

Ofcom Consumer Panel News

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Contents

Annual Report

Consumers and the Communications Market: 2006

Older People and Communications Technology

Digital Switchover (DSO)

Consumer Interest Toolkit

Nations & Regions Audit

Consumer Protection & Digital Inclusion

BT Undertakings

Digital Dividend Review

Personnel Update

Consumer Forum on Communications

How to Subscribe Unsubscribe

Annual Report

In June we published our second [Annual Report 2005-06](#). The report explains that our work over the last year has been dominated by three areas. The first, is focusing on how consumers can really benefit from the changes in the rapidly developing market for communications. And what if anything Ofcom has to provide to support consumers make the right choices.

Second, is how regulators, and Ofcom in particular, can understand and fully incorporate the consumer interest when developing policy. To aide regulators the Panel developed the Consumer Interest toolkit. We believe its work in this area is of relevance to other industries and to government and shared its findings with an audience of senior representatives from regulators, Government, Parliament, consumer bodies and industry in 2006. Following strong advice from the Panel, Ofcom has given greater prominence to its consumer policy work and made consumer protection one of its nine key priorities for the coming year.

Third, we have worked to promote the needs of socially isolated people during switchover and we are supporting DigitalUK's regional work. Recently we expressed strong concerns about the DSO process, see later section on digital switchover.

Consumers and the Communications Market: 2006

At the beginning of June we published our nationwide tracker research '[Consumers and the Communications Market: 2006](#)'. It looks at both the residential and small business engagement with the communications market. One of the key findings was that older people and low-income households are less engaged in the communications market than the rest of the population. And that older people are least likely to be aware of, understand or own new communications technologies.

It also revealed that awareness of digital switchover has doubled since 2005 to 52% but 60% of low-income households are unaware. Friends and family are still the most important source of information and advice for almost half of UK consumers but people over 65 are significantly less likely to know someone who could provide them with support through the switchover process.

Other key findings of the research are:

low-income households are twice as likely than the national average to feel they can't use landlines or the internet largely due to cost.

A quarter of small businesses are dissatisfied with landline and internet services and a third with their mobiles. Amongst consumers there is a marked increase in concern about cost, unsolicited calls and internet spam. Across each of the services, consumers are least likely to be satisfied that suppliers are ensuring they are on the best deals available.

Half of the UK population is not aware of any specialist equipment for landlines, mobiles and PCs that assist people with hearing or visual difficulties whilst two-thirds of people under 65 with hearing difficulties report problems using mobiles. Worryingly only one in ten people with visual difficulties and two in ten with hearing difficulties use specialist equipment.

Older People and Communications Technology

Because of the significant gap of engagement for older people in the communications markets compared to others we undertook further research in this area to understand the attitudinal reasoning for this gap. On the 5 July the Panel launched its research '[Older people and communications technology](#)'. The research was presented at a round table discussion that looked at what the barriers, enablers and solutions are that affect older people's levels of connectivity to ensure policies and programmes are designed and delivered in order to close this gap. The round table brought together key representatives from: government; consumer bodies; industry; and grassroots organisations.

We will be publishing a report in Autumn that will set out the key themes of the day and policy recommendations to move the issue forward. We are not looking to reinvent the wheel but facilitate improved policy-making by drawing on current understanding about what does and does not work and to help create a network of key stakeholders.

We have presented our findings to the Scottish Parliament, the Telecoms Industry Forum on Disability and Ageing, to members of government and consumer stakeholders. We have built strong links with the Digital Strategy Group - a cross-departmental body tasked to deliver digital inclusion projects, the Transformational Government Team and the new Digital Inclusion Team that is part of the Social Exclusion Unit. We are also working closely with the All Party Parliamentary Group Media Literacy to promote digital inclusion within Parliament.

We continue to work with Ofcom to promote its media literacy and digital inclusion work.

Digital Switchover (DSO)

Digital Switchover continues to be one of our key areas of work. We recently met with the Minister Shaun Woodward to discuss our concerns over the proposed plan to help support people through switchover and the structure of responsibility for delivery. We also said that we did not think DigitalUK is adequately funded to handle the scale of work required to deliver a successful switchover programme. We issued a press release, in July, that highlighted these three main concerns. The press release can [be read here](#).

