



## An overview of the Panel’s recent activities Chair’s highlights - Autumn 2023

The Communications Consumer Panel is the statutory consumer panel for the communications sector. Panel Members are appointed by the Secretary of State and hold dual membership with the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People. Find out more about the Panel and its Members on our website [here](#).

### *The Panel’s policy areas of focus*

We have published our [annual report for 2022-2023](#) and consulted on and published [our strategic plan 2023-24](#). Our discussions with stakeholders earlier this year helped to shape our proposed areas of focus for the year ahead, and through our regular engagement with Ofcom, governments, industry and others, we will continue to highlight the interests of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses and feed back what we’re hearing through our stakeholder networks and research and insights programme. We really welcomed input from our stakeholders, which helped to shape our plans for the year ahead.

Our proposed main policy areas of focus are outlined below.

<p><b>Affordability of communications services and consumer debt</b></p>	<p>We believe that communications services should be a basic right for all UK citizens. We remain extremely concerned about consumers’ awareness of social tariffs, including how they navigate the market, their understanding and experience of using them, and whether the tariffs meet their needs. Our latest research into social tariffs highlight many factors and we look forward to publishing the material soon. Initial findings from our research and from our stakeholders demonstrates that awareness is low and more is required to address consumers needs and protect them from further financial hardship.</p> <p>We have commissioned research to explore and understand how younger consumers navigate their way around the communications market in relation to the purchasing of mobile and broadband services. We wanted to analyse their awareness of their own needs and their behaviour in terms of what level of enquiry they undertook to obtain the service they required without overpaying and causing any affordability issues. We are currently assessing the data, and once reviewed the information in addition to our recommendations will be published.</p>
--	---



<b>Migration to VoIP</b>	<p>We remain significantly concerned about the migration to VoIP and the potential impacts on consumers with specific support requirements such as telecare users and those living in rural and remote areas who may not be able to contact emergency services during a power cut. Since publishing our latest research on <a href="#">migration to VoIP and consumers' telephony requirements</a> to further understand the potential consumer impacts of the migration since the initial fieldwork was undertaken last year, we have written to relevant Government Ministers, Parliamentarians, and members of the Devolved Nations to highlight our evidence-base and concerns, also drawing on the findings from our latest research on the daily struggles that people living in rural and remote areas using communications services can face. We are pleased with the contact received so far, and we also expect to receive further engagement soon.</p> <p>We are looking to commission a third wave of research looking at consumer awareness of the migration to VoIP, focused in the BT pilot areas in England and Northern Ireland. We are keen to understand whether efforts to raise awareness in these locations have reached consumers effectively. We hope the findings from these pilot areas will help to inform communications providers' communications plans across the whole of the UK.</p> <p>We continue to urge Ofcom, government and industry to implement a coordinated consumer communications campaign, to help raise awareness of the migration process. We believe that CPs need to proactively identify people who may need additional support throughout the migration process.</p>
<b>2G/3G switch-off</b>	<p>We continue to be concerned about the impacts of the switch-off on consumers who remain reliant on services delivered via 2G/3G connectivity, use equipment that could become obsolete and/or live in areas that could become not spots post switch-off, as well as any impacts on critical national infrastructure that uses these networks. In addition, 3G switch-off is due to take place earlier and some consumers could become reliant on 2G where 4G was not yet available, meaning they could no longer use apps for daily tasks and access important services such as emergency video relay. Having raised these concerns with Ofcom and industry, we were pleased to see that Ofcom had included additional information on how <a href="#">3G switch-off could impact access to emergency video relay on its website</a>. We highlighted the importance of making consumers aware of the impending changes using a variety of communications channels</p>



	and identifying consumers who could be impacted by the switch-off early-on to help mitigate potential harm.
<b>Postal services</b>	<p>We continue to be concerned about the resilience of postal services, quality of service and the impacts of recent postal strikes on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses. We are disappointed that Royal Mail has failed to meet its delivery performance targets for 2022/2023. We believe that all consumers should have access to affordable and reliable communications services, especially within the postal sector, and have recently responded to Ofcom’s consultation on retaining the safeguard cap on second class stamp prices. We passionately believe in retaining the safeguard cap to protect postal service users for at least a further five years as this level of regulatory protection is still an essential tool within the current digital age.</p> <p>Our research and meetings with various stakeholder groups has demonstrated that the cost-of-living crisis is deeply impacting consumers in the choices they face every day. Affordability and predictability of costs is vital to prevent consumers and citizens having to choose between food, heating, hygiene and communications or postal services. Postal services are a way of keeping citizens connected, especially for those who are not digitally connected, and particularly those living in rural and remote areas within the UK. We believe that all UK consumers should have access to an affordable and reliable postal service, regardless of geographical location. Our most recently published research <a href="#">‘Struggle for Fairness’</a> highlights this fact.</p>

### *The Panel’s research and insights programme*

We commission independent research to identify and highlight areas of consumer harm in the communications sector and provide an evidence base to drive change for the benefit of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses. Our research and insights programme seeks to capture a wide range of voices from across the UK including those who have additional support requirements and/or are less digitally skilled or confident.

Our research explores specific areas in the communications sector that have been flagged to us by our stakeholders and through our insights programme where consumers, citizens and micro-businesses may experience detriment.



