesses. No response had been forthcoming and next steps were considered.

3.4 The Panel discussed its soon to be published research on scams and fraudulent activity. The final research report would be circulated to Members.

3.5 The Panel would soon report on initiatives introduced as part of its workplan 2019/20 to help strengthen the consumer voice in the communications sector. The Panel established an Industry Forum, attended by communication providers (CPs); a Consumer Stakeholder Hub, attended by consumer advocacy bodies; and the National Hubs, attended by a wide range of consumer focussed organisations. The Industry Forum, facilitated by the Panel, provided an opportunity for CPs to discuss certain issues and help drive up best practice. The Hubs captured and discussed consumer issues across the Nations – these were then fed back to Ofcom and industry. The report would outline the general themes discussed across these initiatives and any impacts/outputs.

4. Consumer update

4.1 The Panel discussed priority areas outlined within Ofcom's consumer update.

4.2 The Panel asked if commitments to provide a price reduction to fixed voice-only customers, due to expire in March 2021, would be extended. Ofcom advised that discussions were ongoing and further information would be available soon. The Panel reiterated that all line-rental consumers should benefit from the discount regardless of provider. The team would attend the Panel's October meeting.

4.3 The Panel noted that Ofcom would soon be reporting on its Fairness for Customers Commitments and looked forward to receiving an update at a forthcoming meeting.

4.4 The Panel discussed the importance of Ofcom's vulnerability work programme, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. Members urged Ofcom to continue working towards establishing a consistent approach to recording vulnerability data across CPs.

4.5 The Panel asked for further information on Ofcom's Open Communications initiative and how it aligned with UK Government smart data initiatives. The team would attend a future meeting.

4.6 Members sought to ensure that Ofcom's postal users' needs research had considered the views of micro-businesses.

4.7 The Panel was interested to hear more on Ofcom's work to tackle nuisance calls, including its 'Do Not Originate' process. Members cautioned that a reduction in

nuisance call complaints did not necessarily convey a reduction in calls.

4.8 The Panel discussed Ofcom's consumer priorities in the coming months – a comprehensive update would be provided at a future meeting.

4.9 Members urged Ofcom to monitor any long-term impacts on accessing CPs' customer services following the Covid-19 pandemic. Some CPs' customer services capacity and channels had reduced, such as closure of retail stores, which could result in long-term access issues for consumers with additional needs. Of particular concern was the accessibility and functionality of digital platforms – promoted by CPs as a viable alternative to accessing customer service but anecdotally lacking the functionality to make contract changes e.g. downgrading/cancelling contracts.

4.10 The Panel discussed recent reports that consumers requesting a broadband connection under the recently launched USO had been quoted high costs. Members asked if these costs could be split across adjacent properties. Ofcom colleagues were aware of these reports and discussions were ongoing. Members also advised that stakeholder feedback from the Panel's National Hubs had indicated that consumer awareness of the broadband USO was low and consumers needed help navigating connectivity initiatives across the UK.

5. Panel discussion

5.1 The Panel's National Members provided updates on recent Ofcom Advisory Committee meetings. The Panel also discussed a number of topics.
- Digital inclusion – the role of the communications sector in securing consumer access to digital devices and skills, particularly for people with additional access requirements. UK connectivity schemes were noted, such as the broadband USO, though many disconnected areas fell outside of the cost threshold. Members recognised that disseminating clear information to consumers on digital initiatives was a key component to achieving digital inclusion.
- Data poverty – inability to afford services e.g. data packages and digital equipment, acts as a barrier to digital inclusion. The aftermath of Covid-19, such as rising unemployment, could exacerbate data poverty due to increased reliance on data services e.g. registering online for universal credit or job applications.
- Digital wellbeing – the consumer welfare implications of a digital world and increased online usage should be considered.
- Low carbon targets – the role of the communications sector in trying to reduce carbon emissions.

6. Shared Rural Network and Mobile Spectrum Auction update

6.1 The Panel received an update on the progress of Shared Rural Network (SRN) initiative and Ofcom's upcoming spectrum auction. The SRN would deliver 88 per cent of UK coverage by 2024 and 90 per cent by 2026 – this would also cover partial not-spots.

6.2 Members noted that the first site under the SRN had been deployed in Wales and looked forward to receiving further information on location rollout and delivery plans. Ofcom colleagues advised that progress reports would feature in Ofcom's Connected Nations reports.

6.3 The Panel noted that bidding for Ofcom's upcoming spectrum auction would take place in January 2021. The auction would help to improve mobile broadband and support the rollout of 5G. The auction process had been redesigned so that it remained secure and the health and safety of participants during the pandemic was protected.

7. European Electronic Communications Code update

7.1 The Panel received an update on implementation of the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC). Ofcom colleagues advised that discussions around emergency video relay were ongoing and an update would follow.

7.2 Members commented that guidance on non-coterminous contracts should include reference to services offered at a discounted rate if paid in advance, to make it clear that these offers should not act as a barrier to switching.

7.3 Members were concerned that a rise in CPs' notifications could result in consumers missing important information.

7.4 Members asked if mobile data roaming would be covered under implementation of the EECC.

8. Royal Mail update

8.1 Ofcom colleagues provided an update on Royal Mail's activities, with a particular focus on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

8.2 In April 2020, due to high levels of staff absences and social distancing measures, Royal Mail had temporarily reduced its letter delivery days from six to five days, removing the Saturday delivery service (resumed in June 2020) and made changes to its guaranteed delivery service. Ofcom acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic had created an emergency situation, which under the statutory USO allowed Royal Mail to modify its operations without formal authorisation.

8.3 Members recognised the constraints caused by Covid-19 but remained concerned that non-fulfilment of USO obligations was likely to impact many consumers, particularly those in isolated areas with poor connectivity. Ofcom confirmed that it continued to hold discussions with Royal Mail and any emergency modifications remained under review.

9. Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

9.1 The Panel received an overview of Ofcom's Diversity and Inclusion (D & I) strategy. The strategy aimed to embed inclusivity and diversity in the workplace, making communications work for everyone by adopting a range of mindsets.

9.2 Members supported the strategy's mindsets and aspirations; and were keen to receive further information on a number of areas, including:
- how the vision would be embedded into Ofcom's culture and its deliverables measured;
- if the vision applied to Ofcom internally or the wider UK consumer – recognising that a full UK model would be complex; and

- practical information on how the vision's aspirations would be achieved across diverse audiences.

9.3 Some Members had extensive knowledge and expertise of driving accessibility and inclusion agendas to help meet the needs of diverse audiences and offered to pick-up with the team offline.

9.4 The D & I Team agreed to return to a future Panel meeting to share further details of its D & I strategy.

10. Comparing Service Quality report

10.1 The Panel received an update on the latest Comparing Service Quality (CSQ) report.

10.2 The Panel recognised the importance of measuring the customer experience across a number of metrics and suggested that CSQ data should also focus on accessibility and inclusion; network reliability; and pricing.

10.3 The Panel asked to receive further information on the automatic compensation scheme, particularly relating to the number of actual claims and pay-outs in comparison to those projected.

10.4 Members commented that drawing positive inferences from a decrease in service complaints should be treated with caution. Ofcom colleagues would discuss this further offline.

11. AOB

11.1 The Panel was advised of an Ofcom initiative to help draw-in a more diverse range of voices across its Panels and Committees.

11.2 Members remained concerned for consumers who would not benefit from connectivity initiatives across the UK and could not access broadband or mobile services.