

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

on 21 May 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

David Holden

Richard Spencer

Craig Tillotson

Richard Williams

## Apologies

None

## In attendance

Jenny Borritt

Fiona Lennox

Chloe Newbold

Office of Telecommunications Adjudicator (OTA) representative

Phone-Paid Services Authority (PSA) representatives

Ofcom colleagues

Item
<b>1. Welcome and introduction</b>
1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting.
<b>2. Declarations of Members' interests</b>
2.1 There were no new declarations of interest.
<b>3. Minutes of the meeting on 23 April 2020 and matters arising</b>
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 23 April 2020 were <b>APPROVED</b> , subject to minor amendments.
3.2 The Panel asked to receive an update on network resilience at a future meeting, focussing on remote communities where connectivity is vital.

#### **4. Ofcom's consumer update**

- 4.1 The Panel was updated on Ofcom's response to the impacts of Covid-19 on the communications sector, advising that its focus had shifted to the long-term effects of the crisis on consumers such as debt and affordability. Members advised that some consumers were still unable to contact their providers, which could have a knock-on effect for debt and affordability issues e.g. ability to switch.
- 4.2 The Panel raised the importance of learning from the impacts of Covid-19 and strengthening resilience where required. The Covid-19 crisis had redefined the parameters of vulnerability, which should be captured in future discussions on how to identify vulnerable consumers. The crisis had also amplified the importance of connectivity and affordability for consumers. The Panel supported Ofcom's and the UK governments' commitment to universal coverage and emphasised the need to connect hard to reach consumers, without delay.
- 4.3 The Panel would work with Ofcom's Consumer Policy Team to ensure that insights from the Panel's National Hubs, attended by consumer representatives, could inform Ofcom's plan of work.
- 4.4 The Panel advised that its new research into scams would be published in the coming months and asked to receive an update from representatives of Stop Scams UK.
- 4.5 The Panel noted that a further update on Ofcom's postal users' needs research would be provided in June. Members asked for greater granularity to draw out the views of consumers from different age demographics, with access requirements and/or living in remote areas. The Panel noted that the Royal Mail's recent decision to reduce its postal service to five days a week (except parcels) was in response to the effects of Covid-19. However, Members urged the importance of understanding postal users' future needs, taking into account learnings from the crisis, when reviewing the scope of the USO.
- 4.6 The Panel asked to receive further information on network outages to help understand the regularity and scale of any outages. Members were also keen to understand the levels of compensation provided, particularly for consumers who had suffered a financial loss, and looked forward to a future update.

#### **5. Public Policy update**

- 5.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom's public policy team. The update covered the impacts of Covid-19 and how to mitigate long-term effects on the communications sector; the rollout of full fibre; and how to tackle online harms and misinformation, the latter relating to 5G connectivity.
- 5.2 The Panel considered how the conflict between keeping consumers connected versus the growing issue of affordability and debt could be managed in the long-term. It was noted that the Department for Education was sending devices to financially vulnerable households and similar initiatives were ongoing in the devolved Nations.

5.3 The Panel would receive a further update on public policy in the coming months - to include any updates on digital infrastructure investment.

## **6. Phone-Paid Services Authority (PSA)**

6.1 The Panel received an update from the Phone-Paid Services Authority, which covered: the impacts of Covid-19; implementing a new strategic purpose; and reviewing its Code of Practice. PSA representatives advised that its new strategic purpose aimed to build consumer trust in phone-paid services and ensure they are well-served through supporting a healthy market. Part of this work would include driving fairness and building standards.

6.2 PSA representatives advised that a review of its approach to consumer vulnerability was ongoing and would feed into the development of its Code of Practice. The vulnerability review had considered characteristics of the market and the types of measures required to protect consumers. Members emphasised the importance of adopting a consistent approach and welcomed further dialogue as the work developed.

6.3 The Panel raised concerns that consumers trying to contact public bodies during the Covid-19 crisis had been connected via premium rate services (ICSS providers) and consequently received expensive phone bills, unexpectedly. PSA representatives noted these concerns and advised that in the coming months it would be collating a report on the impacts of Covid-19 and welcomed the Panel's input.

6.4 The Panel would respond to PSA's consultation on its new Code of Practice.

## **7. Adults' Media Use and Attitudes**

7.1 The Panel received an overview of Ofcom's recent research of adults' media use and attitudes. The research used data from Ofcom's adults' media literacy tracker and outlined any differences across the Nations.

7.2 The Panel noted the findings of the research and discussed how changing consumer behaviours and demands could, in some circumstances, require a review of existing policy proposals.

7.3 The Panel raised concerns for digitally excluded households and asked that information on digital exclusion be clearly specified in the report. Also, Members suggested that when publishing the research, Ofcom supplement the findings of the report by highlighting other recent Ofcom research that provided insight into groups of people less likely to be online.

7.4 The Panel agreed that media literacy should be discussed at a future meeting.

## **8. The Panel's strategy session**

8.1 The Panel's 2020/21 draft work plan had undergone consultation in March 2020. Along with the consultation responses received, the Panel considered the impacts of Covid-19 on its priorities.

8.2 The Panel's National Hubs had brought to the forefront important issues, magnified by the Covid-19 crisis. These included:

- The importance of connectivity/affordability and securing a universal connection;
- Ensuring a variety of communication channels for all consumers;
- Improving customer service;
- Scams;
- Data privacy; and
- The need to support citizens to get online with sufficient digital skills and confidence.

8.3 Members agreed that the contents of the work plan remained relevant post-crisis, subject to a number of changes. The themes outlined in the plan would be expanded into a statement of strategic priorities. The Panel would approve a final version which would be published on its website.

## **9. Office of Telecommunications Adjudicator (OTA2)**

9.1 The Panel received an update from a representative of the OTA2. The update covered:

- The impacts of Covid-19;
- Ethernet service;
- Consumer switching and number porting;
- Service levels; and
- All IP - Migrations Testing Programme (AIP-MTP).

9.2 The Panel discussed the AIP-MTP, noting the draft industry guidance developed by OTA2 and Openreach on supporting vulnerable consumers during the Salisbury and Mildenhall migration trials. Members discussed how to ensure protection of telecare users during the switchover process, noting data privacy sensitivities.

9.3 The Panel was concerned that, although dialogue with industry was ongoing, there was also a strong need for consumer input. Members emphasised the importance of involving consumers at an early stage and adopting a clear and coordinated approach to assist consumers through the switchover process, ensuring a safety net for vulnerable and disengaged consumers. The Panel's concerns would be relayed to the Broadband Stakeholder Group, which was leading the consumer communications strategy for migration to voice-over IP.

## **10. Access Services**

10.1 The Panel received an update on access services, noting that the Electronic Programme Guide (EPG) accessibility annual report would be published in June. The Panel reiterated that EPG improvements could benefit a wide range of consumers.

10.2 The Panel advised that concerns had been raised at its National Hubs that UK government briefings broadcast in England did not use British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters, whereas a BSL interpreter was present during broadcasts in the devolved Nations. Ofcom colleagues agreed to feedback these concerns to relevant colleagues.

## **11. AOB**

11.1 The Panel discussed migration to voice-over IP and reiterated the importance of parties involved in coordinating migration receiving consumer input prior to the trials, to understand how consumers could be affected by the migration. The Panel's Team agreed to discuss this further with Ofcom colleagues and the Broadband Stakeholder Group.

11.2 The Panel's National Members agreed to set-up a meeting to discuss the upcoming National Hubs, including future topics.