

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 18 March 2021 at 9.30 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

Richard Spencer

Richard Williams

Apologies

None

In attendance

Jenny Borritt

Fiona Lennox

Chloe Newbold

BBC representatives

Collaborate representatives

Jigsaw representatives

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 was a Member of the National Farmers' Union (relevant to item 5).
3. Minutes of the meeting on 18 February 2021 and matters arising
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 18 February 2021 were APPROVED , subject to minor amendments.
3.2 Members had previously raised concerns that the performance of one ADR provider continued to fall below the required standards. The Chair provided an update, having recently met with the provider and fed back the Panel's concerns. The Panel's Exec

team would also soon meet with Ofcom's ADR policy lead.

3.3 Members noted that updates to the Panel's website were ongoing and would be available to view soon.

3.4 The Panel had previously raised concerns with Ofcom and PSA that consumers in vulnerable circumstances were facing 'bill-shock' after being connected to calls via Directory Enquiry services. PSA had recently responded to these concerns and the response was circulated to Members during the meeting.

3.5 The Panel's Member for Wales had recently attended Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Wales and provided Members with an update. The update covered the regulatory implications of using smaller broadband providers to connect smaller communities, and the consumer impacts of potential changes to digital terrestrial TV. The Panel agreed to receive future updates on both topics.

4. Ofcom's Consumer update

4.1 Ofcom's Consumer Policy team provided Members with an overview of its consumer priority areas and highlighted other areas that could be of interest to the Panel. Members asked to receive greater visibility of other ongoing projects, including mobile strategy; net neutrality; 2G/3G switch-off; and quality of service.

4.2 The Panel discussed consumer debt and affordability of communications services, questioning whether social tariffs should become a regulatory requirement to secure a basic level of service for consumers. Ofcom colleagues advised that CPs had been encouraged to introduce social tariffs on a voluntary basis and any regulatory requirement would need to be mandated by UK Government. The Panel raised concerns that introducing social tariffs on a voluntary basis would result in the onus being on consumers to search for the best deal and a lack of consistency across the sector. Members suggested linking progress in this area to Ofcom's Fairness Commitments by outlining and measuring good consumer outcomes.

4.3 The Panel also raised that consumer awareness of social tariffs was low. Members suggested that Ofcom could raise awareness of social tariffs and other initiatives across its communications platforms to help deliver information to a wider audience of consumers.

4.4 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's auto-compensation scheme, noting that the scheme continued to be monitored and further data would be provided in May. Members asked to receive further information on the number of incidents that would have triggered auto-compensation in comparison to payments made. The Panel also noted that the auto-compensation scheme would feed into future work on quality of service and customer expectations.

4.5 The Panel reiterated previous concerns that nuisance calls and silent calls complaints had continued to rise and asked if industry could take greater action in this area. In addition, the reporting processes for scams and nuisance calls should be improved and

simplified. Members were particularly keen to understand how nuisance calls affected consumers emotionally and the impacts on older consumers. Ofcom colleagues advised that work was ongoing to tackle nuisance calls and Ofcom's scams team would provide an update in April. Members asked for the update to also cover nuisance calls and silent calls.

4.6 The Panel discussed available deals across pay-as-you-go and pay-monthly mobile tariffs, noting that PAYG tariffs appeared limited and tended to adopt a 'use it or lose it' concept. Members raised concerns that PAYG customers were more likely to be financially vulnerable and unable to commit or qualify for a pay-monthly tariff, which would require a credit check and a reliable income. The Panel was interested to further understand any detrimental impacts of the PAYG market on consumers in vulnerable circumstances.

4.7 The Chair raised that he had recently met with DCMS to discuss migration to VOIP and highlighted the Panel's repeated concerns relating to the potential impacts of the migration on consumers in vulnerable circumstances, and the need for a coordinated communications strategy to raise consumer awareness, similar to the Australian model.

4.8 The Panel reiterated concerns relating to the impacts of the Northern Ireland Protocol on postal movements to and from Northern Ireland (NI) - noting that the current grace period had been extended to October. Many businesses had ceased trading with NI and the Panel urged Ofcom to monitor the impacts on consumers and small businesses in NI.

