

Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD response to the terms of reference for Ofcom's Strategic Review of Digital Communications

Introduction

The Communications Consumer Panel (the Panel) and the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People (ACOD) welcome the opportunity to respond to the terms of reference for Ofcom's Strategic Review of Digital Communications.

The Panel works to protect and promote people's interests in the communications sector. We are an independent statutory body set up under the Communications Act 2003. The Panel carries out research, provides advice and encourages Ofcom, government, the EU, industry and others to look at issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and microbusinesses. The Panel pays particular attention to the needs of older people and people with disabilities, the needs of people in rural areas and people on low incomes, and the needs of micro businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers. There are four members of the Panel who represent the interests of consumers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively. They liaise with the key stakeholders in the Nations to understand the perspectives of consumers in all parts of the UK and input these perspectives to the Panel's consideration of issues.

There is also cross-membership with Ofcom's Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People. This means that Members, in their ACOD capacity, provide advice to Ofcom on issues relating to older and disabled people including television, radio and other content on services regulated by Ofcom as well as about issues concerning the postal sector.

Response

- We would strongly encourage the Review to adopt a more holistic focus on the communications sector. What is important is whether digital communications are truly delivering the required services for consumers and citizens, rather than a review of the communications market per se which does not address the impact of public policy interventions. The Review must encompass not only an assessment of

the market but also whether public policy interventions are working as they were intended - or whether interventions are required in new areas.

- In those areas where it is considered that digital communications are delivering for consumers, the question of ‘by what means’ must then be asked - including assessing whether these means are sustainable long-term or subject to threat. If it is considered that digital communications are not meeting the needs of consumers and citizens in some areas, then the question must be one of what action needs to be taken to enable delivery.
- Although we appreciate that other work is underway, it is vital that this Review of digital communications enables Ofcom and other stakeholders to have an informed view of how consumer outcomes are affected by both private and public sector developments. Public policy outcomes must be examined and scrutinised for their ultimate impact on consumers. Adopting such an overview will enable a comprehensive review of how innovative and creative solutions can contribute to delivering sustainable outcomes for UK consumers and citizens wherever they may be.
- We would strongly encourage the inclusion in the Review of an examination of the barriers to take up and usage of digital services. For some time it has remained the Panel’s belief that unless fundamental action is taken, the digital divide risks becoming an ever greater digital gulf as the distance increases between those who are online and those who remain firmly rooted in the offline world. We live in an era in which we are seeing many Government services become “digital by default” and when being online is becoming a necessity of life rather than an optional extra. The disadvantages created by lack of online connectivity and/or lack of capacity to use it mean that many consumers pay more for their goods and services. Digital disadvantage compounds disadvantage in the broader sense. While the advantages of online connectivity apply to all groups in the community, they are especially relevant to disabled people, those on a low income and older people, many of whom may be less mobile than younger people. And yet take-up of the digital world is unequal amongst the population, with older people more likely to be excluded. We would suggest that the position of the offline population, and that of narrow users, be more strongly acknowledged in the context of putting digital participation on an equal footing with infrastructure provision. We would suggest

that the Review should take into account of the cost of digital exclusion e.g. costs of lack of access, and costs of lack of capacity to engage.

- It is vital that the devolved administrations are closely involved with the development of the Review.

- Whilst it is important to consider how the majority of consumers will engage with digital communications, it is crucial to address the needs of the minority of people who still do not receive robust and reliable communications services.

- Finally, the Panel would also strongly encourage Ofcom to include a focus on the needs of micro businesses, who act in the market in very similar ways to individual consumers, and experience many of the same problems.

We look forward to working closely with Ofcom as this important Review develops further.