



## An overview of the Panel’s recent activities Chair’s highlights - Summer 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 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 the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses. Having heard from our stakeholders that awareness is low, we continue to highlight to Ofcom, industry and government our belief that more needs to be done to promote available support across the communications sector such as low-cost tariffs. In addition, CPs need to tailor support to individual requirements as, for some consumers such as those who use interpreters and require greater bandwidth, common cost-saving solutions e.g. downgrading packages, will not be sufficient. We have commissioned research to explore the experiences of consumers who are struggling financially in the communications sector, including their awareness of and experiences of applying for social tariffs.</p> <p>We’ve also raised concerns with Ofcom that recent changes to mobile roaming rules are likely to result in increased costs for consumers who travel abroad and/or live-in areas such as Northern Ireland where consumers commonly inadvertently roam onto a non-UK network - and have urged Ofcom to ensure that sufficient consumer protections are in place and that information provided is clear and transparent.</p>
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	<p>We have highlighted to Ofcom our concerns regarding mid contract prices and the additional financial pressures they are likely to put on consumers who are already struggling financially. Similar to other stakeholders, we believe that, in this context, consumers should have the option to switch freely. We have welcomed Ofcom’s review into the fairness of inflation linked price increases for phone and broadband customers and will monitor how the review progresses.</p>
<p><b>Migration to VoIP</b></p>	<p>We recently published <a href="#">our latest research findings on consumers’ telephony requirements</a> and met with DSIT to highlight our latest findings and recommendations which will help assist and inform policymakers, and identify areas where further consumer support may be required before and during the switchover process. We continue to urge Ofcom, government and industry to implement a coordinated consumer communications campaign, similar to the Australian model, 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 such as people with specific support requirements e.g. telecare users, and people living in rural and remote areas who may not have sufficient mobile signal to contact emergency services during a power cut. Recent outages in Scotland have highlighted the fragile nature of peoples’ access to communications services in some rural and remote areas and while we welcome <a href="#">Ofcom’s recent lowering of incident reporting thresholds in the NIS guidance</a>, we encourage a continued focus on protecting consumer access to vital communications services.</p>
<p><b>2G/3G switch-off</b></p>	<p>We continue to be concerned regarding the possible consumer impacts of the 2G/3G switch-off on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses, particularly those who live in areas where 4G coverage is poor or non-existent and/or are reliant on services delivered via 2G/3G connectivity 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 3G switch-off could impact access to emergency video relay on its website - <a href="#">see here</a>. We believe that making consumers aware of the impending changes using a variety of communications channels and identifying consumers early-on who could be impacted by the switch-off early-on will help to mitigate potential harm.</p>
<p><b>Postal services</b></p>	<p>We believe that all consumers should have access to affordable and reliable postal services, regardless of where they live. The Panel is concerned about the resilience of postal services, quality of service and the impacts of postal strikes. We are disappointed that Royal Mail has failed to meet its delivery</p>



	performance targets for 2022/23 and welcome Ofcom's investigation. We have also fed into Ofcom the importance of ensuring that consumers living in areas where competition is limited and/or surcharging is common, remain able to access an affordable postal service. We will soon be publishing research on the experiences of people living in rural and remote areas using communications services, including postal services.
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### *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. We have a number of ongoing research projects that we'll be publishing soon and these 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.
- **The experiences of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses using communications services in rural and remote areas** to help provide a holistic overview of the potential issues that people living in rural and remote areas face. Our next series of National Stakeholder Hubs will provide a preview of this research and you can find more information below.
- **Understanding the requirements of younger consumers in the communications sector**, how they navigate the communications market and any barriers they face.

We will also soon publish 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.

- **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 focused on the work that the University of Liverpool, Good Things Foundation, Welsh Government and others have been pioneering to develop a [Minimum Digital Living Standard for UK households](#), and understand the minimum basic basket of digital goods, services and skills that different household types in different parts of the UK require to participate in a digital world. Which? also presented the key findings from its latest research on the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on consumers across 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 focus on the experiences of people using communications services in rural and remote areas. We will share a preview of our research findings and would like to hear from you and understand if and how rurality has impacted the consumers, citizens and micro-businesses you represent when using communications services.

Please see below for the dates of upcoming Hubs.

- The Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Wales - 28 June at 10.30 am
- The Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Northern Ireland - 4 July at 10.30 am
- The Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for England - 4 July at 2.00 pm
- The Panel's Communications Consumer Hub for Scotland - 7 May at 10.30 am

### *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 and Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and more recently 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 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 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](#).