4.9 The Panel also commented:

- that it looked forward to receiving Ofcom's soon-to-be-published report on its Fairness Commitments;
- on the consumer benefits of Ofcom's wholesale market review; and
- on the future of telephony services, noting that telephone boxes were important to consumers living in remote areas where service was limited.

5. National Farmers' Union - Digital Connectivity survey results

5.1 A representative of the National Farmers' Union (NFU) provided Members with an overview of its 2020 Digital Technology Survey results. The annual survey gathered information from NFU members across England and Wales on the role of digital connectivity and services in farming and rural life. The survey results had found that lack of digital access continued to impact farm productivity and the health and wellbeing of farmers.

5.2 Members noted that the results showed many farmers suffered from slow download speeds and cited broadband speeds as not sufficient for day-to-day business activities. These issues were exacerbated by an increased reliance on digital during the Covid-19 pandemic and digitisation of the farming industry.

5.3 The Panel highlighted that many consumers and businesses were unaware of digital connectivity schemes available to them and the market was hard to navigate. It was also noted that many farmers had been quoted significant digital connectivity costs and

available connectivity subsidy schemes such as the broadband USO were not sufficient. It was noted that the Shared Rural Network would help to connect many premises, but a clear timeline was required alongside a map of areas to be connected under the scheme.

5.4 The Panel supported the NFU's call for better access and speeds in rural areas via user friendly and tech neutral schemes. The importance of digital skills training to increase digital confidence and protect consumers from online harms was also noted. Members suggested that examples of success stories where digital connectivity had benefitted farmers' lives and business models should be shared widely to encourage digital take-up, where available.

6. The Panel's research - digital connectivity in the pandemic

6.1 The Panel received an overview of its recently commissioned research into digital connectivity during the pandemic and the challenges consumers faced by either being online or not being online.

6.2 The Panel noted the findings with interest and reiterated how essential digital connectivity had become since the pandemic. Members were keen to understand any long-term behavioural digital trends arising from the pandemic.

6.3 Members also discussed the challenges that consumers faced by being online and how to mitigate these challenges moving forward to capitalise on consumers' changing digital behaviours. In particular, it was recognised that access to digital skills; and affordable, accessible services were vital to ensure that universally, consumers could benefit from the digital world.

7. The Panel's research - contacting your communications provider

7.1 The Panel received an overview of its recently commissioned research into communications consumers preferred methods of contact to providers and what happened when their preferred method was not available.

7.2 The Panel noted the findings with interest and recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted provider's customer service channels such as lengthy waiting times and reduced numbers of staff. Members were interested to understand how these impacts had affected consumers - particularly those in vulnerable circumstances.

7.3 Members reiterated previous concerns that the closure of provider's retail stores during the pandemic was likely to negatively impact many consumers, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances who faced barriers to engagement via digital channels. This was of particular concern where some providers had opted to permanently close retail stores.

8. BBC Digital Accessibility

8.1 The Panel received an update from BBC's Accessibility team, which covered the BBC's Digital Accessibility Policy - introduced to ensure the BBC's digital products, services and digital environments were accessible to everyone by removing barriers and

facilitating inclusion.

8.2 The Panel noted the commitments outlined in the policy, which included ensuring that accessibility was built into the design process of new products and services - not retrospectively; and the BBC's Accessibility Champions Network would ensure that every project would have at least one person representing the voice of disabled consumers. In addition, all content on BBC iPlayer originally broadcast with access services would include those access services: sign interpretation, audio description and subtitles, where supported by the platform.

8.3 The Panel noted that the policy's commitments were accessible in all languages and built into the procurement process.

9. AOB

9.1 Members noted that the Panel's logo was being redesigned to make the Panel's external communications more inclusive in line with its efforts to strengthen the consumer voice. The logo would represent Members' dual-membership of the Panel and Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People and be available in Welsh and English. The Panel's Executive Team would circulate potential options to a sub-set of Members who had volunteered to give input.