September 2013

Panel bulletin

This month…

Consumers and Citizens in the Communications Sector

In conjunction with Ofcom, the Communications Consumer Panel hosted a successful conference *Consumers and Citizens in the Communications Sector* earlier this month. The event gathered representatives from industry and consumer stakeholders to discuss issues facing citizens and consumers in communications markets. The event was chaired by Panel Chair, Jo Connell and, in addition to a keynote speech by Ofcom's Chief Executive Ed Richards, featured expert commentary from Peter Eberl (Deputy Head of Unit, DG Connect, European Commission), Mairi Macleod (Communications Consumer Panel Member), Mike Dixon (Assistant CEO at Citizen's Advice), Lord Inglewood (Chair of the Lords Communications Committee), Pamela Learmonth (CEO at the Broadband Stakeholder Group), Tom Savigar (Chief Strategic Officer at the Future Laboratory) and Dr Damian Tambini (Senior Lecturer at the London School of Economics).

Mairi Macleod shared with delegates a preview of the Panel's forthcoming research into people's experience of dealing with problems in communications services.

During his speech, Ed Richards called on industry to work with Ofcom to make it simpler for consumers to change communications providers. He raised concern that, despite the UK having one of the most competitive communications markets in the world, consumers cannot take full advantage of the choice available due to difficulties with changing provider. Ed Richards called on industry "to transform switching; to remove the inconvenience, delays and uncertainty that currently can bedevil consumers when trying to change their provider". He also challenged providers to help deliver "a system that enables consumers to take advantage of the increasing competition and innovation available".

A full transcript of Ed Richards' speech can be found on the Ofcom's website: Ofcom chief executive challenges industry to deliver on switching.

Review of Ofcom's compliance with the Panel's Toolkit

An exchange of letters between the Panel and Ofcom about Ofcom's compliance with the principles set out in the Consumer Interest Toolkit has been published this month.

In 2006 the Panel published a Toolkit for Ofcom and other regulators to use when identifying and taking account of consumer interests in policy work. Earlier this year Ofcom carried out an evaluation of its compliance with the principles in the Toolkit. Ofcom's letter to the Panel reporting on the

results of the evaluation along with the Panel's reply can be found here.

Technology for life; smart thinking, smart living

Panel Member for Scotland, Mairi Macleod attended the RNIB conference entitled "Technology for Life: tools for inclusion", which took place in Glasgow on 5-6 September. Mairi reported that the theme was forward-looking, examining emerging technologies which have the potential to change people's lives in ways no-one would have thought of until very recently. Several speakers emphasised that we are only now beginning to realise the possibilities. Amongst the latest developments highlighted were the Ultra Bike, which allows blind people to cycle on off-road cycle tracks and woodland paths; and research into wearable technology such as glasses with an inbuilt camera and a transparent display which shows images in terms of depth (nearby objects are bright, further away objects are dark) and act as a navigation aid for people with very limited vision.

It was recognised that, for a lot of people, technology can also be a barrier, as can the sheer explosion of information in the form of graphics. It was noted that many manufacturers still do not build accessibility into their devices or services as a matter of course. Kevin Carey, chair of RNIB, argued that the organisation would therefore have to take the initiative and invest in digital access itself. RNIB Scotland director John Legg said the challenge was to ensure blind and partially sighted people don't get left behind in the digital age.

Podcasts of conference sessions are available on Insight Radio's website: RNIB: technology for life 2013

Invitation to Comment on Ofcom's Annual Plan

Ofcom has invited members of the public, as well as those working in the industries it regulates, to contribute to its work plan and priorities for the next financial year.

The invitation to comment encourages anyone with an interest in Ofcom's activities to offer their views on which areas of the telecoms, media, postal and spectrum industries should be addressed in Ofcom's Annual Plan for 2014/15.

Responses from the public and stakeholders will help inform the draft Annual Plan, which Ofcom will consult on in December. Ofcom expects to publish its final plan in March 2014.

Comments should be submitted by 5pm on 24 October 2013. Details can be found here: Invitation to comment on Ofcom's Annual Plan

AbilityNet updates My Computer My Way

AbilityNet has updated 'My Computer My Way', its step-by-step guide to adapting a computer to enable users, particularly those with disabilities, to access their computers and the internet more easily. Developed with Microsoft and the BBC 'My Computer My Way' is AbilityNet's interactive service that explains the accessibility options built into every computer:

> ➢ **Vision** - help with seeing your screen
> ➢ **Hearing** - help with sounds and audio

- ➤ **Motor** - help with keyboard and mouse difficulties
- ➤ **Cognitive** - help with reading, spelling and understanding

The guide is free of charge and can be found on the AbilityNet website: Abilitynet - mycomputermyway

Consumers to benefit from easier broadband and landline switching

This summer Ofcom announced new measures to help consumers change landline and broadband providers with greater ease, confidence and convenience. The Panel has worked on the issue of switching for some time and welcomes this development.

Consumers currently face a number of different switching processes depending on which provider they are moving from and to, or the type of service being switched. To help resolve the problems associated with switching, Ofcom has decided that consumers only need to follow a single switching process in future, in which the new provider leads the transfer process on behalf of the consumer.

Ofcom's consultation on the detail of putting these improvements in place, via a change to regulatory rules (known as 'General Conditions') and on timescales for changes closes on 4 October 2013, with the aim of finalising these details by early 2014, and the new process coming into effect within a year thereafter.

Further details can be found at: Easier broadband and landline switching

Television Access Services: Report for the first six months of 2013

Ofcom has published the first bi-annual report for 2013 on the provision of access services (subtitling, signing and audio description) by broadcasters under the Code on Television Access Services that shows the cumulative position from January to June 2013. An explanation of the obligations applying to broadcasters is given in the Code of Television Access Services and is available on the Ofcom website. Code TV Access Services 2013

This first report shows that most broadcasters are exceeding their obligations for subtitling, audio description and for signing and the majority are doing so comfortably. Where broadcasters are not meeting the requirements, Ofcom will expect them to fulfil their obligations by the end of the year. Ofcom expects to publish the next report at the beginning of March 2014, providing the data from the second half of the year 2013.

New Digital Champions Network for Housing launched

Digital Unite have launched the Digital Champions Network for Housing, which will help housing providers support more of their residents to get online.

Inspired by Affinity Sutton's Get Connected project, the Digital Champions Network for Housing (DCN4H) is an online platform to create, develop and support Digital Champions in local communities. It provides access to practical online courses, extensive teaching resources and a moderated community forum as well as the facility for providers to track and evaluate learning activity. Ten housing organisations have already signed up as Founder Partners representing over 455,000

residents.

For further information on this collaborative project and how to be part of it visit Digital Unite's [website](#).

Traffic Management: Ofcom publishes new research and guide

Ofcom has published a new guide to help consumers understand the ways in which fixed-line and mobile internet service providers (ISPs) might manage their broadband services during busy peak periods.

With 46 million people in the UK having access to broadband and many using it for data heavy activities such as streaming and downloading, the internet is becoming increasingly busy. To ensure that networks operate efficiently, ISPs can restrict or ration traffic on their networks, or give priority to some types of traffic over others. This is known as 'traffic management'.

To help consumers better understand this practice, [Ofcom's Guide to Traffic Management](#) highlights:

- the different ways ISPs can manage internet traffic;
- the circumstances when traffic management policies might be put into practice;
- how traffic management can affect consumers' online experience; and
- ISPs' individual traffic management policies.

Mobile performance and coverage in Scotland

The Scottish Government has published a study by Red Review Ltd which reviewed both 2G and 3G mobile performance and coverage in Scotland, including assessing gaps and determining the poorest served Local Authority (LA) areas.

In addition to finding that 'not spots' are generally found in areas where it is not commercially viable for the Mobile Network Operators to provide their services, the research highlighted that not spots are also frequently found in the urban environment. Coverage maps are available within the report, which can be found on the Scottish Government's website: [Mobile performance and coverage in Scotland](#)

Research into ADR Schemes

This summer Ofcom published a [research report](#) on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) schemes.

The research looks at awareness of ADR among consumers. Ofcom introduced regulations in 2011 (under General Condition 14) requiring communications providers to ensure that consumers, who have an outstanding complaint of over eight weeks, are aware of their right to use an approved ADR scheme, free of charge, to settle their complaint. The purpose of the research is to inform Ofcom's understanding of the effect of these regulations and decide whether further action is required to ensure their effectiveness in the future.

In parallel, Ofcom's own-initiative General Condition 14 Monitoring and Enforcement Programme

regarding Complaints Handling has been extended for a further six months. Further information can be found here.

Disabled consumers' ownership of communications services

Ofcom has published its most comprehensive study to date into disabled consumers' ownership of communications services. The report compares the profiles of people with different types of disability; their households' ownership of, and their use of, communications services, i.e. fixed line, mobile and PC ownership; and levels of internet access. In summary, the report covers the following areas:

- ➢ **Profile of disability groups** - an overview of the demographic profiles of disability groups, including age, socio-economic group, employment status and household size.
- ➢ **Ownership overview** - an overview of the services disabled consumers have access to in their homes, and the frequency with which they access the internet.
- ➢ **People with mobility impairments** - a detailed analysis of the services and devices people with (only) mobility impairments have access to in the home, and more information on the impact of demographics. Types of mobility impairment are broken down further in this section.
- ➢ **People with hearing impairments** - a detailed analysis of the services and devices people with (only) hearing impairments have access to in the home, and more information on the impact of demographics.
- ➢ **People with visual impairments** - a detailed analysis of the services and devices people with (only) visual impairments have access to in the home, and more information on the impact of demographics.
- ➢ **People with multiple impairments** - a detailed analysis of the services and devices people with multiple impairments have access to in the home, and more information on the impact of demographics. By 'multiple impairments' the report means any combination of mobility, hearing and visual impairment. Types of multiple impairment are broken down in this section.

The results show that across all age groups, internet ownership is 55% for disabled consumers, compared with 83% for non-disabled consumers. This can partly be explained by their older profile as half of disabled people are aged 65+.

Among the youngest age group (15-34), levels of internet access are broadly comparable, regardless of whether people have a disability or not (90% compared with 93%). This increases to 94% for disabled people and 97% for non-disabled people among the more affluent in this age group.

However, for older (65+) less affluent disabled people, internet access levels are at their lowest (23%) which is significantly lower than among non-disabled people of the same age and socio-economic group (37%).

The report also shows that mobile phone access is broadly comparable between disabled and non-disabled adults across most age groups. Ninety-two per cent of disabled people aged 15-34 have a mobile phone compared to 87% among non-disabled adults in this age group. Two-thirds of disabled people aged 75+ have a mobile phone but this is lower than among non-disabled people of the same age (72%).

Full details of the research can be found here: Disabled consumers' ownership of communications

New Which? research into understanding of 'fixed' mobile phone increases

Ahead of the results of Ofcom's consultation on fixed mobile phone contracts, new Which? research has found that the majority of mobile phone customers do not know the rate that their 'fixed' mobile contact can increase by.

Most operators currently include a term in their 'fixed' term mobile contracts which allows them to increase prices by up to the rate of inflation. The Which? research surveyed 2,078 UK adults online and found that 45% of mobile phone customers do not know what the Retail Prices Index (RPI) is and 84% do not know the current level of RPI, which is the key measure of inflation. The survey included 1,054 people who are currently on a mobile phone contract or considering buying one.

Which? research in 2012 found that 70% of people on fixed mobile contracts didn't know that operators could increase prices during the length of their contract.

New broadband speeds research

Ofcom has published its latest report on broadband speeds. The UK fixed line broadband research found that consumers are now receiving average residential broadband speeds of 14.7Mbit/s. This average has risen by 2.7Mbit/s (or 22%) in the six months to May 2013.

However the report notes that the difference between urban and rural average actual speeds is increasing. It explains that "there are two main reasons why average actual download speeds tend to be higher in urban areas than in rural areas. First, the average line length from the exchange to the end-user's premises is shorter in urban areas, resulting in less signal loss and higher average ADSL broadband speeds. Second, there is lower availability of both fibre and cable broadband in rural areas, as providers tend to concentrate network build in highly populated areas in order to maximise their potential customer bases."; and that "Growth in superfast broadband take-up has been the main driver of increasing average UK broadband speeds in recent years. However, the impact of increased superfast take-up on average rural broadband speeds has been less pronounced, because fewer consumers have upgraded to these services due to the lower availability of fibre and cable services in rural areas."

Further details can be found here: UK fixed-line broadband research

People abandon online public services after 7 minutes of ID checks

A new study by Experian, the information service provider, suggests that people are only prepared to spend an average of seven minutes undergoing identity verification checks before they abandon public service transactions.

Experian's analysis reveals that 45% of UK adults have backed out of an online transaction after becoming frustrated over the length and complexity of the identity validation and security checks. It identified that of those who have abandoned an internet-based purchase 47% took their custom to a competitor after becoming irritated with the process, 20% gave up completely and 17% tried again at

a later date.

Full details of the study can be found here

Ethnic Minority Groups and Communications Services Report

Consumers from ethnic minority groups are among the keenest in Britain when it comes to embracing the latest technology, new Ofcom research reveals. People from ethnic minority groups say they love gadgets more than the British population as a whole (37% compared with 30%), and are more likely to say it's important that their homes are equipped with the latest technology (32% compared to 20%). This rises to 47% of those in the 'Asian Indian' group.

Ethnic minority groups are also more likely to have home broadband and multiple mobile phones per household, although they are less likely to watch TV and listen to the radio, compared to the British population as a whole.

Ofcom's research, which supports its duty to have regard to the different ethnic communities within the UK, gives an overview of the use of and attitudes towards communications services among ethnic minority groups in Britain. It compares the largest ethnic groups: 'Asian: Pakistani', 'Asian: Indian', 'Asian: Bangladeshi', 'Black Caribbean', 'Black African', 'Mixed ethnic groups' and 'Other White' with Ethnic Minority Groups combined and the British population as a whole.

The Ethnic Minority Groups and Communication Services report can be found here.

Enabling technology

A new report published by the disability charity Scope and the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, states that disabled people still have to choose between expensive specialist equipment or inaccessible mainstream gadgets.

Researchers from the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal College of Art found that technology built for disabled people is expensive, has low functionality, and often requires specialist knowledge to adapt. Mainstream technology is cheaper and can do much more, but is rarely customised to meet disabled people's needs. The research, which is funded by BT's Connected Society programme, also found that emphasis needs to be placed on improving the information available to disabled people about enabling technology.

The report outlines a series of recommendations for technology companies, commissioners and the providers of key digital services, to maximise the "enabling potential" of digital technology. The report *Enabling Technology* and supporting videos, can be found here
http://blog.scope.org.uk/2013/09/20/technology-for-disabled-people

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