

## **3<sup>rd</sup> Ofcom Consumer Panel meeting, 26 April 2004**

### **Note of the Third Meeting of the Ofcom Consumer Panel, held at Ofcom, London, 26 April 2004**

#### **Introduction**

1. The Chairman welcomed members to the third formal meeting of the Ofcom Consumer Panel. Apologies were sent by Graham Mather, Simon Gibson and Kevin McLaughlin. Julie Myers (Adviser to the Panel) and David Edwards (Secretary) were present throughout the meeting. The following Ofcom colleagues attended for part of the meeting: Jim Egan, Matt Peacock, Caroline Wallace and Neil Buckley.

#### **Previous minutes and matters arising**

2. The minutes of the last meeting were agreed. The Henley Centre had provided a feedback paper on the facilitated Panel team building event held on 15 March 2004. It would be copied to members. It was agreed that on 17 May 2004 (the day before the next Panel meeting) there would be an afternoon briefing session with Ofcom colleagues followed by an evening event, with a guest invited to address the Panel. Ofcom would have a new media monitoring service supplier from 4 May 2004. It was expected that Panel members could use the service. There had been a number of recent media appearances by senior Ofcom figures. Members requested advance notice of such appearances, when possible.

#### **Chairman's report**

3. On 5 April 2004 Ofcom published its report 'Driving Digital Switchover'. A Panel news release was issued on the same day. It welcomed the report and Ofcom's recommendation that a firm date be set for the start of the switchover process. The Chairman and Bob Twitchin had met Mike Whitlam, the new Chairman of Ofcom's Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People. They would attend quarterly Advisory Committee meetings when possible. Mike Whitlam was expected to devote 12 days annually to Committee work, with 8 days for members of all Ofcom Advisory Committees. The time commitment appeared small in relation to that of the Consumer Panel. It was agreed that over the coming year the Panel should monitor the Committees' ability to advise Ofcom effectively.

4. The Chairman, with Ruth Evans, Roger Darlington and Bob Twitchin, attended an Ofcom workshop on the strategic Telecoms Review. Topics included the attributes of a well-functioning telecoms market, effective competition, the extent of regulation, incentives for investment, consumer protection and behaviour and universal service. Ruth Evans would meet with Alex Blowers to discuss where the Panel could add value to the review. It was agreed that the Panel should issue a news release to comment on Phase 1 of the Telecoms

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Review, which would be published on 28 April 2004.

#### **Digital Switchover**

5. Jim Egan explained the delivery mechanisms for digital television, ie via satellite, cable and digital terrestrial (Freeview); provided information on coverage and take-up, current and expected; and described a phased process for switchover. There would be a number of gains, the greatest being economic with the release of spectrum. The key consumer issues were: access, after switchover some tens of thousands of people, who currently received an analogue signal, would be without a television signal for reasons of geography; affordability and consumer information. The Panel's view was that the latter should be clear, helpful, non-technical and widely available.

#### **Members' workstreams**

6. Members gave brief reports on their workstream proposals. It was agreed that this should be a standing item on Panel agendas. Bob Twitchin, Roger Darlington and Fiona Ballantyne had met with the Chairmen or the full advisory committees for older and disabled people, England and Scotland respectively. There was an open invitation to Panel Members to support Bob Twitchin on issues affecting disabled consumers. Julie Myers would accompany Fiona Ballantyne on a number of visits to stakeholders and contacts in Scotland.

7. On low income consumers, Ruth Evans had met with representatives of the Public Utilities Access Forum. The Panel's consumer research project could turn out to be a useful means of identifying relevant issues. Kate O'Rourke was working on the urban brief. It had proved difficult to identify issues that were not already covered in other workstreams. It was agreed that the Henley Centre should be approached on research on urban issues. By the end of the year the Panel would need to determine whether there were genuine 'urban issues'. Nainish Bapna was considering how best to reach out to small businesses, including via their organisations.

8. The Chairman was working on three workstreams: digital switchover, issues for older people and stakeholder identification and support. A meeting was scheduled with Age Concern and the Panel's consumer research project would identify some important issues.

#### **Numbering issues**

9. Caroline Wallace, Neil Buckley and Matt Peacock joined the meeting. The Chairman explained that the Panel was aware of the controversy that had accompanied the liberalisation of Directory Enquiry (DQ) services. The Panel had a particular concern about consumer information in relation to number changes. It was eager to learn about Ofcom's 'roadmap' for numbering.

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10. It was reported that Ofcom would hold focus groups to gauge consumer reaction to 020 3 as a new number range for London and wished to work closely with the Panel on public information initiatives. A Strategic Numbering Group had been set up across Ofcom, including staff engaged in policy, research and in informing consumers. It would meet regularly and consider short and long term numbering issues. It would produce a paper for the Ofcom Board and would welcome the Panel's input. The Panel welcomed a strategic approach but remained concerned about how consumers would be informed. One approach could be a numbering statement to outline what lay ahead. The Strategic Numbering Group hoped to submit a paper to the Ofcom Board in June 2004 and could discuss it with the Panel at its 10 June 2004 meeting.

11. Members remained unclear about how the Strategic Numbering Group's consumer information work would fit into Ofcom's wider consumer information strategy. Although it was reassured by a strategic approach to numbering, the Panel would need to be convinced that Ofcom fully understood the impact of numbering policy on consumers, that it was organised to understand and assess consumer detriment and to effectively inform consumers about any changes and the reasons for them. It was agreed that the Chairman should write to the Ofcom Chairman formally to report the Panel's thinking on numbering.

#### **Any other business**

12. Concern was raised about Ofcom's policy on publication of responses to consultations. Responses that were not 'in confidence' would be published at the end of each consultation period. It was argued that responses should be available when received by Ofcom to facilitate the consultation process, to stimulate thinking and to encourage further responses. Members would consider any issues arising from Ofcom consultation processes and discuss them at the next meeting. It was reported that BT was considering an increase in the minimum fee charged for local and national calls from public call boxes that would allow calls of longer duration at the new rates. It was agreed that at the next meeting the Panel agenda would include discussion of a finalised consumer research brief, dates for meetings in 2005, consideration of agendas for the rest of the year and external communications.

#### **Date of the next meeting**

13. The next meeting would be held on 18 May 2004 at Ofcom in London.