

Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD's response to the Work and Pensions Committee's consultation on Working Age Benefits

About us

The Communications Consumer Panel, established by the Communications Act 2003, is a group of independent experts with direct sectoral experience. We ensure the voice of UK consumers, citizens and micro-businesses is represented in communications policy development.

The Panel's job is to ensure that the sector works for consumers, citizens and micro businesses - and in particular, people who may be in a more vulnerable position in society. We commission research, provide advice and encourage Ofcom, governments, industry and others to look at issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and micro businesses.

The Panel pays particular attention to the needs of older people and people with disabilities, the needs of people in rural areas and people on low incomes, and the needs of micro-businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers.

Four members of the Panel also represent the interests of consumers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, respectively. They consult with the key stakeholders in the Nations to understand the perspectives of consumers in all parts of the UK and input these perspectives to the Panel's consideration of issues. Following the alignment of ACOD (the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled people) with the Panel, the Panel is more alert than ever to the interests of older and disabled consumers and citizens.

Our response

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the questions asked in the consultation that fall within the Panel's remit.

Our stakeholders

We have been made aware of this consultation by stakeholders with whom we work closely on matters such as digital communications poverty, digital inclusion and the affordability of digital communications and postal services.

Our dual role as the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People and our work with stakeholders representing disabled or older people with a diverse range of access requirements means that we are also aware of some of the additional barriers faced by people who require communications support to live, work and study, in locations across the UK.

The Panel holds quarterly 'National Hubs' - roundtable meetings with stakeholders representing consumers, citizens and micro businesses across the UK nations. We produce a summary of the policy inputs and insights gained from those Hubs:

<https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/stakeholder-engagement/the-panels-national-hubs>

Our most recent round of Hubs have included presentations to the group by Good Things Foundation, the University of Liverpool and Welsh Government on developing a digital minimum living standard. If the Work and Pensions Committee ('the Committee') are not already listening to these organisations, we would suggest tapping into their resources to consider what can be done to help consumers and citizens who qualify for benefits to gain and maintain access to digital communications, to keep them socially and financially connected.

We also meet regularly with the main consumer and citizen advocacy bodies across the UK and would also suggest that the Committee listens closely to consumer and citizen advocates across the UK that listen directly to the everyday needs of consumers and citizens in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, if they are not already doing so.

Our research

Our research, commissioned independently each year, highlights consumer, citizens and micro businesses' reliance on digital communications to apply for jobs and benefits, to work from home as an employee or run a business, to engage in study and home-school children and to gain access to deals that help them to save money, which they may be unable to access through other channels such as phone or face-to-face retail.

Digital communications are an essential - and a gateway - service, to other opportunities and not having basic access to them is today a form of social and financial poverty and detriment. We would therefore urge the Committee to consider UK citizens' access to digital communications services a necessity to be considered in working age benefits.

Our previously commissioned research is published on our website and contains insights into consumers and citizens' reliance on digital communications; the impact of digital communications on UK households during the pandemic; the impact of scams and fraud on users of digital communications channels; the experience of digital connectivity for people living in care homes; the quality of subtitling, signing and audio description - essential services for consumers with vision and hearing loss; the experience of using and paying for digital communications for lower income households, and others:

Communications Consumer Panel publications:

<https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/research-and-reports-introduction/research-and-reports>

Quotes from participants in our research regarding access to digital communications while on benefits:

"(I wish there would have been) grants and support to buy essential IT kit. Like a loan scheme where you get vouchers to buy IT and you can pay it back each week from your benefits." 29 year old, sole parent and not working, lives in a rural area in the South of England

"Trying to look like I'm 'up to speed' was difficult when the laptop was freezing. I didn't want to look like I had any technology issues. So I had to borrow the money to get a better

laptop in the end.” 65, rural Lancashire - previously unemployed but at the time of this research was working from home on a short-term contract for an agency recruiting staff for the NHS to administer the Covid vaccine.

“I got into such a pickle that I had to phone [the Jobcentre] in the end and even then I was getting into such a mess that I asked them to send me a paper form.” 54, rural Wales, low literacy and poor broadband connection

- From Digital Connectivity during the Pandemic: Getting ‘Up to Speed’ while Staying at Home - Communications Consumer Panel:
www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/research-and-reports/getting-up-to-speed-while-staying-at-home-uk-consumers-digital-connectivity-challenges

Our upcoming research insights

We recently commissioned a piece of qualitative research looking into the experiences of consumers on low incomes, who would qualify for a broadband social tariff, in purchasing digital communications services. We await the outcome of the study and would be happy to share any useful insights with the Committee’s team.

We also await findings from a piece of research we have commissioned into the experiences of consumers using digital communications (and postal services) in rural and remote parts of the UK, including any barriers they may face. Again, we would be happy to share those findings with the Committee to assist in developing benefits that suit the lives UK citizens lead as consumers of digital communications consumers.

Summary

We consider that digital communications are an essential, gateway service in UK society today. Consumers and citizens who are not able to pay to stay connected to these services, or who cannot afford to use them are in a form of financial and social poverty that should be tackled by those with the power to assist them. Processes that consumers and citizens need to use to access benefits or, for example a voucher scheme, should also be easy to use. As highlighted by a participant from our recent research, above, government and public sector processes can be intimidating, particularly for people with low digital or general literacy.

We would be open to any further collaboration on the topic of digital communications as an essential service and would suggest that the Committee also listens to DCMS, DCIT and Ofcom alongside others we have referred to in this response to the consultation.