

4th Ofcom Consumer Panel meeting, 18 May 2004

Note of the Fourth Meeting of the Ofcom Consumer Panel, held at Ofcom, London, 18 May 2004

Introduction

1. The Chairman welcomed members to the fourth formal meeting of the Ofcom Consumer Panel. All members were present. 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: Neil Buckley, Jerry Forristal, Ritu Manhas, Helen Normoyle and Alan Pridmore.

Previous minutes and matters arising

2. The minutes of the last meeting were agreed. There was discussion of Ofcom's approach to publication of responses to consultations. All responses were posted on Ofcom's website in a batch at the end of a consultation period. It was agreed that the case for publication of responses upon receipt should be made to Ofcom.

Chairman's report

3. The Chairman and Deputy Chairman had met the Ofcom Chairman and Board Secretary and agreed procedures on how the Panel would communicate with the Ofcom Board. It was agreed that the Panel's options were to:

- write to the appropriate person in Ofcom;
- invite project managers to debate at Panel meetings;
- make submissions to Ofcom's regular Policy Executive committee meetings;
- attend or make submissions to Ofcom Board meetings;
- invite a member of the Board to explain its views at a Panel meeting.

Channels of communication would be kept under review to ensure that they were working.

4. Members discussed publication of Panel minutes and it was agreed that a note of meetings should be placed on the Panel website.

5. There was discussion of the format of Panel meetings and it was agreed that meetings should be structured to include:

- an agenda item devoted to how the Panel related to the consumer world;
- at least one item covering an important Ofcom issue; and
- an item on how the Panel conducts its business.

At the next meeting there would be discussion of a draft of the Panel's half-year report and draft responses to Ofcom on the Telecoms and the Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) reviews.

Report on meetings with consumer groups

6. The Deputy Chairman reported on meetings with the Public Utilities Access Forum (PUAF), the National Consumer Council (NCC) and Consumers' Association (CA). Both NCC and CA had been approached to examine the Panel's Statement of Intent and appeared to accept that the Panel's criteria to determine its priorities were sensible. The Chairman of the Digital Expert Group would be invited to address the Panel in that role. It would be important for the Panel to work with consumer bodies and to be satisfied that Ofcom worked effectively with them.

7. The Consumer Forum on Communications (CFC) was considering an offer from the Panel Chairman to host CFC meetings. Formerly NCC had provided support.

8. The Panel required direct access to consumers, in addition to contact with consumer bodies. It was proposed that the Panel should consider setting up a standing group or forum of sufficient size that was statistically representative of UK consumers. This would provide a live evidence base that the Panel could use to test out its views and ideas. The Chairmen asked the Deputy Chairman to develop the idea further.

The Panel and electronic communication with consumers

9. Suggestions were made on how to make effective use of the Panel's website to communicate with consumers. These included a weblog and an electronic newsletter. It was agreed that it would be better to start small and grow. It would be important for the Panel site to be clearly distinguished from Ofcom's site. It was noted that effective communication with Ofcom colleagues would be important, to ensure they were aware of the Panel and its remit.

Ofcom and providing consumers with information

10. Ofcom's Annual Plan referred to publication of strategy to inform consumers on telecoms matters. The first step would be a statement that identified high level principles for providing consumers with information. Specific policies would be informed by consumer research. The Panel's own research exercise could be of help. Internal guidance was being prepared for Ofcom project managers on the consumer information issues they should consider. A project team was being set up to look at telecoms tariff transparency, at whether there was a need for consumer information and the form it should take. The Chairman commented that Ofcom should consider use of free media, eg press coverage, along with other channels of communication.

11. The Chairman's view was that leaving communication of liberalisation of DQ services to the industry had been a mistake and confusion had been the result. This was one of the reasons that consumer information was one of the Panel's most pressing issues. The Chairman proposed that discussions

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should continue with Ofcom off-line on a range of consumer information issues, including numbering and the miss-selling of fixed-line telecoms services.

Universal services in telecommunications

12. There was discussion of the background to universal services in telecoms, including funding, the legal framework and how the universal service review fits with Ofcom's strategic review of telecoms. There was discussion of the BT Light User Scheme and its cost structures. Affordability was an element of universal service. Ofcom was conducting consumer research on the experience of people who had been disconnected and with consumers who used public payphones. There was discussion of how the Panel could contribute to Ofcom's work on universal service. Findings from the Panel's consumer research project could be relevant and members had workstreams that included issues affecting consumers on low incomes, consumers in rural areas and older and disabled people.

Members' workstreams

13. On the youth workstream, there appeared to be fewer issues than originally thought or issues were covered in other workstreams. As with the urban workstream, the Panel would have to determine whether there were genuine issues to be pursued. Other workstreams were in progress and details would be included in the Panel's interim annual report.

Other matters to note/agree

Monthly report – consultations and approaches to the Panel etc

14. The report was now forward looking and would detail themes of Ofcom's work as they emerged.

Dates for meetings in 2005

15. Proposed meeting dates had been circulated. Members were requested to advise the Secretary of their availability.

Panel research

16. A report was given on the tendering exercise for the Panel's consumer research project. Meetings had been set up with two agencies. By the end of May 2004 a recommendation would be made to the Panel on which agency to commission to conduct the research. If members were in agreement the Chairman would then 'sign off' the project.

Any other business

17. It was agreed that the Panel would respond formally to the Ofcom consultation on mis-selling of fixed-line telecoms services.

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Date of the next meeting

18. The next meeting would be held on 10 June 2004 at Ofcom in London.