Insights and recommendations from our new projects will be published soon - the subject areas we have focused on are outlined below:

- **The experiences of communications consumers who are struggling financially and may benefit from social tariffs**, including how they navigate the market, their awareness of social tariffs and experiences of applying for them.
- **Understanding the requirements of younger consumers in the communications sector**, how they navigate the communications market and any barriers they face.

We have published several other research projects that explore areas of the communications sector where we believe consumers are at risk of harm. Further information on the projects can be found below.

- **The experiences of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses using communications services in rural and remote areas.** Our research highlights the issues facing people living in rural and remote locations across the UK face using communications services. Our research findings and recommendations can be found [here](#) and a summary of the discussions take from our National Stakeholder Hubs can be found [here](#).
- **Consumers with additional support requirements in the communications sector** - our research, both qualitative and quantitative, considered what the term 'vulnerability' means to consumers and any barriers consumers face when trying to seek support from CPs. We shared our key research findings with the Panel's National Stakeholder Hubs ([a summary of our discussions can be found here](#)) and the Panel's Industry Forum.
- **Consumer perceptions of security and privacy of their online data** - we previously commissioned research looking into [consumers' perceptions of digital privacy](#) and we have commissioned a follow-up quantitative project to see how consumers' views have changed over five years. In July 2022, we held a UK-wide Hub on digital privacy and staying safe online where we discussed the online experiences of consumers, citizens and microbusinesses across the UK. A summary of our discussions can be found on our [website here](#).
- **A cross-sectoral think-piece on what excellent customer service looks like in UK regulated sectors.** This builds from on from our think-piece, published last year on Making Communications Services Inclusive and we look forward to sharing it with you.



## *The Panel's stakeholder engagement and collaboration*

### *The Panel's National Stakeholder Hubs*

The National Stakeholder Hubs - a series of roundtable discussions attended by a range of consumer, citizen and small business representatives - are held across each of the UK Nations and seek to strengthen the voices of UK consumers, citizens and micro-businesses in the communication sector. The themes of meetings are driven by current issues affecting those using communications services as highlighted by our stakeholders and research and insight programme.

The Hubs recently focussed on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses who live and work in rural and remote communities and how they access and experience communications services, such as landline, broadband, mobile, Pay-TV and postal services, in all four nations of the UK.

We commissioned research to further understand the interactions and experiences of communities in accessing communications services daily.

We invited stakeholders who represent the interests of such individuals to attend the Hubs with the aim of showcasing the Panel's latest research entitled: [The Struggle for Fairness: The experience of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses in remote and rural locations in the UK](#).

Participants were invited to ask questions and make comments, and a summary of our discussions can be found [on our website here](#).

We would like to thank all stakeholders who attended the sessions and contributed to our discussions. A summary of our discussions has been circulated to Ofcom and will be fed back to industry, governments through our channels of engagement.

### *Upcoming Hubs for your calendars*

Our next round of Hubs will take the form of an **All-UK Hub** and participants from all four Nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) will be invited to attend. We shall focus on consumers' awareness of social tariffs including how they navigate the market, their understanding and experience of using them, and whether the tariffs meet their needs. We will share a preview of our research findings and encourage participants to share examples of where social tariffs have impacted consumers and citizens, and what steps policymakers in the communications sector and industry should be taking to improve their experiences.



### **Future dates for the Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for England**

- 25 January 2024 - commencing at 11am
- 23 April 2024 - commencing at 2pm
- 25 June 2024 - commencing at 11am
- 22 October 2024 - commencing at 11am

### **Future dates for the Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Northern Ireland**

- 23 January 2024 - commencing at 11am
- 23 April 2024 - commencing at 10am
- 24 June 2024 - commencing at 3.30pm - (subject to change)
- 24 October 2024 - commencing at 2pm - (subject to change)

### **Future dates for the Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Scotland**

- 2 February 2024 - commencing at 10.30am
- 26 April 2024 - commencing at 10.30am
- 14 June 2024 - commencing at 10.30am
- 25 October 2024 - commencing at 10.30am

### **Future dates for the Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Wales**

- 24 January 2024 - commencing at 11am - (subject to change)
- 24 April 2024 - commencing at 10am - (subject to change)
- 24 June 2024 - commencing at 10am - (subject to change)
- 24 October 2024 - commencing at 11am - (subject to change)

### ***The Panel's UK Consumer Advocacy Hub***

We meet on a quarterly basis with consumer advocacy organisations across the UK. The Panel's Consumer Advocacy Hub is chaired by the Panel and attended by Which?, Citizens Advice, Citizens Advice Scotland, Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and Consumer Scotland. These meetings provide an opportunity to share and understand the key issues affecting consumers nationally and feed these into Ofcom and industry where appropriate.

### ***The Panel's Industry Forum***

We continue to facilitate discussion between Communication Providers (CPs) at the Panel's Industry Forum. The Industry Forum provides an opportunity for CPs to discuss issues of interest or concern under Chatham House rules to help them work together, learn from other sectors and the Panel's suggestions, and drive-up standards.

These meetings continue to focus on supporting consumers with additional service requirements, an area where we have urged CPs to take greater steps to understand



Panel Defnyddwyr  
Cyfathrebiadau



Communications  
Consumer Panel

and consistently record the requirements of consumers across the communications sector.

### *The Panel's policy inputs*

We regularly respond to consultations on matters relating to consumers, citizens and micro-businesses in the communications sector and you can find the Panel's consultation responses on our website [here](#). The Panel also engages with Ofcom's policy teams monthly and the minutes of these meetings can [be found here](#).