

Minutes of the meeting of the Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD

on 16 November 2023 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

Amanda Britain

Judith Clifton

Lenna Cumberbatch

Michelle Goddard

Robert Hammond

Richard Spencer

Michael Wardlow

Richard Williams

Apologies

Helen Froud

In attendance

The Panel's Executive Team

Ofcom colleagues

Representative of University of Liverpool (item 6)

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 new declarations of interest.
3. Minutes of the meeting on 17 October 2023 and matters arising 3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 17 October 2023 were APPROVED following a minor amendment.



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 Nations.

4.2 Future Panel agenda items and research topics were discussed.

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 were concerned with the level of complaints recorded and noted eagerness to learn of any progress being made with the ADR scheme.

5.3 The Panel remain deeply concerned with the cost-of-living crisis and the importance of ensuring communication services are priced at an affordable level to enable low-income households access to communications services. Options including, but not limited to, social tariffs should be encouraged and different solutions for consumer affordability should be sourced.

5.4 The formulation, amendment and monitoring of CPs vulnerability registers in relation to the migration to VoIP were once again highlighted as an ongoing concern for the Panel. Consumers who require extra support should not be included within current migration schemes, according to their providers, and fears remain many individuals and households will be 'scooped up' within the process irrespective of this commitment.

5.5 The Panel look forward to receiving future enforcement updates on the postal sector at the next scheduled meeting.

5.6 The Panel were keen to learn a printed telephone directory could remain an option for those who pay to receive the service, however concerns were raised that many who rely on a hard copy may not be able to afford to pay for the service.

6. Findings from the social housing pilot on connectivity from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)

6.1 The Panel were pleased to receive information on the findings of the social housing pilot on connectivity which concentrated on the area of Manchester.



6.2 The Panel raised concerns on the huge impact to consumers as many could become disadvantaged in regards of their connectivity. The Panel advised that affordability is key and social tariffs are not the sole answer, their design and price point must be reviewed along with sourcing alternative funding via a cross subsidised route from Government in addition to CPs assistance.

7. Risks to Networks

7.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on how risks to networks are established, viewed and mitigated.

7.2 The Panel were keen to provide input on the importance of consumers having the capability for undertaking their own quality checking of networks and were pleased to learn of future guidance for CPs to check resilience both in terms of networks and equipment.

8. Update on mid-contract price rises

8.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on their review of inflation-linked in-contract price rises and Ofcom welcomed views on their work to date.

8.2 The Panel were pleased to learn of the recommendation for increases to be explained in pounds and pence instead of a percentage, which is easier for individuals to understand and provides certainty to consumers.

8.3 The Panel emphasised concerns with the varying differences in pricing structure for new and existing customers. The Panel referred to a sales tactic where CPs look to offer price incentives to secure new business rather than retain existing customers. The Panel advised that while many consumers are able to shop around or negotiate a price, consumers who require additional support may be less able to haggle and may accept the first price offered. The Panel and Ofcom discussed the options available, and the Panel advised that consumers should be offered more choice when selecting a deal, such as a package which could increase mid-term, or a fixed price contract which could cost more, but offer stability.

8.4 The Panel raised concerns over affordability within the marketplace and the potential ripple effect of CPs increasing their costs if one CP introduces a price increase, advising that a robust system should be in place for CPs to justify and evidence those increases.

9. 2G/3G Switch off Implications for Telecare, Fire, Security and other Industries



9.1 The Panel received an update from Ofcom on the implications of the 2G/3G switch off in relation to telecare alarms, security and fire alarms, ATMs and payment terminals.

9.2 The potential risk to life with telecare alarms ceasing to work once 2G/3G has been switched off remains a huge concern for the Panel in addition to the risk of SOS facilities in motor vehicles unable to call emergency services in an accident.

9.3 The Panel raised concern over the level of awareness of Local Government about the switch off, how it will affect residents with telecare devices within local areas, and the cost involved in rectifying the situation.

9.4 The Panel once again highlighted their fears of 2G/3G enabled devices still being advertised and sold to consumers who are unaware of the impending switch off along with visitors who use foreign sims to access internet services, who will be unaware and cause them disconnection.

10. An Introduction to Generative AI

10.1 The Panel received a presentation on Generative AI, encompassing implications, remits and regulatory information, plus how Ofcom will respond to developments.

10.2 Although the Panel found the information helpful and encouraging, many concerns were raised on the level of misinformation and disinformation on the internet to cause difficulty for citizens to locate the truth along with the delays in providers removing harmful material.

10.3 The Panel relayed concerns on generative AI material providing biased information and problems in recruiting certain consumers who could potentially be considered as vulnerable.

10.4 The Panel hope as new technologies emerge the duty to protect consumers, citizens and micro-businesses continues especially in the current climate as every citizen will need to understand how the Online Safety Bill will work in protecting against harms as new technologies evolve and adapt.

10.5 The Panel look forward to receiving an update on Generative AI in 2024.

11. AOB

11.1 The Panel was represented by a member of the Executive Team at the Digital Connectivity Forum's Working Group on Sustainability - SME guidance launch event, who would keep engaged in the work to ensure a consumer voice could be fed into the project at the right stage.

11.2 The Panel look to respond to forthcoming UK government consultations on digital connectivity.