

Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith / Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee

Cysylltedd digidol yng Nghymru / Digital connectivity in Wales

DC06

Ymateb gan Panel Defnyddwyr Cyfathrebiadau / Evidence from Communications Consumer Panel



Written evidence for the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee

1. The Communications Consumer Panel and Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People

- The Panel was established under the Communications Act 2003, to provide a voice for consumers, citizens and micro-businesses across the UK, with a particular focus on consumers who may traditionally be less heard in policy-making.
- The communications market is complex, highly technical and fast-moving - and impacts across society and the economy. As a result, the Panel and ACOD's work is diverse and broad, covering not just telecommunications such as broadband, spectrum (mobile and TV airwaves) and mobile, but also post, broadcasting and issues such as digital inclusion.
- Our sector specialism and expert experience and understanding allow us to robustly challenge telecoms policy development from a position of strength, supported by sound evidence and resulting in pragmatic actions based on real world solutions.
- The Panel works to influence before, during and after policy development – through a variety of methods and channels.
- We consult publicly on our strategic plans. Our reports can be found on our website.¹

2. The Panel's work to support consumers in Wales

- The Panel commissions research among UK consumers each year. We ensure that agencies offer consumers the opportunity to be interviewed in Welsh and ask agencies to ensure that they seek input from consumers living in different parts of Wales.
- The Panel has a Member for Wales (Sian Phipps), who also attends Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Wales, as an observer, ensuring that learnings from the Advisory Committee sessions are fed to the Panel, so that all Panel Members are aware of issues affecting consumers in Wales.
- The Panel's Member for Wales chairs quarterly 'Consumer Stakeholder Hubs'², enabling charities and consumer organisations representing consumers in Wales to share with the Panel and each other issues affecting Welsh consumers. We publish a summary of the issues raised in those sessions and submit key issues to policy-makers and industry.
- Our Member for Wales provides a Welsh 'voice' in the Panel's monthly meetings, when the Panel is able to input into Ofcom's policy development at an early stage, meaning that Welsh consumers are represented early on in Ofcom's thinking.
- The Panel's Chair, Rick Hill MBE, chairs a quarterly 'Consumer Advocacy Hub', with participants from across the UK, including Citizens Advice for England and Wales, Citizens Advice Scotland

¹ [Strategic plans and Annual Reports - Communications Consumer Panel](#)

² [What the Panel does - Communications Consumer Panel](#)

and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. This enables the Panel to hear about research and consumer concerns in each nation and to join together with consumer advocates to represent UK consumers.

- The Panel's Chair also attends regular meetings of the Broadband Stakeholder Group, a forum for broadband suppliers to UK consumers. He is able to provide a voice for consumers across the UK in those sessions.
- The Panel's Chair has regular meetings with communications providers and raises concerns of specific groups of consumers, including those highlighted by the Panel's Member for Wales, in those meetings. He also recommends a proactive approach in urging providers to have accessible complaints processes and learn from issues impacting groups of consumers across the UK. He encourages providers to employ accessible user testing to ensure that they are incorporating the needs of all consumers in the design of their processes.

3. The Panel's recent research

- In 2020 and 2021, the Panel published qualitative and quantitative research on various issues that we knew were affecting consumers across the UK,³ including connectivity during the pandemic and connectivity in care homes.
- Our research has shown that consumers rely on communications services as **essential services** and to lack decent access to communications services has practical and emotional impacts, leaving people unable to perform daily tasks or connect with work, loved ones and hobbies.
- Our research has also shown that some consumers are still being 'left behind' in terms of not only access to infrastructure, but a lack of confidence and skills to contact their provider. The communications market is complex and confusing and the language used by providers leaves consumers in a position where they feel they are unable to challenge their provider; have low levels of awareness of big changes in technology, such as 'Migration to VOIP'; and are ill-equipped to find the best deal on the market.
- Our research has revealed that for consumers in more vulnerable situations (for example, people living in a low-income household; living in a remote rural location; living with a disability, or a mental or physical health condition which means they have additional support requirements; or who have low English literacy or digital literacy) barriers to access and use of communications services are greater.
- This detriment is further compounded by the fact that these groups of people may be more reliant than others on communications services, to stay informed of medical appointments, stay connected to loved ones, pursue hobbies at low cost, apply for jobs and run a business.
- We believe that everyone in the UK who wishes to have reliable, resilient, affordable digital connectivity should have it – including access to easy redress if something goes wrong.
- We believe consumer awareness of the availability and cost of connectivity options across the UK is low and often excludes people who are not online and those who are less able to engage with complex technological jargon. We therefore recommend that informative communications with consumers, by providers, Ofcom and UK and Welsh Government should be in plain language, in English and Welsh, so that it is accessible to all UK consumers. This would enable consumers to understand whether faster broadband options would be worthwhile to their circumstances and budget.
- Following our research with low income households and people targeted by scams, we highlight the financial and emotional impact on consumers on not being empowered to navigate the communications market in a safe and informed way.
- With the above low consumer awareness and confidence in mind, **we have strongly recommended to UK Government, Ofcom and communications providers that there is:**
 - **a widescale consumer communications campaign on 'Migration to VOIP' across all parts of the UK – taking into account the needs of consumers locally;**

³ [Research and reports - Communications Consumer Panel](#)

- greater awareness-raising on social and low-cost tariffs, with consumers automatically being switched to a lower cost tariff where applicable; and
- clear communication to all consumers on the types of support that providers can offer to people who may find it more difficult to represent themselves in the communication market, or who have additional support needs.