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Welcome to the January 2008 edition of the quarterly Ofcom Consumer Panel e-newsletter.

Consumer Panel policy work

Priorities for Ofcom

In November 2007 we wrote a [letter to Ed Richards](#), Ofcom's Chief Executive, in which we spelt out the top three consumer priorities for the coming year that we would like Ofcom to focus on. Our Chairman at the time, Colette Bowe, also spoke about these priorities at Ofcom's event on 20 November which launched its [2007 Consumer Experience Research Report](#).

These were: Ofcom should put greater focus on children's issues and create a Children's Panel to provide it with strategic direction in this area; Ofcom should ensure that consumers of broadband services are provided with clear information about the broadband speeds they are actually getting; and Next Generation Access must continue to be a key priority for Ofcom, and its introduction should not deepen the digital divide between rural and urban areas.

[Ed Richards responded](#) to the Panel's letter, giving his views on the issues we had raised.

Broadband speeds

In October 2007, [we wrote to the chief executives of the UK's six largest Internet Service Providers](#) (ISPs) about the increasing consumer concern over the differences between the "up to" speeds advertised in broadband packages and the actual, lower speeds experienced by many subscribers. In the letter, we asked the ISPs to come up with solutions that give consumers clearer information to understand the range of factors that influence the speed of their broadband connection, and what they can do if it does not live up to their expectations.

After hearing from the ISPs, [we wrote to Ofcom](#) last month asking the regulator to lead discussions with the industry to produce an enforceable code of practice to give customers the best information during and after the sales process. Additionally, we want customers to have the flexibility to move freely to different packages that reflect the actual speeds that their ISPs are able to provide them. We also asked the Advertising Standards Authority to tighten up the advertising of broadband speeds to ensure that greater prominence is given to the range of factors that affect the speeds of people's broadband connections.

Ofcom [responded](#) immediately, welcoming the lead taken by the Ofcom Consumer Panel and outlining the ways in which it plans to tackle the issues we had raised.

Digital Dividend Review

We have followed closely Ofcom's Digital Dividend Review (DDR) for over a year. At the start of December 2007 we made [further written recommendations](#) on the DDR as Ofcom was finalising the policy formulation that led to its [Statement on the Digital Dividend Review](#).

Going Digital

As we get closer to the first UK TV Region to have its analogue signal switched off, we commissioned [a qualitative research study](#) in order to understand the experience of vulnerable consumers as they 'go digital'. We found that people who need it most are not getting the information and technical support they need to make a smooth switch to digital TV. Some consumers are confused about what equipment they should purchase and are not confident about installing digital TV themselves.

We have therefore called for Digital UK to carry out a more concerted and targeted UK-wide communication campaign to ensure that consumers are aware of all of the options, information and assistance available to them. We also favour the placing of "Power Questions" in shops to help consumers through what can often be a confusing retail experience.

Children and the Internet

In our [last e-newsletter](#) we reported on the [Panel's research into the social effects](#) that the lack of internet access has on socially disadvantaged children, and on the round table discussion we held with government policy-makers, representatives of industry and the third sector who are involved in providing home internet access. In September we published [a report of this event on Children and the internet](#), including policy recommendations that emerged from the day's discussions.

Telephone Preference Service (TPS)

In June 2007 we expressed our views and concerns, in an [advice note](#) to Ofcom, about the operation of the Telephone Preference Service scheme including enforcement and the handling of complaints. In November 2007 [Ofcom responded](#) to the Panel's comments and questions.

Other Consumer Panel activities

Next Generation Access

In 2007 the Panel worked closely on Next Generation Access (NGA) with Ofcom and others, including the Broadband Stakeholder Group (BSG). This is an important policy area for the Panel because of the significant benefits that NGA could bring - felt by consumers, citizens and the UK as a whole. We published [a second Advice Note](#) on the issue in August 2007.

We are currently co-sponsoring, with BSG and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, a piece of research that will provide a framework to analyse the economic and social value of next generation broadband, and the costs of late deployment.

In the spring of 2008, we will hold an event in Scotland to promote investment in next

generation broadband in communities that currently receive the sparsest and slowest coverage. We will explore what next generation broadband will mean for the UK economy and UK citizens, such as: the difference it could make to education and healthcare services; the private value to the financial and entertainment industries; how citizens would make use of much faster broadband; and how to ensure that a new digital divide does not occur between rural and urban areas.

The Consumer Interest Toolkit

PricewaterhouseCoopers has won a tender to carry out three audits for the Panel using our Consumer Interest Toolkit. The audits will look at how the consumer interest was factored into Ofcom policy development in the following areas: the removal of BT's retail price controls, the Broadband Migrations Review and the Licence Exemption Framework Review. The reports of these audits will be launched at a Consumer Panel event in February 2008.

Social Inclusion Literature Review

To explore the interconnection between social and digital inclusion, we commissioned [a literature review of social inclusion and communications](#), which was published in November 2007. The review sets out the common themes that run through the publicly available research, and identifies gaps where further research is needed.

Forthcoming research

Later this month, the Consumer Panel will publish a qualitative research piece that will explore the attitudes and behaviour of happily-engaged technically-savvy consumers in order to learn how the world of mainstream communications may develop in the near future. The research looks across all aspects of the communications market within Ofcom's remit, including TV and radio, mobile and fixed line telephony and internet services.

Consumer Forum on Communications (CFC)

The final meeting of 2007 took place on 18 December, with the agenda covering the EU Telecoms Framework Review, Next Generation Access, and Ofcom's Consumer Experience. The [note of the September 2007 CFC meeting](#) - which looked at the Switched-On campaign to promote BT's 21st Century Network, the TAG campaign on telecommunications for deaf people, and Ofcom's review of Additional Charges levied by telecoms providers - has now been added to the Panel website.

Details of Consumer Panel meetings

The Consumer Panel meets monthly, except in the month of August. The [agendas and minutes of Panel meetings](#) are published on our website, and you can see what is coming up on the next Panel meeting agenda in the [Looking Ahead section of the Panel website](#).

A new Consumer Panel Chairman

Finally, in 2008 we will see the arrival of a new Chairman to lead the Ofcom Consumer Panel, following [Colette Bowe's decision to stand down](#) after four years in the role. We hope to make an announcement about the new Chairman later this month.

If you no longer wish to receive this e-newsletter, or if a colleague would like to be added to our e-newsletter distribution list, please write to contact@ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk.

The Ofcom Consumer Panel is the independent advisory body that advises Ofcom and other relevant bodies on consumer interests in telecommunications, broadcasting and spectrum markets. To find out more visit www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk.