

13 May 2004

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Numbering issues: communication with consumers and businesses

As you know, the Consumer Panel had a presentation from Ofcom staff on several different aspects of numbering at its meeting on 26 April.

Essentially, Ofcom staff ([REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]) briefed us on: 090 scams, number portability, 0845 and 0870 numbers and new 020 3 numbers for London.

As you will appreciate, the Panel considered these issues not from the technical point of view which, we understand, drives many aspects of the Ofcom work on numbering, but from the point of view of whether the consumer impact of new initiatives on numbering – or indeed, the re-affirmation of existing approaches – is fully identified and planned for in framing these regulatory initiatives.

We are, as you know, particularly concerned to ensure that any significant changes to numbering are carefully communicated to consumers ahead of changes being made. Consumer confusion in the telecoms marketplace is an important concern for us, and we are expecting Ofcom to be highly sensitive to this as an issue when taking action in this market place.

We noted the various initiatives that are planned and expressed to the Ofcom team some concerns about the extent to which these changes, and the reasons for them, would be clear to consumers. We do not understand how the communication of such changes fits into Ofcom's whole strategy for communicating with consumers.

We have concerns about relying on the operators to communicate such changes, and we think the initially very strong negative reaction to Oftel's DQ liberalisation arose partly from its reliance on the operators as the main

channel of communication. We would not expect the lessons from this episode to be lost on Ofcom!

We did not find the arguments advanced for the continued link of 0845/0870 numbers with BT's local and national tariffs at all persuasive, and we did not receive any assurance that the continued use and development of these numbers by businesses had actually been explored with the business community.

For all of the reasons noted above, we were reassured to learn that Ofcom is proposing to set up a Strategic Numbering Group which, as we understand it, will be charged with preparing and communicating a "road map" for numbering changes over the next 12 months or so. We understand that this proposal will shortly come to your Board and I have asked that progress on this initiative should be reported to the Panel at its June meeting.

We regard the communication of these "numbering" issues as a very important part of Ofcom's overall strategy for communicating with consumers. We shall be considering a draft of Ofcom's statement on principles for providing consumers with information at our next meeting on May 18. We also hope to learn more about Ofcom's strategy as a whole and I will write to you again after that meeting to give you our views.

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