

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 15 May 2024 at 10.30 am

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

Present

Consumer Panel/ACOD

Rick Hill (Chair)

Kay Allen

Rachel Burr (from 12:30pm approx.)

Judith Clifton

Lenna Cumberbatch

Helen Froud

Michelle Goddard

Robert Hammond

Richard Spencer (until 1pm)

Apologies

Michael Wardlow

In attendance

The Panel's Executive Team

Ofcom colleagues

Representative from Futuresight (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 declarations of interest.
3. Minutes of the meeting on 17 April 2024 and matters arising 3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 17 April 2024 were APPROVED .



4. Chair's update

- 4.1 The Chair and National Members provided an overview of the Panel's recent activity and stakeholder engagement across the UK.
- 4.2 The Chair confirmed a recruitment campaign had commenced for a Member for Scotland, Member for Northern Ireland, Member for England and up to two additional Members, to cover vacancies arising throughout 2024. All successful applicants will be Members for the Communications Consumer Panel and act as Members of the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People (ACOD).

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 reiterated the need for a national awareness campaign around Migration of the analogue telephony network to Voice-over Internet Protocol (VOIP) that not only targets telecare users, but to users of other connected devices such as medical devices and pacemakers.
- 5.3 Latest research conducted by the Panel on the migration to VoIP found slight improvement in consumer awareness, however recent Panel research findings confirmed a quarter of people looking after someone who has a connected device, are unaware of what to do or what risks the person they were helping might face following migration. The Panel urge more action by industry and Government to protect citizens and consumers from harm and to prevent further fatalities.
- 5.4 The Panel highlighted concerns of establishing a shared definition for vulnerability and stressed the importance of using a social model rather than a medical model as vulnerability shouldn't be deemed by personal characteristics alone, but also by situational characteristics - an example was given about a 24 hour power outage that led to fatalities.
- 5.5 Members questioned Ofcom on its approach regarding holding to account communications providers on matters where competition alone does not satisfy the needs of all consumers, e.g. Social Tariffs.
- 5.6 The Panel asked for an update on how the Shared Rural Network is progressing, whether consumers living in rural and remote areas of the UK are seeing any improvements in connectivity and asked if Ofcom are able to push industry and government further to avoid consumers being disconnected upon retirement of 2G and 3G networks, highlighting that synchronisation of these programmes is key to consumer connectivity.
- 5.7 The Panel raised continued concerns about the future of the Universal Postal Service, and stressed the process should not be rushed as consumers,



citizens and microbusinesses deserve an affordable, trusted, and reliable service.

- 5.8 Members questioned Ofcom about a perceived rise in complaint volumes across the UK.
- 5.9 The Panel requested an update from Ofcom following their consultation on in-contract prices rises, to which the Panel had provided a response.

6. Update on Migration to VoIP Developments

- 6.1 Members received an update from Ofcom on the protections for telecare users during the migration to VoIP.
- 6.2 The Panel continue to raise grave concerns about the possible impact on a large number of consumers who have connected devices which may fail to work during a power outage.
- 6.3 Members are pleased a campaign targeting telecare users has been discussed, however urge a much larger national campaign is necessary for users of other connected devices such as medical devices and pacemakers and to raise awareness among people who help someone who lives in a different part of the country to them, so may not be migrating to VOIP at the same time.
- 6.4 The Panel recommended Ofcom to humanise the language used when considering fatalities. It is impersonal to simply call these 'incidents'.
- 6.5 Members suggested a trusted third party such as the Local Government Associations should be encouraged to front a national awareness campaign (funded by industry) if Government or industry are reluctant.
- 6.6 The Panel reiterated concerns over the availability of analogue devices within the marketplace as the sale and distribution of such devices should cease.
- 6.7 The Panel highlighted concerns raised during the Consumer Policy Update (Item 5, paragraph 5.4). They stressed the importance of using a social model rather than a medical model in establishing a shared definition of vulnerability.
- 6.8 Members were impressed with the success of the data sharing exercise between CPs and local authorities (LAs), where telecare users' landline telephone numbers had been cross-referenced to LAs' records to identify people who require extra assistance.
- 6.9 The Panel advised Ofcom to plan ahead for the possibility of future detriment to consumers who have not been migrated after a large proportion of the UK landline user population had been switched over.



