

Consumer Panel spells out top consumer issues for new Ofcom Chief Executive

16 November 2006

The Consumer Panel, the independent voice for the consumer interest in telecoms, has welcomed the appointment of Ed Richards as Ofcom's new Chief Executive, spelling out what it thinks the regulator's top consumer future priorities should be. In a letter to the new Chief Executive, the Panel welcomed the significant change Ofcom has made on embedding consumer issues, calling on Ofcom to extend its progress to citizen issues and "to be vocal" on its assessment of the risks in digital switchover.

Colette Bowe, Consumer Panel Chairman, said that Ofcom had got off to a slow start on consumer policy, but:

"We have since observed the beginnings of a significant and positive change within Ofcom. We believe that this has been greatly facilitated by the Panel's Capturing the Consumer Interest Toolkit. We acknowledge that the Ofcom Board's wholehearted co-operation with this important project has been fundamental to its success. Consumer issues are now being embedded into Ofcom's methods of working and style of thinking."

The Consumer Panel called on Ofcom to identify ways in which the Digital Dividend can be best used for society as a whole, and to put this at the top of its 'to do' list. Colette Bowe said that Ofcom's advice to Government on this will be central. She urged the telecoms regulator "to promote a wide and accessible public debate about how this massive – and massively important - resource should be developed in the interest of all of us".

Serious concerns about the resourcing and focus of digital switchover and its impact on consumers have been raised by the Consumer Panel with Ministers in "strong terms". The Panel wants Ofcom "to be vocal" on its assessment of risks on digital switchover, and has warned that switchover must be "handled in a way that does not leave anyone in the UK isolated and without support".

Colette Bowe said: "The Panel knows that Ofcom has more than once said that it does not regard it as part of its role to offer detailed public comment on a project for which it is not directly responsible. We do not agree with this. We urge Ofcom to use its authoritative position speak out about its assessment of the risks around this project.

"The Ofcom audit of the Whitehaven project will be an excellent opportunity for Ofcom to place its views about the organisation, delivery and financing of the digital switchover on the record," she said.

The Panel also highlighted increasing public anxiety about the complexity of communications services, costs, service quality, and recently broadband services. The Panel predicted that present concerns are set to increase further.

The Panel strongly welcomed Ofcom's recent enforcement action against some of the companies responsible for the menace of silent calls. The Panel called for Ofcom to have the powers to levy bigger fines as part of its enforcement activity.

Ofcom should use its authority to support the Government in addressing the emerging problem of broadband internet take up. Colette Bowe pointed out that it “is a problem for our society, particularly amongst some of our oldest citizens, and amongst children in low income households.

“We know Ofcom set out its stall as a light touch regulator at the outset.... But as we have said before, a light touch can sometimes be the wrong touch – especially if it leaves consumers bedevilled by unacceptably poor service with ineffective redress. Examples have been broadband service quality, silent calls and rogue diallers. In such cases, Ofcom needs to act quickly and firmly in the consumer interest, and we urge you to be prepared to take what might seem like unpopular decisions – if they are in the interests of consumers,” Colette Bowe concluded.

Ends

Notes for editors and CSEs

The Consumer Panel was established to advise Ofcom on the consumer interest in the markets it regulates. The Panel is independent and sets its own agenda. Visit www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk for more information.

For a copy of the Consumer Panel letter to Ofcom Chief Executive Ed Richards go to www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk or ring Julia Guasch on 020 7783 4027.

The Panel’s members appointed by Ofcom are:

Colette Bowe, Chairman
Ruth Evans, Deputy Chairman
Fiona Ballantyne
Roger Darlington
Simon Gibson
Alan Horne
Graham Mather
Kevin McLaughlin
Jeremy Mitchell
Kate O’Rourke
Bob Twitchin
Allan Williams

For further information and a copy of Capturing the Consumer Interest Toolkit go to our website