

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 18 February 2021 at 10.30 am

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 (items 1-6)

Richard Spencer

Richard Williams

Apologies

None

In attendance

Anna Beckett (item 5)

Jenny Borritt

Fiona Lennox

Sam Mountford (item 5)

Chloe Newbold

Future Dot Now representative

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 Richard Williams declared that he had co-authored a research report (relevant to paragraph 6.4).
3. Minutes of the meeting on 21 January 2021 and matters arising
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 21 January 2021 were APPROVED , subject to minor amendments.
3.2 The Panel held a strategy session in February and discussed the Panel's strategic themes and priorities for the forthcoming year. Members were keen to widen the Panel's stakeholder network by inviting expert stakeholders to attend Panel meetings

and communicating directly with consumers. The Panel would soon hold a consumer immersion session, which would provide a platform to hear directly from consumers.

3.3 The Panel looked forward to receiving further information on the communications complaints landscape. The Panel's Executive Team had requested further information from Ofcom's Enforcement Team and would provide an update soon.

3.4 The Panel discussed its ongoing accessibility audit of CPs' apps, noting that not all CP audit reports had been received. Once all audit reports had been submitted, a report of the key findings and themes would be circulated to Members.

3.5 The Chair reiterated concerns relating to implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol, which had caused a significant number of organisations to cease trading with Northern Ireland. The Panel continued to engage with relevant bodies and individuals to encourage swift publication of customs guidance and raise awareness of the detrimental impacts on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses.

3.6 The Chair and a Panel Member would soon meet with Ofcom's vulnerability team following a recent meeting of the Panel's Industry Forum where CPs had discussed recording consumer support needs consistently. The Panel was keen to secure progress in this area, particularly in the context of migration to VOIP, where the Panel considered a consistent approach was essential to identify and safeguard consumers with additional access requirements before and after the rollout.

4. Ofcom's Consumer update

4.1 Ofcom's Consumer Policy team provided Members with an overview of its consumer priority areas and the continued impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The team advised that discussions with industry and UK Government were ongoing to address any challenges presented during the latest lockdown period, whilst ensuring that consumers in vulnerable circumstances continued to receive support.

4.2 The Panel stressed continued concerns that many consumers would require additional support during the migration to VOIP rollout process and had not yet been identified. The Panel urged Ofcom to ensure that this was treated as a matter of priority. In addition, CPs needed to proactively encourage consumers with additional access requirements to self-identify.

4.3 The Panel stressed continued concerns that a coordinated communications strategy was required to raise awareness of migration to VOIP amongst consumers, citizens and micro businesses. The Panel advised that the UK should learn from other countries where the migration had already taken place and encouraged adopting a similar approach to Australia's communications model. Members also raised that CPs needed to involve and share information with stakeholders in local areas. Ofcom colleagues advised that discussions were ongoing, and a further update would follow in March.

4.4 The Panel noted that the performance of one ADR provider continued to fall below the required standards. Members asked to receive further information behind the

performance issues, including whether the provider was continuing to prioritise consumers in vulnerable circumstances. The Chair would also meet bilaterally with the provider and would reiterate Members' comments and concerns.

4.5 The Panel discussed the recent rise in nuisance calls complaints and how industry could better tackle the issue. It was noted that Ofcom continued to focus on ways to combat scams and the team would attend the April meeting.

4.6 The Panel looked forward to receiving Ofcom's report on the Fairness Commitments, which would identify areas of best practice across industry and help to drive-up standards across other consumer priority areas. Members suggested that stakeholders could provide input on the Fairness Commitments. Ofcom colleagues agreed, noting that the Panel's National Hubs had recently been a useful platform to gather stakeholder views on affordability of communications services.

4.7 The Panel reiterated its concerns on the continued impacts of the Northern Ireland Protocol on postal movements to and from Northern Ireland. It was noted that the issue could grow once the current grace period ends in April. Ofcom colleagues advised that the postal team would contact the Panel's Executive team to discuss further.

4.8 The Panel asked to receive further information on the timeline of Ofcom's investigation into BT's handling and implementation of the broadband USO. Members also remained concerned that - due to ineligibility or residents being unable to afford additional connection costs - a significant number of premises would not receive a connection under the USO. Members asked to receive greater visibility of how these premises would be connected.

4.9 The Panel discussed the affordability of superfast and gigabit-capable broadband, noting that consumer take-up was low in some UK Nations. It was also noted that consumers' connectivity needs vary - a recent survey had found a third of UK home workers had switched to using mobile data to stay online. Ofcom colleagues advised that it continued to consider the affordability of both mobile and fixed connections and the potential impacts of changing consumer behaviour.

4.10 The Panel also commented:

- on the increase in priority fault repairs and whether this had been caused by the pandemic; and
- that it looked forward to receiving a further update on Open Communications in April.

5. The Panel's research programme update

5.1 The Panel received an update on its research programme, having recently commissioned five research projects.

5.2 Members discussed the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on research methodologies, highlighting the importance of reaching consumers who were digitally excluded and/or harder to reach.

