

CONSUMER  
PANEL

**Ofcom**  
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

# Ofcom Consumer Panel News

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# Introducing the Ofcom Consumer Panel



The Consumer Panel is independent of Ofcom and was established to give advice to Ofcom and others on the interests of consumers in the markets regulated by Ofcom, with the exception of matters related to content. The Communications Act 2003 requires us to have special regard to the needs of vulnerable consumers, including disabled people, older people and those on low incomes.



**Collette Bowe**



**Ruth Evans**

Our Chairman is Colette Bowe and our Deputy Chairman is Ruth Evans. Other members specifically represent the interests of consumers in the four nations making up the UK.

In addition to the Chairman and Deputy Chairman there are eight members with a wide range of knowledge and skills. [Read more about the panel](#)

The Consumer Panel believes that it should operate as transparently as possible. We meet as a full panel once a month and a note on each of our meetings since February 2004 is published on our website. [Read our meeting notes](#)

# Strategic review of telecoms

Ofcom is conducting a strategic review of telecommunications to determine the regulatory framework that should condition its decisions on telecoms over the next few years. In June 2004, the Consumer Panel made a submission on the Phase 1 consultation document:

[Read the Phase 1 consultation](#)

On 18 November 2004, Ofcom published the Phase 2 consultation document which contains a section on *Exercising effective consumer choice*. [Read the Phase 2 consultation](#)

We will be commenting on this latest document by the deadline of 3 February 2005 and would be interested in any ideas that you would like to put forward. We don't need lengthy submissions. A couple of paragraphs will be fine. [Email enquiries@ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk)

## Digital switchover and vulnerable consumers

On 24 November 2004, following a request from the Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell, the Panel delivered a report identifying which consumers are most likely to be disadvantaged by the proposed switchover to digital television and how best they could be assisted. From its analysis of existing research, the Panel concludes that people at risk of social isolation – those who do not have an adequate network of friends, family, neighbours or carers to turn to for support – are likely to face the biggest difficulties in finding out about switchover, in understanding what it means, and therefore taking effective steps to adopt digital television. You can access the full report here. [Read the DSO report](#)

We would be interested in any comments that you would like to put forward. Again your views can be as brief and specific as you wish. [Email enquiries@ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk)



## Mis-selling of fixed line telecoms

Now that there are many companies providing telephone service to residential as well as business customers, households are being encouraged to switch operators and the methods used are not always honest and fair. In June 2004, the Consumer Panel made a submission to Ofcom on the regulator's examination of this issue, arguing that we needed a mandatory code of practice. [Read the mis-selling consultation](#)

On 22 November 2004, Ofcom published its decision to promote such a mandatory code. [Read the news release](#)

## Voice over internet protocol services

Telephone calls made on networks using the same technology as the internet are variously called Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), Voice over Broadband (VoB) and new voice services. Whatever the name, there are real benefits to consumers – especially in lower prices – but also some concerns – notably around access to 999 services. On 21 September 2004, the Panel held a seminar on this subject and we have published a note on the event. [Read about the seminar](#)

## Communications regulation and low income consumers

On 29 November 2004, there was a seminar at Ofcom Headquarters designed to create a dialogue between members of the Ofcom Consumer Panel and academics working in the area of communications and low income. Other attendees came from Ofcom itself and various consumer groups. A major theme of the event was that access to new communications technologies, such as the Internet, cannot be seen in purely economic terms, although obviously the costs of the PC, the various peripherals and Internet connection are important. It is necessary to consider the various competencies and skills necessary to make effective use of the Internet and this ranges from basic literacy skills to navigational skills and requires confidence and support. A report on the seminar will be posted on our website shortly.

## Consumer Forum on Communications

The Consumer Panel intends to work very closely with all the relevant consumer groups. The main collective body for such contacts is the Consumer Forum on Communications with which the Panel will meet about three times a year. The first such meeting was held on 8 November 2004 and the main issues discussed were digital switchover, Ofcom's strategic review of telecoms, and Ofcom's universal service review.

## The Consumer Panel's research project

In the same way that Ofcom intends to be an evidence-based regulator, the Panel wishes – whenever possible – to have its views informed by reliable research. Therefore we have commissioned a major piece of consumer research which we will repeat about once a year. This is designed to elicit the level of consumer knowledge regarding what is going on in the market and the choices that they have now and in the future plus an understanding of the current consumer experience in the communications market. All our research findings will be published and we hope to publish the first report in Spring 2005.

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If you have any comments or suggestions concerning the format or content of our newsletter, we would be pleased to hear from you. In all such cases, please contact Flora Demetriou. [Email flora.demetriou@ofcom.org.uk](mailto:flora.demetriou@ofcom.org.uk)

## Stop Press – Review of the Universal Service Obligation

At the time of issue of this newsletter, 10 January 2005, Ofcom published its Review of the Universal Service Obligation, with a deadline for responses of 21 March 2005.

[Read the USO Review](#)

Universal Service ensures that basic fixed line services are available at an affordable price to all consumers across the UK. The review focuses on the here and now but also repeats the questions on the future of universal service posed in the strategic review of telecoms. The Panel will be responding to the universal service review and would welcome any views you may have.