



e-newsletter January 2009

Welcome

Happy New Year and welcome to our first e-newsletter of 2009. Even though it's just the start of the year, the Communications Consumer Panel has a lot to report on – not least the launch of our new blog (see below for the full story).

To register for updates to our website or to read the blog go to:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/>

No consumers or citizens should miss out on the digital age – Anna Bradley tells Digital Britain Steering Group

Addressing the Digital Britain Steering Group, chaired by Lord Carter, Consumer Panel Chair Anna Bradley spoke about the findings of recent Panel research on the future needs of consumers and the role of communications services in meeting them. She outlined the four key messages that flow from the research:

- It is critical for all consumers and citizens that no one should miss out on the digital age – access to the internet is essential.
- Security and privacy online are vital to trust and confidence and therefore to the use of communications services and devices.
- Consumers need help to manage increasing complexity and constant change.
- Consumers and citizens accept they have responsibilities in a digital environment, but they believe Government, regulators and service providers also have responsibilities that need to be met.

Anna Bradley then set out how Digital Britain should address these issues. She said that broadband should be universally available “at a level that provides access to the digital services that are considered important by consumers and citizens”. In the light of recent cases high-profile data losses she told the audience that consumers needed “a clear commitment and improved record on government and industry privacy and security issues”. To help consumers to take responsibility for protecting themselves and their families, she said that they needed, “simpler and more automatic privacy and security mechanisms.” And to help consumers deal with increasing complexity

and constant change, there should be a “joined-up information, advisory and problem solving capability to help in purchasing and trouble-shooting.”

The Panel will publish the full research report in February, and it is likely that it will explore the implications of the findings in greater detail, looking for example at “which communications services should be universally available and how they should be delivered”.

Digital Britain’s interim report is expected by the end of January and the Panel and will be working with Digital Britain on areas of common interest so as to contribute to the final report. See the presentation on the website:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/Meeting%20the%20needs%20of%20consumers.pdf>

Panel research finds fast-growing network of community-led broadband schemes across the UK

A new report from the Communications Consumer Panel, *Local initiatives on next generation access in the UK*, has mapped a surprisingly extensive and growing network of community-led fast broadband schemes across the UK.

The Consumer Panel’s review of local networks of super-fast broadband found schemes and pilots across the country from Ashford in Kent and King’s Lynn in East Anglia, to the Scottish Highlands. “There are around 40 local broadband schemes,” report author and Panel member Roger Darlington explained. He highlighted examples such as the Digital Region project in South Yorkshire that aims to connect all households and businesses in the region “which would give fast internet access to at least 500,000 people.

This is the most comprehensive review to date of community broadband schemes, which are of very different sizes and at very different stages of development. “Collectively they represent a range of funding and business models and of technical delivery options that should contribute significantly to the national debate on the timing and form of next generation access roll-out in the UK,” Roger Darlington said.

The Communications Consumer Panel would welcome further information on any of the initiatives mentioned and on any new schemes not covered by this review – following publication of the report we have heard about some more schemes already. Please contact us via:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/>

Read the full report at:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/smartweb/nga-s-economic-and-social-value/community-led-broadband-schemes>

Broadband access ensures consumers remain economically and socially connected – Fiona Ballantyne tells Scottish minister

Fiona Ballantyne, the Communications Consumer Panel's Member for Scotland, recently took part in a Ministerial Summit chaired by Ann McKeichin, MP, Permanent Undersecretary of State in the Scotland Office. The Minister had concerns about the current challenging economic circumstances and the impact on consumers.

The summit, which also included representatives from Consumer Focus Scotland, Trading Standards, Consumer Advice Bureau and the Office of Fair Trading, agreed that agencies needed to avoid fragmentation of resources. Also, that they needed to ensure that consumers were quickly directed to the right help and advice

Fiona Ballantyne pointed out the importance of consumers retaining their communications service in straitened times to access the services they need: "The Panel's concern is that broadband access could be seen as expendable when household budgets are tight, just as it will come into its own in ensuring that people remain economically and socially connected."

She told the summit that although Ofcom has already raised this issue with Ministers, it had been told that Job Centres and other public places provide broadband access. "Whilst this is true, such sources would be a limited substitute for home-based broadband which should remain the priority," she told colleagues. "If the level of broadband connections does start to decline, the Panel may wish to advocate raising awareness of sources of (free) publicly accessible broadband and increasing the capacity of such providers in order to cope with higher demand levels."

Read Fiona's reflections on the summit on the blog:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/smartweb/news-and-media/blog>

Communications Consumer Panel makes recommendations to Government to promote digital inclusion

In responding to the Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan, the Communications Consumer Panel pointed out that, "Broadband internet access can change people's lives immeasurably, providing new sources of information, new ways of communicating and more convenient access to important services. It is vital that no one misses out. So the Panel supports the Government's co-ordinated action to enhance participation in the digital age through its Digital Inclusion Action Plan. And we welcome the impressive array of initiatives that collectively, will help to achieve the goal of digital inclusion."

The Panel went on to make nine recommendations to strengthen the Action Plan and "increase the prospects of achieving digital inclusion in all parts of the UK". The recommendations flow from the Panel's view that in promoting

digital inclusion, there are two main challenges – extending the availability of broadband and increasing its take-up. To participate fully in a digital society, consumers and citizens will need a reliable, always-on broadband connection and the Government should recognise that broadband access is of particular importance for people who live in sparsely populated, rural areas.

To encourage take-up of broadband, the Panel said that a dual approach is needed. “The Government should take targeted action to encourage take-up among particular social groups and take action to help all consumers and citizens to get the most out of being online...the social groups that are in particular need of assistance are lower income families, older people and people with a disability”.

Read the response, including our recommendations, on the website:
<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/smartweb/digital-inclusion/digital-inclusion-action-plan>

Latest news...

Ofcom research into broadband speeds gives a true picture of consumer experience for the first time

The Communications Consumer Panel welcomed Ofcom’s publication of research into consumer broadband speeds, and said that it looked forward to the full results later in the year. The research follows a year long campaign by the Panel to highlight the mismatch between the broadband speeds that consumers think they are buying and what they actually receive.

Panel Chair Anna Bradley commented that this was the first time that there was a true picture of the broadband speeds consumers receive rather than “the picture that is painted by advertising”.

“The research reveals a headline speed out-of-touch with the real world speed experienced by consumers with the average speed of 3.6m/bits less than half the average headline speed,” she said.

The Consumer Panel has now told industry that it expects it to react to these findings positively, and enable consumers to make informed choices by giving them better information about the speeds they can expect to receive.

See the Panel’s news release:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/smartweb/news-releases/responding-to-the-publication-by-ofcom-of-its-research-on-broadband-speeds-communications-consumer-p>

Read all about it – Communications Consumer Panel launches new blog

The launch of the blog on the Communications Consumer Panel website will make the Panel’s work more accessible and provide a useful source of information about developments in the communications sector.

Communications Consumer panel chair Anna Bradley said: “Our new blog discussion forum is a completely new way for Panel members to share with a wide audience information about the policy issues we are tackling and our research and events. It will show how the Panel works with other policy makers, regulators and with industry in the interests of consumers.”

So look out for the latest news from the Panel, and keep up-to-date with what our new Panel members are saying and doing. Go to our home page and click on the blog link: <http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/>