

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 23 April 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

Futuresight 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 Craig Tillotson declared his role as Chief Executive of Ordo, relevant to a later item on consumer research (para 4.4). |
| 3. Minutes of the meeting on 19 March 2020 and matters arising |
| 3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 19 March 2020 were APPROVED . |
| 3.2 The Panel discussed the short and long-term impacts of Covid-19 on the communications industry and, at a future meeting, would consider how the crisis could alter the Panel's priorities for 2020/21. In addition, the Panel would review actions taken by CPs so far in response to the crisis. |

4. Consumer update

- 4.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom colleagues, which focussed on the impacts of Covid-19 on the communications industry. The update focussed on scams; debt; access to customer service; network resilience and service performance, noting that the crisis had caused internet usage to surge.
- 4.2 The Panel was advised that discussions with government and CPs were ongoing and CPs had recently agreed to a number of commitments to help protect vulnerable consumers, including no service disconnections and ensuring where service fault repair was not possible, consumers would remain connected by alternative means. Ofcom would monitor fulfilment of these commitments and keep the Panel updated.
- 4.3 Members commented that:
- data sharing could help to identify and protect vulnerable consumers;
 - telecommunications should be regarded as an essential service, connectivity ubiquitous and disconnections prohibited; and
 - CPs' platforms should be accessible for all consumers, particularly where inaccessibility could mean non-compliance with statutory requirements.
- 4.4 Ofcom was advised that recent research (see para 2.1) had indicated that, in response to the current economic climate, consumers wanted more control over monthly expenditure and had shifted away from direct debit as a payment mechanism, seeking greater flexibility. The implications of a shift from direct debit payments for communications consumers were discussed e.g. a potential increase of late payment fees. The Panel would share the research with Ofcom colleagues.
- 4.5 The Panel was advised that decision-making in enforcement cases was on hold due to Covid-19, including the Royal Mail enforcement case - the Panel would be kept updated.

5. Post users' needs

- 5.1 The Panel received an overview of Ofcom's recent research into postal users' needs. The results were benchmarked against previous research conducted in 2012. Ofcom's primary duty under statute is to secure provision of a universal postage service and the research considered financial sustainability and efficiency of the universal service. It was noted that the research had been conducted prior to the Covid-19 crisis.
- 5.2 The Panel was particularly interested in understanding how representative the sample was of the Nations, Regions and rurality, in addition to access requirements and age demographics. Ofcom colleagues agreed to attend a future meeting and discuss the research findings further.

5.3 The Panel was updated on the impacts of Covid-19 on the postal service, including staff absences, changes to products and changes to the delivery process e.g. no customer signatures. Members raised that the cost of postal redirection services were high and impacting consumers, particularly small businesses. Members raised concerns regarding the impact on people who do not use the internet, of any future reduction in the universal service once the current crisis is over.

6. Shared Rural Network

6.1 The Panel received a progress update on the Shared Rural Network (SRN), noting that the agreement would deliver 88 per cent coverage by 2024 and 90 per cent by 2026 - this would also cover partial not-spots. Members supported the deal and noted that if mobile network operators (MNOs) did not comply with terms of the agreement then Ofcom could impose fines of up to 10 per cent of an MNOs' gross revenue.

6.2 Members asked how consumers living in premises covered by the SRN would report network outages; and if the targets within the agreement would include network resilience requirements. Ofcom colleagues advised that no additional requirements relating to resilience had been added to the agreement and the team would confirm by e-mail the process of notifying network outages.

6.3 The Panel noted that not all premises would be covered by the SRN and reiterated the importance of universal coverage.

7. Vulnerability update

7.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's guide to treating vulnerable consumers fairly. The guide suggested areas of best practice for CPs, focussing on:

- Establishing and publishing policies;
- Treating vulnerable consumers fairly in practice;
- Recording information;
- Monitoring performance; and
- Staff training.

7.2 The Panel noted that the guide had been consulted on and received 23 responses, all of which were supportive. The Panel suggested that the guide should encourage a 'frictionless' consumer experience by identifying a customer's needs and providing the support services required. Members suggested that the guidance should also encourage CPs to identify and remove any existing barriers across existing platforms.

7.3 The Panel commended the guide, noting the benefits of a trusted relationship between CPs and consumers. Members encouraged Ofcom to link CPs' delivery of the guide with the fairness commitments as a means of driving-up best practice.

8. The Panel's recent activities

8.1 The Panel discussed its latest activities, including recent stakeholder meetings and

the National Hubs. The Hubs were attended by a range of consumer, citizen and small business representatives, charities and NGOs who discussed the impacts of Covid-19, particularly on consumers who are vulnerable, and how Ofcom and communications providers could help. A number of issues were raised, including:

- The growing importance of connectivity/affordability and securing a universal connection;
- Ensuring a variety of communication channels for all consumers;
- A surge in consumers being targeted by scams; and
- Importance of providing consumers with digital skills.

8.2 Further meetings of the National Hubs would be held in June and July 2020. Members agreed that information relating to the Hubs should be disseminated across the Panel's communication platforms.

8.3 The Panel had also held a Consumer Stakeholder Hub, attended by consumer advocacy bodies to discuss how the crisis was affecting consumers across the UK.

9. 2G/3G connectivity update

9.1 The Panel received an update on the future of 2G/3G connectivity.

9.2 The Panel discussed the different functionalities of 2G and 3G connectivity, noting that many consumers relied on 2G connectivity for a wide range of uses including telecare units, smart meters and making emergency calls in rural areas.

9.3 The Panel asked to receive regular progress updates on the future of 2G/3G connectivity.

10. Futuresight: Overview of Panel's research (scams and fraudulent activity)

10.1 Futuresight representatives provided an overview of the Panel's research into scams, which included video footage of participants' interviews.

10.2 The Panel discussed the findings, any overarching themes across all communication channels utilised for scams such as post, web, e-mail and text messaging; and potential recommendations to help protect consumers from the impacts of scams and fraudulent activity.

10.3 Once complete, the research report would be published on the Panel's website. It would also be disseminated to stakeholders and those who could make a difference in protecting consumers from fraudulent activity across communications networks.

11. AOB

11.1 There was no other business.