

OCTOBER 2017 BULLETIN

Update on Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD activities

Jo Connell, Panel Chair, and Fiona Lennox, Executive Director, met Baroness Hayter and other Consumer Panel Chairs at the House of Lords to discuss Brexit, and held a follow up meeting with the Chairs to update each other on their respective work.

Panel member Chris Holland attended the Ofcom Advisory Committee for England where he highlighted the Panel's ongoing interest in nuisance calls, consumer engagement and auto compensation, as well as outline our plans for a new body of research looking at customer service.

Chris also attended the Consumer Forum for Communications where amongst other topics, Ofcom's Consumer Engagement Project was discussed and Chris outlined the [Panel's view](#) on this.

Panel representatives, including Jo and Chris, met with the Royal Mail this month to discuss consumer policy and initiatives.

Our latest research: Access to broadcast and on-demand content: Time to catch up!

Our [latest research](#) was released this month, looking at the availability, awareness and use of access services in the UK. Although more people are watching TV via 'catch up' or on-demand programming, there are proportionally fewer accessible programmes for those with a sensory impairment than are available on traditional 'linear' or time-specific TV: 68% of on-demand programming did not offer any accessibility provision.

Our research overall highlights an appetite for greater provision of access services across the media landscape, but our qualitative interviews also strongly suggest there is a need for more awareness of what there is available, greater knowledge on how to use it, and improvements to the quality of output.

At the end of the report, based on the findings of our research, we make several recommendations of next steps for the regulator, industry and stakeholders. [Read more here.](#)

The Panel and ACOD's consultation responses

Response to the DCMS' consultation on a new broadband universal service obligation

The Panel believe that 10Mbps should be a minimum guarantee across the UK, but as we stated in our response, this threshold should increase in line with, or ideally anticipate, consumers' needs. We support DCMS' proposal to ask Ofcom to monitor the USO on an ongoing basis and have previously advised that we believe the measures to be reviewed should be affordability, speed, reliability and quality of service - and that where there are gaps in provision, there will need to be flexibility in Ofcom's powers to address these.

We agree with the Government's statement of intent that the USO's design must put people and businesses at its heart so that digital connectivity for as many people as possible can be achieved as quickly as possible; and that the USO must be legally binding, measurable and enforceable. Furthermore, the Panel asserted that it is vital that consumer information is consistent, transparent and accessible and sets out clearly consumers' rights, including priority fault repair and complaint handling.

Digital engagement and stimulating take up should feature as an element of the USO's planning and implementation, and micro businesses and consumers in vulnerable circumstances should be given particular focus.

[Our response is here.](#)

Other news

Panel welcomes 37% line rental cut for BT's landline-only customers

Ofcom has announced, following their review, that BT landline only customers will see their monthly bills cut by £7 per month; a saving of £84 a year, for up to one million of BT's landline-only customers.

The Panel has been concerned with the rising prices for customers who are on landline only contracts, especially as these have not been in line with wholesale costs. We have voiced this concern to Ofcom and are very pleased that they have acted on this and set out proposals to resolve the issue.

We are also pleased that BT agreed to Ofcom's proposal in full. We anticipate other providers will follow BT's lead.

More information is available in [Ofcom's news release](#).

Amendments to the Financial Guidance and Claims bill

Currently passing through Parliament is the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill: which seeks to establish a new financial guidance body; provide for the funding of debt advice in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; and regulate claims management services.

Last week during the Report stage in the Lords a cross-party amendment was tabled and accepted which would enable the new financial guidance body to make and publish an annual assessment of any consumer detriment. Furthermore, if the financial guidance body concludes that there are products and services where a ban on cold calling would help it exercise its functions, including consumer protection, it would have to advise the Secretary of State to institute such bans. Any ban would extend to the commercial use of data obtained by cold calling.

Also tabled is an amendment by the [Fair Telecoms Campaign](#), put forward following their campaign in this regard, to require the Financial Conduct Authority to prohibit cold calling by claims management companies and their agents.

Consultation on Broadband Speeds Codes of Practice

Ofcom is proposing to strengthen the current codes to improve speed estimates provided at the point of sale, after sale and in customer contracts and to enhance customers' right to exit. These changes would also ensure the codes apply to all technologies used to deliver broadband.

The [consultation](#) is open until 10 November.

Consultation on Calling Line Identification

Calling Line Identification (CLI) gives people the ability to identify the person or organisation calling them, and then choose whether to accept the call or not. The Panel have been calling for CLI to be made free where possible, and following a [successful outcome](#) in this regard, including requirements that the CLI data provided with a call includes a valid, dialable telephone number which uniquely identifies the caller, Ofcom needs to update its guidance to communication providers. Ofcom has stated that the points of clarification relate to the fundamental principles, which will improve the reliability of CLI information: validity, privacy and integrity.

Ofcom are also proposing to make a new number range available to be used when calls from CPs that are outside the scope of the CLI guidelines have absent or unreliable associated CLI.

The [consultation](#) is open until 14 November.

Mobile phone operators overcharging for handsets

Another issue that the Panel have raised concerns about is the unfair practice by mobile phone operators of continuing to charge customers the same tariff after they have paid off their handset - when that tariff included the cost of the handset. So we were very pleased to see [Citizens Advice champion this](#). They revealed that customers of Vodafone, EE and Three who choose to stay on the same phone plan after their fixed deal ends do not get their bills reduced. These customers are paying on average an extra £22 a month for a phone they have already paid off. Citizens Advice's analysis revealed that the extra cost can be as much as £38 a month on average for contracts with handsets such as the iPhone 7 128/256GB, the Galaxy S8 and the Xperia XZ Premium.

36 per cent of people with a handset-inclusive mobile phone contract stayed on it beyond the fixed period, with 19 per cent staying in the same contract for more than six months afterwards.

The Panel will be pursuing this issue further with Ofcom.

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