

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 19 June 2023 at 11.00 am

Meeting held in hybrid format at Riverside House and via Microsoft Teams

Present

Consumer Panel/ACOD

Rick Hill (Chair)

Amanda Britain

Helen Froud

Sian Phipps

Richard Spencer

Michael Wardlow

Richard Williams

Apologies

Kay Allen

In attendance

The Panel's Executive Team

Ofcom colleagues

Representative of Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA) (item 10)

Item
1. Welcome and introduction
1.1 The Chair welcomed Members and attendees to the meeting.
2. Declarations of Members' interests
2.1 There were no new declarations of interest.
3. Minutes of the meeting on 18 May 2023 and matters arising
3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 18 May 2023 were APPROVED .
4. Chair's update
4.1 The Chair provided an overview of the Panel's recent activities. The Panel's



National Members also provided updates on recent activity and stakeholder engagement across each of the UK Nations.

- 4.2 The Panel remains concerned on the migration to VoIP and continues to highlight the importance of coordinating a national campaign to enable government and CPs to provide greater awareness for all consumers.
- 4.3 The Panel's Executive Team to arrange the delivery of letters to relevant Government Ministers within the UK Government and each devolved nation to draw their attention and provide recommendations to [the migration to VoIP research](#) (published) and the rural research due to be published in July.
- 4.4 The Panel remained concerned over the level of disquiet on the second-class price cap and had reportedly received similar concerns from other consumer organisations who would be completing their own research on the topic. Postal deliveries and the level of customer service remained an issue and the Panel looked forward to an update later in the year.

5. Consumer policy update

- 5.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom's consumer policy team on its key consumer priority areas.
- 5.2 The Panel relayed concerns with the service offered to consumers when an Altnet provider ceased to trade and was keen to identify the protections in place for consumers who were unable to rely on an alternative company for their service and the obligations of Ofcom and other companies in this situation. Areas of focus should be the government voucher scheme which did not work in all cases and newer consumers who were looking to enter into a contract for a service which may not be fit for purpose. The Ofcom team would provide an update at a future meeting.
- 5.3 Members' concerns over the lack of consumer awareness were still evident in relation to migration to VoIP, as areas in Northern Ireland and the East Midlands would soon commence migration.
- 5.4 The Panel remained disappointed that CPs had missed Ofcom's deadline to implement a 'one-touch' switching process and noted that Ofcom had opened an enforcement investigation.
- 5.5 The clarity of consumer roaming protections remained a concern to the Panel in light of evidence of an SMS message highlighting a discrepancy and the arrangement for a refund and recompense to be made to a customer. There appeared to be a lack of clarification as to when and which country it referred



to, plus concerns over the duration of time a consumer would wait for the funds to be returned.

- 5.6 The Panel remained deeply concerned with the decreasing funding and availability of a Shared Rural Network in connection with ‘total not spots’. Many areas of the UK still required some form of connection, and the Panel was intrigued to identify which areas were being improved and where funds were being spent.
- 5.7 The Panel noted that delivery by Royal Mail in more rural/remote areas was valued as evidenced by the latest rural research, soon to be published.
- 5.8 Evidence offered by various consumer organisations highlighted to the Panel the need for the second-class cap to be retained, to protect consumers who may be more financially vulnerable. The Panel remained vigilant to extra surcharges faced by consumers in more rural areas of the UK. The Panel was keen to receive an update. The Panel would respond to Ofcom’s consultation on the second-class safeguard cap.

6. Migration to VoIP Update

- 6.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom’s latest desk research into the Migration to IP: International Consumer Communications Report, which included input from 19 other countries and how they communicated with consumers about the migration. The approach taken in Australia was well regarded.
- 6.2 Members would continue to re-iterate the necessity for a targeted approach to communicating information to consumers. As referenced under paragraph 4.3, the Chair would arrange sending letters to various select Governmental Ministers across the UK Government and devolved nations to highlight concerns.

7. Public Policy Update

- 7.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom’s public policy team on its key public policy developments.
- 7.2 Members flagged that England-specific news was not included within the Nations Update. The team will take this forward and add it to the paper in future.
- 7.3 The Panel raised concerns over the potential detriment to consumers not receiving a Royal Mail delivery on a Saturday, which would affect those living



and working in rural and remote areas of the UK. The Panel recommended that the postal USO should not be altered from 6 to 5 days.

7.4 The Panel asked whether there would be any consumers implications on the four Ofcom related Governmental reformed/revoked pieces of REUL: Advanced Television Services Regulations, Wireless Telegraphy (Control of Interference from Apparatus) (The London Olympic Games & Paralympic Games), Wireless Telegraphy (Mobile Repeater) and foreign Satellite Service Proscription Order. The Public Policy Team confirmed consumers would not be disadvantaged.

8. Accessibility Best Practise Guidelines

8.1 The Panel received an update on Ofcom's on-demand accessibility regulations, best practice guidelines (of which Ofcom invited the Panel to view and comment upon), and results of Ofcom's BSL signing survey. Additionally, the Members were shown Ofcom's access services data report for 2022.

8.2 The Panel raised concerns over the accessibility and usability of smart TVs and how CPs should ensure the entire interface is accessible and usable; and the inconsistency of subtitling protocol, which can otherwise lead to consumer confusion. Ofcom confirmed they were exploring these needs.

9. Comparing Customer Service Report

9.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on its customer service and complaints handling research. Members discussed the findings with interest. The Panel was concerned with the move to produce bi-annual data and the possibility that Ofcom may miss out on consumer trends/perspectives when they occurred.

9.2 Ofcom presented an interactive report on [comparing customer service: mobile, home broadband and landline](#). Although the report provided detailed yearly information from the period of 2017 to 2023, the Panel felt an average figure would also be beneficial.

10. Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA) Update

10.1 The Panel received an update from the INCA on the digital infrastructure market, and the overview of how Altnets provide structure and connectivity to consumers.

10.2 The Chair raised concerns about the viability of Altnets within the marketplace and the mechanisms in place to protect consumers from disconnection if they ceased to trade. The INCA representative confirmed an administrator should still provide service to consumers whilst the company was sold.



10.3 INCA advised that Altnets can provide a good service to consumers, however better infrastructure and further funding is required in more rural and remote areas. Altnets concentrated operations where competition was low to maximise uptake of service. The Panel raised a question about recourse where a consumer had received poor quality of services from an Altnet and were advised that Altnets follow a Code of Conduct.

11. Debt and Disconnection Update

11.1 The Panel received an update detailing good practice guidelines in supporting consumers facing debt or disconnection fairly. Ofcom met with debt organisations and 11 communications providers and key findings were relayed to the Panel.

11.2 Members were pleased with Ofcom's Treating Vulnerable Customers Fairly guide on how CPs should treat customers fairly and offer support, however, remained concerned over the lack of social tariff information and assistance on cheaper options.

11.3 The Panel queried how Ofcom understood the ways in which CPs contact, interact and support consumers and recommended more monitoring in this area.

12. AOB

12.1 The Chair noted it was Sian Phipps' last meeting and thanked her for her valuable contributions throughout her time as the Member for Wales and Member of the Communications Consumer Panel/ACOD, particularly as an advocate for Welsh language inclusivity, affordable digital connectivity across the whole of Wales and quality of postal services for citizens, consumers and micro-businesses in Wales.

12.2 The Chair also noted the sad passing of former Communications Consumer Panel/ACOD Member Bob Twitchin. Bob had been a strong, dedicated advocate for disabled people's rights and making communications services accessible to all, and had been awarded an MBE for 'services to consumers and telecommunications' while he was a Member of the Panel/ACOD.