

## **Ofcom should focus more sharply on children's issues, says Consumer Panel Chairman**

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Ofcom should put greater focus on children's issues, the Ofcom Consumer Panel - the independent voice for the consumer and citizen interest in communications markets - has put to Ofcom Chief Executive Ed Richards.

Writing to the Ofcom Chief Executive, who has been in post for a year, Consumer Panel Chairman Colette Bowe spelt out her top three consumer priorities for the coming year that she would like the regulator to focus on.

Following the Consumer's Panel's research into children and the internet, Colette Bowe said that the Panel's top priority for Ofcom is media literacy. The Panel Chairman explained that the increased focus on children is important because of their vulnerability as users of communications technologies and services. "We believe that Ofcom should create a Children's Panel to provide a strategic overview of all of Ofcom's work that is currently undertaken in relation to children's issues, which relate to access, protection and parental responsibility."

She said that advertising of broadband speeds is the Panel's second concern, with consumers often not getting the advertised broadband speeds they think they are buying. "We hope that Ofcom will closely monitor this to see whether the industry adequately addresses these issues; and if this does not happen, to consider how Ofcom and others should respond in order to ensure the provision of clear information for consumers of broadband services."

The Panel Chairman explained that the third priority is getting the significant benefits of the internet to everyone because "being connected is becoming central to how we work as a society". She welcomed Ofcom's move to consider the definition and implications of a Universal Service Obligation for broadband, but suggested that the regulator should go further than mandating minimum speeds. "Ofcom should...be identifying how we can ensure significantly higher internet speeds are delivered to all so the internet's economic and social benefits are maximised."

Colette Bowe highlighted the Panel's concern that the roll out of the next generation of broadband could exacerbate the digital divide by focusing on urban centres. "We think there is an opportunity to reduce significantly disparities between rural and urban areas. There is a good case for saying that this new generation of faster internet access should be provided first to the rural communities that currently receive the sparsest and slowest coverage, because these are parts of the country where the public value of such a network is greatest."

Beyond the top three priorities, the Panel Chairman asked Ofcom to consider its regulatory response to the high levels of consumer complaints about communications service providers. "We call again for Ofcom to take into account the need for strong monetary sanctions to provide a real deterrent," she said.

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### **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](http://www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk) for more information.

The Panel's members appointed by Ofcom are:

Colette Bowe, Chairman

Ruth Evans, Deputy Chairman

Fiona Ballantyne

Roger Darlington

Simon Gibson

Graham Mather

Kevin McLaughlin

Jeremy Mitchell

Kate O'Rourke

Bob Twitchin

Allan Williams

A PDF copy of the letter is available to read on the Consumer Panel website  
[www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk](http://www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk)

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