

September 2011

COMMUNICATIONS
CONSUMER
PANEL



Panel newsletter

In short...

Making the most of the internet...

The Panel is starting a new project to identify how best to get - and keep - people online. This builds on the Consumer Framework that we published in 2010, and we'll be working with a range of key stakeholders throughout the Autumn. Watch out for further updates and the launch of the report in early 2012.

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/smartweb/digital-participation/the-consumer-framework-for-digital-participation>

Panel meetings...

To read minutes from previous meetings go to:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/smartweb/angenda-and-minutes/2011>

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Latest news...

Consumers and citizens must continue to have a strong advocate

Responding to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) consultation into the future consumer landscape, the Communications Consumer Panel has welcomed the consultation, but questions why consumer advocacy functions of a limited number of sectors would be brought together. The Panel believes that effective consumer advocacy must be founded on a set of general principles, but says there is little evidence of how they would be delivered in the proposed model for consumer advocacy.

The Panel has concluded that the case for change in the communications sector has not been made. Consumer Panel Chair Bob Warner writes: "In the short to medium-term the interests of consumers would be better served by the continuation of the current arrangement, which are working well at low cost."

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/BIS%20response.pdf>

CAP guidance on broadband adverts does not go far enough

New guidance on advertising broadband speeds for internet service providers (ISPs) does not go far enough, the Consumer Panel said in response to the Committees of Advertising Practice (CAP) publication. The Panel had already told the CAP consultation that ISPs must stop using misleading 'up

to' speeds in their adverts. There is concern that the new guidance for ISPs still means that consumers will be unable to an informed choice about which ISP gives them the best internet speeds.

<http://bcap.org.uk/Media-Centre/2011/Changes-in-advertising-of-'unlimited'-and-broadband-speed-claims.aspx>

BBC mobile not-spots survey reinforces Panel's call for intervention

Consumer Panel member Colin Browne said that the BBC's mobile coverage survey had reinforced the Panel's views about the extent of the coverage problems experienced by nearly three million people in the UK on a day-to-day basis: "Effective mobile communication is essential, and we need intervention to improve services", he said, adding: "The forthcoming spectrum auction offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to resolve this persistent problem, which causes significant disadvantage for consumers as well as small businesses."

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/BBC%20survey%20final.pdf>

Making mobiles easy to use - another step forward

The Panel's call to make mobile handsets easier to use received significant support at a meeting this month between Ofcom, the Communications Consumer Panel and representatives of a range of disability organisations. Chairing the event, Communications Consumer Panel Chair Bob Warner explained that the meeting was intended to explore the issues that came up in the Panel's research into mobile accessibility: "The research highlighted that many older or disabled people can't get the information they need to select a suitable mobile phone - labelling could play a hugely important role in informing people's decisions."

The meeting collected feedback for the Mobile Manufacturers' Forum (MMF) on its Global Accessibility Reporting Initiative (GARI). GARI is a project designed to help consumers learn more about the various accessibility features of mobile phones and to help them identify phones with the features that may assist them with their particular needs. Participants congratulated the MMF for developing GARI and for actively seeking input about how it could be improved.

UK mobile network operators were encouraged to use GARI in their high street shops when advising consumers, in the same way that postcode mobile network coverage checkers are used. The meeting also urged further manufacturers such as Research in Motion (BlackBerry), HTC and makers of specialist phones - such as Geemarc and Doro to list their handsets on GARI to bring them to the attention of people looking for a suitable mobile.

Ofcom will be making these points to the MMF and to mobile operators in the UK.

To read the Panel's research into making mobile phones easier to use go to:

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/Final%20usability%20report%20260111.pdf>

The GARI website can be found at:

<http://www.mobileaccessibility.info/>

Banning automatically renewable contracts is good for consumers

Communications Consumer Panel Chair Bob Warner said that Ofcom's ban on automatically renewable landline and broadband contracts was really good news for consumers. He said that this would "prevent residential and small business customers getting stuck with contracts that no longer meet their needs because they have been extended for another year without people's active consent".

<http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/ARCs%20comment%20final.pdf>

Silver surfing

Consumer Panel member Colin Browne attended the Awards Ceremony for Spring Online, which recognised six of the most outstanding initiatives from the tenth Silver Surfers' event: "There were over 2,500 imaginative and practical initiatives devised to help older people learn more about computers and the internet. The trick, of course, is to try to convert the enthusiasm and ingenuity of these one-off events into business as usual, and not to lose the experience of what works and what doesn't work," Colin said.

<http://springonline.org/>

News from the Nations

Fiona Ballantyne, Panel member for Scotland reports:

Consumer Focus Scotland has published their Annual Review for 2010-11. The review includes a section on digital communications.

http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk/scotland/files/2011/08/Scottish-annual-review-2010-11-Interactive_WEB.pdf

Fiona also highlights two stories about progress in bringing broadband to Scotland. Alex Neil, Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment has criticised Scotland's share of the broadband fund recently allocated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, stating: "We do not regard the UK Government's allocation as a realistic contribution to meet Scotland's broadband requirements." Meanwhile councils in South of Scotland have decided to come together to ensure local people can access superfast broadband. They have decided to support a £120 million broadband funding model that will deliver super fast broadband throughout Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders by 2020.

<http://online-broadband-guide.co.uk/120-million-broadband-scheme-in-scotland-to-go-ahead/00616>

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/08/16154750>

Maureen Edmondson, Panel member for Northern Ireland, writes:

Ofcom recently published its Communications Market Report (CMR) for Northern Ireland that shows that 92% of adults in Northern Ireland now own a mobile phone. Almost a quarter of Northern Ireland's mobile phone owners have a smartphone (23%).

Since 2008, broadband penetration in Northern Ireland has risen from 52% and now stands at 75%, making Northern Ireland second only to England among the UK nations for broadband take-up. Northern Ireland has recently benefitted from investment in fixed-line superfast broadband from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and BT, and the CMR report notes that 81% of households in Northern Ireland have a fibre-to-the-cabinet connection, while the UK average is 23%.

However, Maureen highlights that the mobile experience in Northern Ireland is not as positive: "Both 2G and 3G coverage are lower in Northern Ireland than in the UK as a whole. This shortfall has a significant impact on consumers and small businesses and must be addressed," she adds.

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr11/CMR_2011_Northern_Ireland.pdf

September Panel meeting

This month's Panel meeting included:

- Examination of the data on telecoms complaints, and discussion of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) schemes.
- Presentations on Ofcom's latest work on mobile coverage.
- The Panel discussed Ofcom's Annual Plan for 2012/13.
- Discussion of the BIS consultation.

