Communications Consumer Panel

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 17 October 2024 at 10.30 am

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

Present
Consumer Panel/ACOD
Helen Froud (Chair)
Kay Allen
Rachel Burr
Judith Clifton
Lenna Cumberbatch
Michelle Goddard
Robert Hammond
Richard Spencer
Michael Wardlow

Apologies
none

In attendance
The Panel's Executive Team

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 19 September 2024 and matters arising   3.1 Following a small addition, the minutes of the meeting of 19 September 2024 were **APPROVED** as a true and accurate reflection.

4. Chair's update

4.1 The Chair and Members provided an overview of the Panel's recent activity and stakeholder engagement across the UK since the last meeting held on 19 September and provided details on future planned engagement.

4.2 The Chair provided an update on recruitment.

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 In relation to the research completed by Ofcom in August on affordability, Members confirmed their keenness to establish how consumers will be affected by the new Governmental budget due in late October.

5.3 The Panel is aware from listening to stakeholders across the UK that consumers are finding it difficult to balance costs of communications services alongside other essential services. The Panel highlighted that consumers have been found to prioritise communications services over food or heating when substitution could be deemed a component of affordability.

5.4 Members remain concerned with the low level of social tariff uptake and question whether they could be advertised in a way that would both reduce stigma and clarify any perceived complexities in obtaining such a deal.

5.5 The Panel remain focused on the implementation of the One Touch Switch (OTS) programme due to their concerns around 'data-matching difficulties' between communications providers, inhibiting the process for some consumers.

5.6 In addition, the Panel reiterated concerns that companies may monetise the One Touch Switch scheme, highlighting website search findings offering a switching service for a fee. They provided feedback to Ofcom to add the word 'free' to the genuine websites/advertisements. An update on the OTS programme would be scheduled for a future meeting.

5.7 Members relayed disquiet in learning of the plan to forceably migrate consumers to the Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) after a period of 12 months' inactivity on their service. The Panel reminded Ofcom of the various reasons why a household may not have used their landline service for 12 months and reiterated concerns to not forceably migrate any consumer's service without understanding their circumstances. An update on how the migration to VoIP is proceeding is scheduled for a future meeting.

6. Ofcom's Academic Engagement Portal

6.1 A representative from Ofcom provided a presentation on the importance of working with academics, transparency in research priorities and demonstrating the commitment to evidence-based regulation.

6.2 The Panel was encouraged by the initiative and what had so far been achieved and look forward to learning how the programme evolves to encapsulate further academic engagement.

7. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Policy Proposals update

7.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on their Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) review and consumer research.

7.2 Members were pleased to learn about Ofcom's review and attention to the consumer voice and to provide input on where improvements could be made to the ADR process.

7.3 The Panel encouraged Ofcom to look at how a number of consumers are unable to access ADR due to the lack of usability, accessibility,digital literacy, and to consider the struggles and inconvenience a consumer faces in trying to assign a monetory value to the issues they have encountered. Additionally, the evidential burden to consumers in collating the information to take to the ADR scheme is of concern and the Panel recommended to Ofcom the onus of providing said information should lay with the Communications Providers (CPs) and not their customers.

7.4 Members highlighted the lack of consistency between schemes, such as how they are accessed and the offer of an appeals process (as currently only one of the schemes offers such provision) and queried the need for two schemes in this sector.

8. Future Development of the Postal USO update

8.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on the Future Development of the Postal Universal Service Obligation (USO) which included Call for Input objectives, responses received and next steps.

8.2 Members highlighted the USO must be robust enough to meet the needs of all consumers to ensure no one is left behind, plus be an affordable and transparent service.

8.3 The Panel advised Ofcom to consider obtaining full-bodied economic analysis and further in-depth scrutiny to understand the needs of citizens using postal services and those of bulk mailers. The Panel reflected that the way the USO is set up will also deeply affect consumers in relation to service and price point. Establishing a clear evidence base before reaching any decision would be key to addressing these considerations.

8.4 Members relayed deep concern over the potential to remove the Safeguard Cap on Second Class post. Consumers have witnessed several increases to First Class post and the removal of the Safeguard Cap for Second Class post could result in prices becoming unaffordable for consumers on lower incomes.

8.5 The Panel highlighted further concerns around reducing the quality of service and staggering the interval of Second-Class delivery over a two-week period, with deliveries being made every other weekday (not Saturday), thus equating to 2.5 delivery days per week, which will lead to consumer confusion. Members urge Ofcom

to consider deliveries be made on regular consistent days each week to avoid consumer uncertainty.

8.6 The Panel welcomed innovative developments to protect consumers, giving them the ability to scan stamps to check their validity. However, the Panel raised concerns that consumers who have lower digital skills or access would be left behind until such options were made available to them.

8.7 Members guided Ofcom to ruminate on a consumers' affordable price point for a Second-Class postal service, by considering a level at which is fair to citizens on lower incomes who rely on postal services, while also offering reliability and consistency.

9. Post Monitoring

9.1 The Panel received information from Ofcom on the work being undertaken in relation to the monitoring of post.

9.2 Members were keen to understand the reasons for the increased volume of international in-bound mail and the comparison to global out-bound services.

9.3 The Panel expressed concern with how 'last collection times' are presented on post boxes and highlighted if collection times are not changed or displayed correctly, it would cause confusion and lead to the consumer making an extra unnecessary journey to a post box elsewhere.

9.4 Members questioned how the postal quality of service is monitored taking into consideration the physical aspect and sample sizes and look forward to receiving a short precis to better understand the process.

10. Enforcement update

10.1 Ofcom's Enforcement team provided Members with an update on Ofcom's investigation and enforcement programme.

10.2 The Panel asked questions around the current enforcement work and praised Ofcom's attention to detail and consideration of the proportionate degrees of action to take to protect consumers from harm.

11. Panel Research update

11.1 The Panel received a project update from its Executive team.

12. AOB

12.1 There was no other business.