

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

on 18 June 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

Richard Spencer

Craig Tillotson

Richard Williams

## Apologies

None

## In attendance

Jenny Borritt

Fiona Lennox

Chloe Newbold

Stop Scams UK representative

Ofcom colleagues

Item
<b>1. Welcome and introduction</b>
1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting, Clifford Harkness in particular, who was attending his first Panel/ACOD meeting.
<b>2. Declarations of Members' interests</b>
2.1 Craig Tillotson reminded all present that he had previously declared his role as Chief Executive of Ordo, relevant to a later item on scams (Item 9).
<b>3. Minutes of the meeting on 21 May 2020 and matters arising</b>
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 21 May 2020 were <b>APPROVED</b> , subject to minor amendments.
3.2 Members commented that clear network resilience protocols should be in place, particularly for remote communities.

3.3 The Panel discussed how the National Hubs provided a useful platform to gather the views of consumer organisations across the Nations on certain topics concerning communications consumers, which could then be fed back to the communications industry.

3.4 Members raised concerns that health and safety restrictions imposed during the Covid crisis as a short term measure, may lead to situations where CPs fail to deliver against existing equality requirements. This would significantly impact many consumers (see para 11.4).

#### **4. Consumer update**

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

4.2 Members were keen to receive a further update on Ofcom's postal users' needs research. The Panel would receive a further update in July. In the interim, Ofcom colleagues would check if the conjoint report could be circulated to the Panel.

4.3 The Panel asked to understand any consequences of accelerating the migration to VOIP process. Members were particularly concerned that the opportunity to gather consumer input would reduce.

4.4 The Panel asked for further information on delivery timescales of the Shared Rural Network.

4.5 The Panel emphasised the importance of CPs' adopting a common approach to identifying and recording vulnerability, particularly since the definition of the term 'vulnerable' had broadened as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.

4.6 The Panel raised concerns that increased cross-sectoral consumer debt was a long-term issue due to debt deferral during the Covid-19 crisis and would require careful, compassionate and preferably consistent debt management by CPs.

#### **5. Debt and Disconnection**

5.1 The Panel was provided with an update on Ofcom's debt and disconnection work programme. The voluntary commitments entered into by CPs in response to the Covid-19 crisis would expire at the end of June and it was recognised that some consumers would require a longer period of safeguarding and support. Ofcom had engaged with CPs to understand the types of issues facing consumers and how CPs could ease the consumer burden for a continued period.

5.2 Members highlighted that engaged consumers were more likely to benefit from support measures, however, due to the Covid-19 crisis, communications customers with additional needs faced additional barriers when trying to access customer service, particularly at retail stores. Ofcom colleagues would feed these concerns to the relevant CPs.

5.3 The Panel urged that the long-term implications of debt management strategies such as payment plans or debt deferrals were clearly explained to consumers by their providers.

5.4 Members emphasised that connectivity was now an essential utility and an affordable, basic level of service should be available for low-income households, and disconnections disallowed. In addition, the behaviours of communications consumers may have changed permanently, and an increased consumption of technology could result in a higher level of consumer debt. Ofcom confirmed that it was considering the long-term impacts of Covid-19 on consumer trends.

## **6. Enforcement**

6.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom's Enforcement Team, which included; actions taken to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19; preparation to move back to business as usual activities; and progress updates on open enforcement cases. The Panel looked forward to receiving a further update on enforcement cases in July.

6.2 The Ofcom team would confirm the outcome of a previous investigation where customers of a provider had been overcharged for international calls.

## **7. Making Sense of Media**

7.1 The Panel was provided with an update on Ofcom's Making Sense of Media research and activities, aimed to promote media literacy and improving the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children. The MSOM programme had formed a network and launched an Advisory Panel to bring together organisations and individuals with expertise in media literacy. The programme had also recently hosted a virtual event focussed on children's experiences of being online.

7.2 The Panel was also provided with an update on the results of Ofcom's Covid-19 tracker - a weekly online survey about how consumers had been accessing information about the crisis. Findings included that consumers had been using traditional media sources for news and information on Covid-19; and many consumers had come across false or misleading information about the crisis.

7.3 The Panel commented:

- that digital connectivity was now an essential service, yet many consumers remained digitally excluded;
- on the importance of children contributing to 'the consumer voice';
- that cascading the media literacy agenda to employers, public services, third sector and consumer focussed organisations would help to spread awareness; and
- that digital ethics should be considered alongside media literacy.

## **8. Stop Scams UK**

8.1 A representative of Stop Scams UK and Ofcom colleagues provided an overview of recent activity undertaken to help tackle scams. Activity included:

- Cross-sectoral work to help tackle scams collaboratively;
- Publication of scams advice;

- Disseminating information on emerging scams to CPs;
- Analysis of complaints data e.g. nuisance calls;
- Discussions with international regulators to learn and share approaches and good practice; and
- Expanding the 'Do not originate list'.

8.2 Members asked to receive a written summary of Ofcom's scams activity to share with its National Hubs.

8.3 The Panel discussed the importance of consumer education and recognised that a coordinated cross-sectoral approach would benefit consumers.

8.4 Members commented that many initiatives were Nation specific and did not apply to the whole of the UK, which should be clearly specified in Ofcom's communications to avoid consumer confusion. Members would help to facilitate collaborative partnerships across the UK, by making introductions between SSUK and their contacts.

## **9. Network resilience**

9.1 The Panel received an update on network resilience, with a particular focus on remote communities. Members were concerned that many remote areas relied heavily on connectivity and network outages had a severe impact on many communities.

9.2 The Panel discussed levels of network resilience and the importance of tracking outages and holding CPs accountable for poor resilience. Ofcom colleagues advised that information on network outages was published in Ofcom's Connecting Nations report.

9.3 The Panel noted that the National Infrastructure Commission had made a number of recommendations to Government after examining the resilience of the UK's infrastructure. Members looked forward to a further update in the coming months.

## **10. The Panel's discussion**

10.1 Panel Members provided an update on recent activities - these included: Ofcom's National Advisory Committees attended by the Panel's national representatives and delivering a speech at the Westminster e-forum on key issues for the retail mobile and broadband market - consumer protection, infrastructure and competition.

10.2 Members were advised that Connecting Scotland had presented to Ofcom's Advisory Committee in Scotland at its latest meeting - the session would be circulated.

10.3 Members suggested that an update on 5G rural trials be added to the forward plan.

10.4 The Panel discussed the implications of the UK government's Covid-19 guidance on consumers' and citizens' equality requirements. Members were concerned that the guidance could significantly impact consumers with additional access needs, on a long-term basis, as providers may revert to providing less support for people who are less able to use mainstream services. In addition, the crisis had magnified the limitations of CPs' online communication channels and highlighted the need for effective communication channels for all consumers. Members agreed that it was important that the Panel and Ofcom do not lose focus on making communications services work for everyone.

#### **11. AOB**

11.1 The research report commissioned by the Panel on scams and fraudulent activity in the communications sector would be circulated to Members for comment.