We agreed with the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee's report which said that the needs of socially isolated households during switchover are in danger of not being met. In July the Panel met with the chair of the Select Committee John Whittingdale to discuss these concerns further. We gave evidence to the Select Committee back in September 2005 which can [be read here](#). We will be meeting the Minister Margaret Hodge at the end of Autumn to discuss the DTI's role in delivering DSO and our wider digital inclusion agenda.

We continue to work closely with Ofcom on DSO and gave advice to Ofcom on its paper 'DSO: an audit of viewer's priorities' published in July. Our advice can [be read here](#). We continue to meet regularly with DCMS, DTI, DUK to discuss their work and we continue to contribute to the Consumer Expert Group meetings.

Consumer Interest Toolkit

The Panel is about to undertake two case study assessments of Ofcom's policies using the toolkit it developed last year. The first policy to be looked at will be the Digital Dividend Review. The Digital Dividend Review looks at what the spectrum that will be released due to digital switchover should be used for. The toolkit will analyse Ofcom's work in terms of whether it has effectively evaluated and given due weight to consumer and citizen interest in its policy development.

We have engaged with Ofcom from the beginning of its policy development and we will continue to work with Ofcom to help it take into account the consumer and citizen interest and support its engagement with other consumer organisations to ensure their views are represented.

We continue to discuss the toolkit with stakeholders and promote it as part of the Better Regulation agenda. Ofwat and Ofgem have both contacted the Panel to discuss using the toolkit in their regulatory work. The Chairman, Colette Bowe, has been invited to discuss this work with the Director General of Consumer Protection and Health at the European Commission. And we will be holding an event in early 2007 to draw on Ofcom's lessons learned in implementing the toolkit and the wider better regulation agenda.

Nations & Regions Audit

We have met Ofcom on a number of occasions to discuss the policy implications of the Nations and Regions Audit. We recommended to Ofcom that research along the segmentation of Nations and Regions does not fully reflect the state of the communications market in Northern Ireland and the UK. And that a more useful segmentation in order to understand physical access to the communications network would be to look at the difference between rural and urban areas and for Ofcom to understand the digital divide it should segment its research along the lines of: age; socioeconomic groups; education; and personal attitudes.

Consumer Protection

We continue to work closely with Ofcom who have been reviewing Consumer Protection in the communications market place and been developing policies to reflect the current environment the consumer is in.

BT Undertakings

We continue to discuss with Ofcom how the Undertakings are progressing and what it is delivering for consumers. We are please to note that much of our advice in how to measure what the impact of the undertakings is for consumer has been taken on board. Our original advice to Ofcom can [be read here](#)

Personnel Update

We are pleased to welcome Siân Evans who joined the team in June as a freelance press officer. Sian has worked as a freelance consultant for nine years and has held the position of Head of Media Relations for the substance misuse charity Turning Point and Deputy Editor of Housing Today. She currently provides strategic media relations and project management support for the National Consumer Council, the London Health Observatory, the King's Fund and works for: the Royal College of Nursing; the British Dental Association; Department of Health; Dovetail Management Consultancy; Quaker Housing Trust and the supported housing organisation Stonham.

Due to outside work commitment's Azeem Azhar stepped down from the Panel earlier in the year. We are presently advertising for his replacement. [The job specification can be found here.](#) The Panel is looking for a candidate to demonstrate an understanding of new media, ideally gained through a career in the telecoms, media or technology sectors in a business strategy, research or infrastructure-related role.

Consumer Forum on Communications

The Consumer Panel wishes to work closely with all relevant consumer bodies. To strengthen our ties we host the Consumer Forum on Communications. The Forum last met on 15 June, 2006. The topics that we covered were: the Consumer Panel's attitudinal research on 'Older people and communications technology'; how best Ofcom can engage with consumer stakeholders; Ofcom's QoS work and the launch of the Topcomm site. The next forum meeting is on 19 September 2006. If your organisation would like to attend the next meeting [please click here and contact us](#)

[notes of the Forum meetings can be read here](#)

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