

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 25 April 2019 at 10.30

Riverside House, 2A Southwark Bridge Road, London SE1 9HA

**Present**

Consumer Panel/ACOD

Rick Hill (Chair)  
Kay Allen  
Amanda Britain  
David Holden  
Chris Holland  
Karen Lewis  
Craig Tillotson  
Richard Williams

Apologies

Richard Spencer

In attendance

Jenny Borritt  
David Edwards  
Fiona Lennox  
Rachel Weyman  
Colleagues from PwC (item 5)  
Ofcom colleagues

Item
<p><b>1. Welcome and introduction</b></p> <p>Rick Hill welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting, his first as Panel/ACOD Chair.</p>
<p><b>2. Declarations of Members' interests</b></p> <p>Craig Tillotson reminded Members of his role as Chief Executive of the Smart Request Company Limited, a FinTech, ahead of item 5. There were no other declarations.</p>
<p><b>3. Minutes of the meeting on 21 March 2019 and matters arising</b></p> <p>Subject to minor amendment, the minutes of the meeting of 21 March were <b>APPROVED</b> for signature by the Chair. Matters noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Chair would be attending Ofcom's 3 June 2019 consumer fairness event. It was expected that Members would receive invitations to attend.</li></ul>

- A Member had attended the UK Regulator's Network annual conference, held the previous day.
- A Members' Code of Conduct had been reviewed at the previous meeting. Subsequently it had been revised, agreed and published on the Ofcom and Panel websites. A link would be copied to Members.
- The Chair undertook to have further conversations with Ofcom about the level of staff support for the Panel in the context of a wider programme of work to strengthen the consumer voice in the communications sector.

#### **4. Consumer update**

The Panel was updated on Ofcom's consumer priority work areas. Topics discussed by Members included:

- Nuisance calls; Trading Standards Scotland had published a report on nuisance calls and a link would be copied to Ofcom's nuisance calls team. A Member queried how many communications providers (CPs) were blocking unwanted calls effectively. Feedback would be provided. Scam calls purporting to come from Microsoft were raised and a Member queried whether Microsoft itself should be intervening to support its customers.
- Complaints handling; Members noted an increase in complaint numbers and queried whether these were due to one or two CPs or across the sector.
- Review of price differentials in fixed broadband; the Ofcom team would be invited to update the Panel further.
- Automatic compensation; the voluntary industry scheme had been launched on 1 April, but it was noted that not all CPs had yet joined the scheme.
- Vulnerability; on 17 May Ofcom would be hosting a workshop for CPs to share good practice and two Panel Members would be attending.
- Review of Postal User's Needs; the Ofcom team would be invited to talk to the Panel about the scoping of research.
- Other matters raised included Ofcom's work related to the Citizens Advice supercomplaint; mobile switching reform; standalone voice engagement trials; ADR; migration to VoIP; and review of call costs.

#### **5. Panel research into the experiences of low-income consumers**

Members were updated by PwC on the progress of the Panel's qualitative research project on the experience of low-income consumers. Members noted that 38 of 40 depth interviews with low income households had been completed. High level themes and insights were shared with the Panel. PwC would take account of Members' feedback, on issues including the particular

impact on low income consumers of a number of issues; and on language and presentation of findings. PwC would return to the Panel shortly with a structure for a research report.

## **6. Mobile handsets update**

Ofcom and the Panel had concerns about the fairness of some handset plus airtime deals, which had been an ongoing issue for the Panel and highlighted previously. Members were given an update to provide an overview of Ofcom's initial mobile handset consumer research findings, including awareness of SIM-only contracts, and data analysis, to better understand the reasons why customers stay out-of-contract. Issues discussed included the number and churn of out-of-contract customers and the average overpayment per annum. The Panel encouraged Ofcom to explore alternative methodologies to ensure it fully captured potential detriment. It was noted that Ofcom planned to consult in June.

## **7. Member updates from across the UK**

Panel Members for the Nations provided a round-up of issues and events in their parts of the UK, including:

- The Chair would continue to be the Panel's Member for Northern Ireland. He had met the General Consumer Council in Northern Ireland and presented findings from the Panel's *Still Going Round in Circles* research. A Panel/General Consumer Council MoU had been proposed.
- Chris Holland was unable to attend the next meeting of the Advisory Committee for England (ACE) and requested that a fellow Panel Member act as a substitute. He had circulated a note of the previous ACE meeting. That Committee would be recruiting a new Chairman.
- Karen Lewis reported that David Jones had been appointed as the Ofcom Board Member for Wales. She would be meeting him shortly to discuss the work of the Panel. She had met recently with the new Director of Citizens Advice Cymru.
- Amanda Britain reported a recent power outage on the Hebridean island of Colonsay. It took place early in April. Battery backup had failed at BT's telephone exchange, leaving islanders without service, and its level of customer support was noted as a concern. More information would be provided to the Panel and the incident could be raised at the Panel's next catch-up meeting with BT.

## **8. Disabled consumers in Ofcom's research**

Ofcom was seeking advice on how it could best design a standard set of research questions to understand the needs of consumers who may have additional needs due to a disability or health

condition, having reviewed variations in the wording of its current tracker survey questions. The Panel took the view that questions should focus on seeking to highlight the needs of those consumers, so that solutions to barriers to access could be developed. The Panel highlighted that this was a different matter to the quantification of numbers of people affected by those barriers. Members made comments and would provide further advice by email.

## **9. Public Policy update**

Members were updated on key Government and Parliamentary developments. It was noted that:

- DCMS had published a consultation on the Government's draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for telecommunications, the management of radio spectrum and post.
- Publication of a consumer White Paper was expected in the Summer.
- DCMS would consult on transposition of the EU Electronic Communications Code into UK law.

## **10. End of contract notifications update**

Ofcom planned to impose new obligations on CPs requiring them to send notifications to customers when their contracts were ending, in line with new requirements in the EU Electronic Communications Code. Members were given an overview of related Ofcom research findings and the decisions it planned to set out in a statement, due to be published in May. Issues raised by Members included:

- Inclusion of SIM-only in best tariff advice would serve to remind consumers about the cost of a handset.
- Onus should be on CPs to allow customers to terminate contracts without having to give a lengthy notice period.
- CPs should be obliged to provide customers with notifications in accessible formats.

Subsequent to the discussion with the Ofcom team, it was agreed that the Panel would feedback a concern about duration of notification periods.

## **11. Any other business**

There was an existing Panel/Ofcom MoU and this would be reviewed as part of the Panel's next steps to strengthen the consumer voice in communications.