Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 19 March 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   There were no new declarations of interest.
3.   Minutes of the meeting on 13 February 2020 and matters arising
3.1   The minutes of the meeting of 13 February 2020 were **APPROVED**, subject to minor amendments.
3.2   The Panel noted that no information had been forthcoming from BT relating to the power outage at Colonsay Island. It was agreed that discussions around network resilience in the Highlands and Islands would be rolled up into a wider conversation surrounding network resilience.
3.3   Members asked to receive an update on 2G connectivity, highlighting the importance of 2G for consumers who are currently still unable to receive reliable 3G, 4G or 5G

services, or whose equipment relies upon a reliable 2G connection.

4. Consumer update

4.1 The Panel was updated on COVID-19's impact on the communications industry, communications consumers, and Ofcom's work programme. Ofcom was holding talks with communications providers, encouraging a proactive response to help protect and ensure fair treatment for consumers, particularly vulnerable consumers.

4.2 The Panel advised that it would be holding its National Hubs over the coming weeks, which would focus on the impacts of COVID-19 on communications consumers, and it would be useful to provide up-to-date information to attendees on steps taken by Ofcom and communications providers, so far. Members also encouraged industry to adopt a consistent COVID-19 response to avoid consumer confusion. Ofcom agreed to circulate an update, ahead of the meetings.

4.3 The Panel discussed the importance of keeping consumers connected during the crisis, reiterating the importance of network resilience. Ofcom advised that, so far, network demand was being met and an update would follow at a future meeting. The Panel discussed the consumer impacts of COVID-19 further, under AOB.

4.4 Members commented that a variety of communications methods should be available for consumers, particularly deaf or speech-impaired consumers. Examples of communications methods that should be readily available included British Sign Language and online messaging.

5. Children's and Parent's Media Use

5.1 The Panel was provided with an overview of the report into Children's and Parent's Media Use, which included a five-year review of how children's media use had changed. Ofcom had held a launch event for key stakeholders.

5.2 Findings of the report included:
   5.2.1 adult's and children's connectivity had increased, and tablets were the most popular device used by children;
   5.2.2 hateful content had increased, and certain groups were targeted based on their characteristics;
   5.2.3 social media helped children to support causes, coined as the 'Greta effect'; and
   5.2.4 the internet helped with children's homework.

5.3 The Panel commented that protecting children from harmful content was crucial, particularly when children had moved away from watching regulated content i.e. public service broadcasters.

5.4 The Panel noted that some findings differed across the Nations and considered presenting the research to the Panel's National Hubs.

6. Broadband USO

6.1 The Panel received an update on the Broadband USO, due to be launched by the end of March. To raise awareness, potentially eligible consumers had been notified of the launch, along with MPs and local authorities. A factsheet had also been provided to consumer groups and contacts across the Nations. Ofcom colleagues agreed to circulate the factsheet to Members.

6.2 Members were advised that consumers could now request a broadband connection by phone, subject to eligibility. The Panel asked to receive further information on how consumers' vulnerabilities would be identified and recorded.

6.3 The Panel remained concerned that some premises would not meet the eligibility criteria. Ofcom confirmed that work was ongoing across the UK to achieve universality of broadband services.

7. Migration to Voice-over IP (VOIP)

7.1 The Panel received an update on migration to VOIP. It was noted that Ofcom continued to hold quarterly meetings with communications providers, where progress updates were provided.

7.2 The Panel was advised that discussions would be held with CPs to understand if COVID-19 would delay the rollout of migration to VOIP. The Panel encouraged Ofcom and CPs to reflect on any lessons learnt from the impacts of COVID -19 on communications services, that could assist the migration process.

7.3 Members noted that testing of telecare services was ongoing and, so far, no significant problems had been reported. The Office of the Telecoms Adjudicator's had recently developed draft guidance for consumer migration in the trial areas, which covered protection of telecare users, and vulnerable customers more generally.

7.4 Members reiterated the value of receiving consumer input during the early stages of the rollout process. Ofcom welcomed a future Panel session with its research team to discuss this. The Ofcom team and the Panel's executive team would discuss this further.

8. Panel's research – consumers' unreported concerns

8.1 The Panel noted the findings of its research into consumers' unreported concerns, relating to broadband, mobile, Pay-TV and landline. Participants had responded to an online survey, which found that the most common concerns related to slow internet; lack of broadband signal; lack of mobile signal and catch-up or on demand services. It was noted that if the survey was rolled out to consumers via alternative methods e.g. face-to-face, the findings could change.

8.2 Members discussed the drivers behind consumers not reporting concerns, including any barriers preventing them from doing so. The Panel was keen to explore this area further in future.

9. Futuresight – Overview of Panel's research

9.1 Representatives of Futuresight attended the meeting to provide an overview of the Panel's research into scams, which included both quantitative and qualitative research. The research sample was UK representative and covered a variety of communications services utilised for scams.

9.2 Members were provided with information on the research findings so far, including video footage of participants' interviews.

9.3 The Panel looked forward to receiving the full research findings at the April meeting. Once completed, the findings would be published on the Panel's website, disseminated to Ofcom, communications providers and key stakeholders.

10. Audience expectations research

10.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's latest research into how audience expectations are evolving in a digital world. The research explored participants' changing attitudes towards content standards and their experiences of programmes across platforms. Participants had been asked to provide comments on a number of hypothetical 'programme scenarios'.

10.2 The Panel was provided with some of the scenarios along with the views of participants. Members – in their ACOD capacity - noted the findings with interest and, once published, looked forward to reading the full findings.

11. AOB

11.1 The Panel discussed recent developments surrounding COVID-19 and the potential impacts on communications consumers. The discussion focussed on the importance of network resilience; consumer access to connectivity, particularly for schoolchildren and vulnerable consumers; ensuring consumers would not be disconnected, particularly priority repair customers; affordability of services, including free access to information websites; and sympathetic treatment of customers in debt. Members asked to receive an update at its next meeting from Ofcom colleagues, advising of steps taken by Ofcom and CPs, so far; and agreed that CPs' responses to the crisis should be reviewed once normal service resumed.

11.2 Members commented on how a shift to purchasing mobile handsets online could affect consumers, particularly vulnerable consumers.

11.3 Members noted that the latest Click Away Pound Survey had raised a number of issues faced by telecoms consumers with access needs. The Panel would consider looking further into these issues and the consumer implications.

11.4 The Panel would hear further on the Office of the Telecoms Adjudicator's vulnerability guidance at a future meeting.