

Ofcom Consumer Panel News

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Digital Switchover and the DCMS Select Committee

On the 8th of November the Consumer Panel gave oral evidence to the DCMS select committee on Digital Switchover. We argued that the government should ensure that everyone, no matter who you are or where you live, is aware of digital switchover; that the greatest number of people possible are able to receive a digital signal; that people know how to 'switchover' technically and physically; that there must be assistance (physical or financial) for groups that are vulnerable with an emphasis and priority on the care and needs of the socially isolated. We repeated our concern that the governments proposed financial and practical support measures fail fully to meet the needs of these identified groups. Our document 'Supporting the most vulnerable consumers through digital switchover' sets out our position. We are also working closely and holding regular meetings with the DCMS, DTI and Digital UK (the body charged with delivering switchover). Digital UK are undertaking a practical support switchover trial and are using our blueprint for supporting vulnerable consumers during switchover.

[Our report Supporting the Most Vulnerable Consumers through Digital Switchover can be read here](#)

[Our written evidence to the Culture Media and Sport inquiry can be read here](#)

Capturing the consumer interest: A toolkit for regulators and government

In our last newsletter we reported that we had begun devising a toolkit that would enable stakeholders or regulators to objectively assess how effectively a regulator takes the consumer interest into account when forming and implementing its policies. The toolkit will also help regulators, across the sectors, to review and revise decision-making processes so that they are adequately consumer-focussed in the future. The Panel used the toolkit to assess Ofcom's 'factoring in' of the consumer interest in two key policy areas – mis-selling and TSR. Ofcom have responded to this work by making changes to their policy process which will help embed the consumer interest into its thinking when taking policy decisions. There will be a public launch of the document in February 2006 will also involve input from the National Audit Office.

Consumers and the Communications Market: where are we now

In May 2005 we published research into the consumer experience within the UK communications market. The research broke down the consumer experience by nation, age, people with a disability, low income and rural and urban areas. Building on the foundation that the first research publication provided we will be publishing our tracker research in April 2006 and we will discuss our findings with stakeholders. We will use our research to ensure that our workplan policies are based on an understanding of the difficulties consumers face in the market place.

[Our May publication can be read here](#)

Low Income workshop

We will be holding our second workshop on issues affecting low income consumers and access to the communications market March 2006. The workshop will assess the impact of Ofcom policy over the past two years on low income consumers and identify the implications for future policy.

Telecoms Strategic Review

Over the past year and a half we have met regularly with Ofcom throughout its TSR policy process and will continue our work with them as the policy develops. We have said to Ofcom that the outcome of the TSR review must be one that:

- Allows all citizens to participate fully in society, whether they have a disability, are on low income, or because of where they happen to live, and that they are be able to make informed choices in their purchasing decisions in the telecoms market
- That Ofcom must embrace the concept of "real equality of access" as readily for citizens and consumers as it does for industry
- That Ofcom must set indicators of progress in making the fixed-line market more competitive. The indicators would be: measurable, relevant, and time-specific
- That it must improve the information conditions in the market place so that consumers feel empowered and make informed decisions

BT Undertakings

We responded to Ofcom's consultation on BT Undertakings and said:

- The Equality of Access Board should have a champion of consumer choice as a member
- There should be an independent adjudicator to resolve quickly and smoothly any practical difficulties or differences in the implementation of the agreement
- Ofcom should specify the metrics by which it will judge the success of the agreement in terms of delivery to the consumer and the citizen
- Importantly, alternate network providers must now rise to the challenge and make new investments in infrastructure and deliver more services that will bring more choice to consumers
- The TSR 3 should aide consumer information and empowerment
- There is a need to appoint an independent adjudicator to resolve quickly any practical difficulties or differences in the implementation of the agreement

We will continue to have a dialogue with Ofcom in order to keep its focus on the 'benefits for consumers' at large

Number Translation Services (NTS)

We responded to Ofcom's consultation on revenue sharing numbers in December 2005. For over a year and a half we have engaged with Ofcom on this issue. Throughout this time we have called for price transparency to be at the heart of Ofcom's policy thus allowing consumers to understand what an NTS call will actually cost them. We told Ofcom that an NTS number is inappropriate when a consumer is 'locked-in' to a particular number, e.g. when contacting a customer care line the number that sits on the 08 number range. We also said that Ofcom should restore the geographic link to the 08 number range when it undertakes its Numbering review - and make the 09 number range, the range for revenue sharing numbers. This would mean that it would help create a consistent NTS environment in which consumers would more easily understand the costs of calls. We spoke out against the use of NTS numbers by government bodies and we look to Ofcom to continue to engage with government on this matter and ensure that the recurrence of episodes such as the use of an NTS number for the London July bombings helpline, for example, does not reoccur.

