

Communications Consumer Panel response to Ofcom's consultation: Improving access to electronic communications services for disabled people

Introduction

1. The Communications Consumer Panel (CCP) and the Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People (ACOD) welcome this opportunity to respond to this important consultation on suggested improvements to how disabled people can better access communications services.
2. The CCP is an independent group of experts established under the Communications Act 2003. Its role is to provide advice to Ofcom to ensure that the interests of consumers and citizens, including small businesses, are central to regulatory decisions. The Panel also provides advice to Government and champions consumers' communications interests with industry. The Panel has members representing the interests of consumers in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.
3. With the recent alignment of ACOD with the Panel, the Panel is more engaged than ever in the communications interests of disabled consumers and Ofcom's role in protecting and furthering these interests.

Consultation

4. The Panel welcomes Ofcom's pro-active work to ensure that disabled people are not discriminated against as new communications technology becomes available. The Panel believes that new technologies such as smartphones and next generation relay facilities are great opportunities for disabled people, who traditionally have been some of those most likely to be excluded.
5. We particularly welcome Ofcom's renewed commitment to delivering on its duties regarding disabled people and to using its powers to ensure that disabled people are equipped with equivalent access to modern communications services.
6. Although we welcome both the spirit and the content of the consultation, there are some areas where we feel that Ofcom should concentrate its efforts and where a more pro-active policy would perhaps be appropriate.
7. It is not just those who have a disability that will benefit from these provisions, the elderly (an increasing proportion of the UK population) also need to be considered in to any proposals. Many of the measure set out in the consultation will directly help the elderly and the infirm and as such the Panel welcomes this.
8. We are pleased with the provisions in the consultation which govern the accessibility of the primary interactions between telecommunications providers, such as bills and contracts. We do however feel that the provisions should also concentrate on the whole customer journey. Telecommunications providers need to ensure that their procedures are both flexible and accessible to all. A good

example of this is providers ensuring that those who are less able to access their accounts can nominate a proxy to look after the account for them. Many disabled people have complained that the process to secure such an arrangement can be extremely frustrating. We hope that Ofcom's re-assertion of its commitment to disabled people will ensure that the entire 'customer journey' is made as accessible as possible for disabled people.

Specific Points

- Paragraph 2.17 - The Panel is particularly pleased that Ofcom has in the past commissioned specific research on the needs of disabled people when accessing communications services; we are pleased, too, that Ofcom is undertaking an analysis of more recent data. We would encourage continued research so that the needs of disabled people can be better understood.
- In respect of Broadband services the consultation raises the question of equivalence of access (for example, paragraphs 1.6 and 2.20). The Panel supports such equivalence and welcomes further exploration of steps that might be taken towards this end. We support investigation into the barriers for disabled people to accessing Broadband services as a result of their disability (paragraph 2.32 refers). The Panel further believes that a priority fault repair scheme for Broadband would be of value to disabled people. As the consultation points out in paragraph 3.33 and elsewhere, disabled people may be especially reliant on Broadband for a number of reasons and it is difficult to put a monetary worth on such a service.
- In paragraph 3.14 Ofcom states that many of the provisions in General Condition 15 are in accordance with, or complementary to, those in the Equality Act 2010. The Panel would like to see the provisions of the Equality Act, and the rights and responsibilities it conveys, better communicated both by Ofcom and telecommunication providers to disabled people. We believe that many disabled people do not know that they are entitled to 'reasonable adjustments' and, as such, are struggling to manage, when there is no need for them to do so.
- Question (v) of paragraph 3.21 asks respondents for groups of people that might not be adequately served by GC15.19. Many of the measures within GC15.19 concentrate on physical disabilities but we feel that those with less obvious mental health problems and learning difficulties could be overlooked in the provisions. Perhaps further training for staff to support consumers with these disabilities and further facilities to allow family members to manage accounts could help. We hope Ofcom will consider this.
- Question (i) of paragraph 3.49 asks which groups of disabled people would benefit from the ability to nominate a third party to manage their bills. The Panel would again hope that Ofcom will take into consideration not only the situation of those with physical disabilities but also those with less obvious mental health problems.
- In paragraph 3.67, Ofcom discusses its proposal for imposing a condition on communications providers to inform disabled users about products and

services 'designed for them'. This would be a welcome addition to the provisions for disabled people but we feel that it needs to be expanded. Disabled people are less able to access information about products and services generally, so the Panel would like to see this provision extended to all products and services, not just those of particular interest to disabled people. In paragraph 3.71 Ofcom asks for information on the barriers that disabled people face when accessing communications, getting the right information in the right format is a key one of these. It's important that the needs of those with less obvious disabilities, such as mental illness, are also addresses, with simplified information provided as a matter of course.

In summary, the Panel believes that this consultation and the proposals contained within it are to be welcomed. However, as noted above, we believe that Ofcom should consider where the proposals can be further extended to ensure that disabled people have equal access to communication services.