5.3 The Panel commended the significant progress made to date and looked forward to future updates on the emerging research findings. Members asked to receive any findings in advance of future discussions. In addition, Members would find it useful to allocate time to consider any underlying themes, issues and/or commonalities across the research projects.

6. FutureDotNow

6.1 A FutureDotNow representative provided Members with an overview of its ongoing work to bring together organisations to motivate people and businesses to boost their digital skills to thrive in a digital UK. The Panel was advised that 17.3m working people did not have the essential digital skills required for work and within 20 years, 90% of all jobs would require digital skills to some degree.¹ Members noted that the [Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index](#) provided a breakdown of digital skills data per UK Nation.

6.2 The Panel discussed the role of the communications sector in getting everyone digitally connected, recognising that digital connectivity encapsulated access to infrastructure, a digital device and digital skills. It was emphasised that since the pandemic, digital connectivity had become an essential service for social purposes and lack of access could cause significant disadvantage e.g. households with children requiring access to online education throughout the pandemic.

6.3 The Panel raised that many citizens and consumers who wished to participate digitally faced barriers doing so. Members highlighted that inaccessible services were a significant barrier, as outlined in a research report on the accessibility and usability of major online retailers' websites² (relevant to paragraph 2.1). It was noted that FutureDotNow had an educational role to help businesses understand consumer digital needs; identify any barriers; and connect businesses with consumer representative organisations.

6.4 The Panel was keen to further understand current activity across the digital skills space and encourage a joined-up approach across organisations and sectors.

7. Ofcom's Adults' Media Lives study

7.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's Adults' Media Lives longitudinal study, which followed the same 19 individuals over time, and interviewed them on camera each year about their media habits and attitudes. Members were shown chapters of participants' interviews over the past 15 years relating to certain topics. The Panel asked to view two additional chapters not shown during the meeting.

¹ [2. Digital skills and inclusion - giving everyone access to the digital skills they need - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

² [The Click-Away Pound Report 2019](#)

7.2 Members were keen to further understand how the qualitative research videos were structured, noting that the videos were a historical record. Ofcom colleagues agreed to share the most recent research discussion guide with Members.

7.3 The Panel discussed how the digital world had evolved since the research had commenced and sought to understand how Ofcom colleagues would use the research findings to inform and improve the experiences of communications consumers. For example, raising awareness of data privacy; helping to protect consumer data; and understanding changing attitudes to public service broadcasting.

7.4 The Panel looked forward to receiving a further update in May on the latest quantitative and qualitative research findings.

8. Ofcom's Switching Trackers

8.1 Ofcom's market research team provided an overview of recent quantitative research into consumer switching levels, which provided an insight into switching behaviours and any barriers that consumers faced during the switching process. The research also informed Ofcom's Fairness programme, which sought to ensure that people could shop around with confidence, make informed choices, switch easily and get a fair deal.

8.2 The Panel noted the research findings and reiterated concerns that non-conterminous contracts created barriers to switching. In addition, it was noted that since the pandemic consumers had experienced significant difficulty contacting CPs by phone and the functionalities of alternative communications channels were limited e.g. inability to downgrade tariffs or cancel services.

8.3 Members also commented:

- on the research methodology and how research participants were contacted, particularly consumers who were not online
- that it looked forward to having sight of future research on the impacts of CPs' issuing end of contract notifications; and
- on the commonality and consumer cost implications of line-rental being sold alongside broadband where the service was not requested.

8.4 The Panel flagged that many consumers found the switching process daunting and lacked confidence to negotiate a better deal. Members noted Ofcom's recent proposals to make switching easier and would provide a response to the consultation.

9. Ofcom's Fairness Commitments

9.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's Fairness for Customers Commitments. The commitments launched in June 2019 and aimed to ensure that CPs treated all customers fairly. Ofcom colleagues advised that a report would soon be published on how CPs had embedded the commitments into their business models. In addition, Members were provided with examples of the types of changes and practices that embed fairness, noting that the impact of any changes would be measured over time.

9.2 The Panel supported implementation of the Fairness Commitments and welcomed the continued support provided by CPs to customers throughout the pandemic.

9.3 The Panel stressed the importance of CPs consistently adopting and implementing Ofcom's Fairness Framework. In addition, Members repeated concerns that the definition of 'vulnerable' consumers needed to be consistent across industry to ensure that support for these consumers aligned.

9.4 Members raised that the report would be a useful tool to highlight best practice across industry, outlining where CPs could improve. In addition, CPs' performance could be assessed against customers' perceptions of fairness.

9.5 The Panel looked forward to receiving the report and a further update once published.

10. Shared Rural Network

10.1 The Panel received an update on the Shared Rural Network (SRN), which covered progress to date and next steps. Members noted that CPs had been encouraged to rollout consumer communications providing information on which areas would be covered by the initiative.

10.2 The Panel discussed potential community connectivity initiatives that could help to fast-track connectivity in rural areas.

10.3 The Panel noted that coverage obligations were enforceable under the MNOs' licence commitments and looked forward to a further progress update.

11. AOB

11.1 There was no other business.