7. Public Policy update

- 7.1 Members received an update from Ofcom on the key public policy developments since the previous update in February 2024.
- 7.2 The Panel questioned whether Ofcom had thoughts on how the results of the recent local Mayoral elections could affect the communications sector and also asked Ofcom to consider the needs of consumers in different parts of England.
- 7.3 The Panel raised concerns about content-blocking in the protection of children, where the blocking of words (such as 'lesbian') may affect young citizens' rights and perceptions in terms of accessing data and information to assist in their everyday lives. This was highlighted in the context of reported educational policy requiring schools to stop teaching sex education to children under nine years of age.
- 7.4 Members were interested to learn more detail around the impact to Ofcom's work of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill which has passed through the House of Commons and the House of Lords and is awaiting Royal Assent.
- 7.5 The delay to One Touch Switch continues to concern the Panel. Members questioned whether industry was on track to deliver the programme by the revised deadline of 12 September 2024 and asked if Ofcom had put any plans in place if the launch date slipped further.
- 7.6 The Panel requested an update on the industry call for tougher sentencing laws, following the spate of attacks on critical internet infrastructure across the UK.

8. 2G/3G Switch-off Project update

- 8.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on the implications of the 2G/3G switch off.
- 8.2 The Panel highlighted concerns on the lack of information regarding the future cessation of 3G not being readily available or accessible to citizens and consumers when purchasing 3G enabled products or services. This was of particular concern in respect of point-of-sale information about telecare and other connected devices that fall back to 3G when 4G is unavailable. Members highlighted the complexity for unpaid carers in navigating this market on behalf of the vulnerable consumers and citizens they help.
- 8.3 Members advised of new not-spot areas which have recently lost mobile coverage and relayed fears of not being able to make emergency and urgent calls if required.
- 8.4 The Panel remain concerned with the progress of emergency alarms in vehicles and look forward to learning more at a future update.



9. Making Sense of Media - Introduction to the Media Literacy Consultation

- 9.1 The Panel received information from Ofcom on their consultation which highlighted their three-year Media Literacy strategy.
- 9.2 Members were enlightened to learn of Ofcom's proposed three-year strategy and indicated Online Safety has made Media Literacy even more important by engaging companies to develop their Media Literacy capabilities. As the statutory obligation falls to Ofcom and not online platform providers, the Panel asked Ofcom about its remit to hold to account such organisations if they fail to meet Ofcom's requirements.
- 9.3 The Panel recommended adding the word 'confidence' to Ofcom's strategy document as citizens need to feel empowered and self-assured about how they feel in addition to having the right tools to navigate a digital world.
- 9.4 Members highlighted that safety for consumers, citizens and microbusinesses is key and care should be taken over people's Protected characteristics.
- 9.5 The Panel would respond to Ofcom's consultation.

10. Urban (inner city) Panel Research update - City Limits: Struggles in a Digital Age

- 10.1 A representative from Futuresight presented a video to the Panel of its latest research findings detailing the experiences of people living in urban/inner city areas across all four nations using communications services.
- 10.2 Members were pleased that the video showcased a plethora of issues and brought to life the struggles consumers faced daily, which the Panel could use to influence policymakers and industry.

11. AOB

- 11.1 The Panel, their Executive team and Ofcom colleagues expressed their gratitude to Rick Hill MBE, at the close of his final meeting as Chair of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD.
- 11.2 Members and others agreed that Rick's passion for fairness, combined with an evidence-based approach and collaborative stakeholder engagement had helped to raise the profile of the Communications Consumer Panel and strengthen the consumer, citizen and micro-business voice in the regulation of the UK communications sector.