[read our response here](#)

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Schemes

We responded to Ofcom's consultation on ADR schemes in October 2005. We start from the position that ADR schemes act as an important protection measure for the consumer and for an ADR scheme to function effectively it must be accessible, transparent, and have clear and easy processes to follow. Also there must be readily available knowledge of its existence. We called for effective sanctions when communication providers fail to comply with their own Code of practice and that the information on which communication providers are failing to meet best practice should be published. This would help inform Ofcom, consumers and consumer organisations to judge how the market is treating the consumer. Also we called for more research into ADR schemes as we believe the present research sample is too small to take an informative decision from.

[our response can be read here](#)

Universal Service Obligations (USO)

We view the USO as a core component of a citizen and consumer centred approach to the telecoms market. It is the provision of a basic “safety net” of services at affordable prices. In September 2005 we responded to Ofcom’s USO statement (having earlier responded to their USO consultation in April 2005) in which we again raised our concerns over eligibility of the scheme. We were pleased to see that Ofcom had dropped the initial requirement of a households income being under £10,400 for scheme eligibility. We had said that this figure does not accurately reflect the government’s definition of poverty because the government defines poverty via ‘equivalised income. However, we made strong representations to Ofcom against its replacement idea of tying scheme eligibility to housing benefits or pension credits – as not everyone eligible for these benefits takes them up.

[read our response to Ofcom's USO statement here](#)

The European Union review of the scope of Universal Service

In July 2005 we responded to the EU review by calling for the directive to ensure a real equality of access to the communications network for all people. The Panel recommended that the directive should be technology neutral and future proof and that it must move away from a fixed line and service specific focus (services and connections are myriad in form) and concentrate on access alone. We called for the Universal Service Directive to provide regulatory flexibility to allow Member States to introduce its own specific measures to ensure that for people with a disability, access and delivery of required services are achieved. We took this stance because Member States are in the best position to a) understand what its local social needs are and b) they are able to respond effectively to these needs by understanding what the local market can deliver.

[read our response to the EU on its review of the scope of Universal Service here](#)

Representing the Nations

The Consumer Panel has members appointed to represent the interests of consumers in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. These members attend the quarterly meetings of the relevant National Ofcom Advisory Committee. We think it is not only essential to understand National concerns but to engage with stakeholders. We have travelled to Wales and Scotland to understand better the issues that concern these Nations. On October 13 2005 we held our Consumer Panel meeting in Belfast. During this time we met with Mike Byrne, Commissioner at the Republic of Ireland's Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg); Wilfie Hamilton, Deputy Secretary at the NI Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI); and Professor Wallace Ewart, Chairman of Ofcom's Northern Ireland Advisory Committee. We discussed, among other things, the issue of Digital Switchover. A strong message that came out of this meeting was the importance of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland switching over at the same time We also discussed the issue of the digital divide within the Northern Ireland context. And the vexing and unacceptable situation for Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland citizens - mobile roaming along the Northern and Republican border. People are finding that their phone will switch mobile operator without their knowledge and thus they end up paying international call costs for their mobile phone calls whilst still being at home.

Consumer Forum on Communications

The Consumer Panel wishes to work closely with all relevant consumer bodies. To strengthen our ties we now host the Consumer Forum on Communications. The Forum last met on December 13, 2005. The topics that we covered were: Digital inclusion, Digital Switchover and our initial thoughts on our 2006 /07 workplan. If you would like to attend the next meeting [please click here and contact us](#)

[a note of the Forum meeting can be read here](#)

Visitors from Home and Abroad

At our Consumer Panel meeting in September 2005, we met Professor Müller from the Federation of German Consumer Organisations - VZBV. Professor Müller explained VZBV's was a non-political umbrella body of 38 member organisations which dealt with a wide range of consumer issues, local and central institutions. And that communications was only one sector that they looked at. We discussed telecoms issues, digital switchover - which has already happened in parts of Germany - and future ways that we can work together in Europe.

New Arrivals

In September 2005 Georgia Klein joined the Panel team. Georgia takes up the position as Panel manager and joins us from the NCC where she worked for five years as a Senior Policy Manager. During which time Georgia concentrated on access to the communications and utility markets for disadvantaged consumers. Julia Guasch joins the team as the new administration support executive.

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