

2nd Ofcom Consumer Panel meeting, 16 March 2004

Note of the Second Meeting of the Ofcom Consumer Panel, held at Ofcom, London, 16 March 2004

Introduction

1. The Chairman welcomed members to the second meeting of the Ofcom Consumer Panel, including Azeem Azhar who was attending his first meeting. Bob Twitchin sent apologies. Julie Myers (Adviser to the Panel) and David Edwards (Secretary) were present throughout the meeting. The following Ofcom colleagues attended for part of the meeting: Stephen Carter (CEO), Geoff Delamere and Helen Normoyle.

Previous minutes

2. The minutes were agreed with one amendment. Actions from the previous meeting were completed or in hand.

Chairman's report

3. The Chairman gave a positive assessment of the Henley Centre facilitated team event, held the previous evening. It had allowed members to learn more about each other and the important issues for the Panel. The Henley Centre would prepare a feedback paper; it would be shared with members.

4. Members suggested that it would be beneficial to have their own programme of meetings with Ofcom colleagues working on their areas of interest. They would also request briefing notes on topics, as the need arose. Industry developments would be of interest and a press cuttings service would be useful.

5. Modernization of the BT network was raised and it was suggested that BT should be invited to meet the Panel. The Chairman had received invitations to meet with the industry but had taken the decision that the priority was consumer stakeholders. It was decided that at this stage the best way to relate to the industry was to meet on technical issues in the context of the various Ofcom policy reviews.

Ways of engaging with consumers

6. The Panel's 'statement of intent' had been revised to take account of discussion at the last meeting. It would be a 'live' document subject to review, intelligible to consumers and posted on the Panel website. Members suggested further amendments. The Chairman commented that it was becoming clear that numbering would be an important issue to pursue, with a new proposal from Ofcom imminent. The Panel required a paper for discussion at the next meeting, with Ofcom colleagues involved if necessary.

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7. Members had done some initial thinking on how to work with particular consumer stakeholders and on their different work areas. The Chairman asked members to recast their ideas and write 'workstreams' with targets etc, eg dates by which to meet consumer groups. Workstreams should include planning as far ahead as would be sensible, to the end of the year if appropriate. A workstream template would be supplied by the Secretary. The Chairman would discuss 'big projects', eg Ofcom strategic reviews, and how to communicate electronically with consumers by email, with the members working in these areas. Those representing the Nations would probably need to meet industry players sooner than other members.. At this stage they were requested to factor this into their workstreams for discussion.

Stephen Carter, Ofcom CEO

8. Stephen Carter spoke briefly about how Ofcom had got to where it was, on its approach to policy issues and what they were. He reviewed the work that had been undertaken to set up Ofcom. Decisions had been taken to conduct three strategic reviews: on Public Service Broadcasting ahead of the BBC Charter Review, Telecoms and Spectrum Reviews. The Reviews would bring together a number of Ofcom workstreams, including implementation of EU Directives, digital switchover, work on broadband and standards, media literacy etc.

9. The Chairman commented that the consumer interest should be 'in the DNA' of all Ofcom colleagues and that the Panel would soon publish a statement on its work programme. The Panel would not seek to 'score points' nor would it be a constant supply of media quotes. Disagreements could arise but the Memorandum of Understanding was the mechanism to ensure that engagement between the Panel and Ofcom would be productive.

Ofcom's (proposed) Annual Plan

10. There was a presentation on the Annual Plan and responses received, including feedback from stakeholder meetings in different parts of the UK. Around a hundred people had attended each event, including politicians, consumer and industry representatives. There had been lively discussion. Consultation responses would be posted on the Ofcom website, together with a summary of issues that emerged at meetings. Ofcom planned to publish a statement in April 2004 with a summary of responses and explain if they resulted in changes to the Plan.

11. Some concern had been expressed about terminology, eg 'citizen-consumer', but this was employed as a convenient term and not intended to represent a hierarchy. Several had commented that there was too much in the plan, that it was too ambitious. But Ofcom had wide responsibilities. Some timescales were determined by the Communications Act and EU Directives

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obliged Ofcom to conduct market reviews. Internet Service Providers were concerned about regulatory burden if Ofcom intervened in Internet content issues; consumer groups argued for more intervention. In practice Ofcom's powers were limited in relation to the Internet.

12. The Chairman responded on behalf of the Panel. In aggregate Ofcom had a wider remit than the regulators it replaced. There was no such thing as "the consumer", there were geographic, age, small business and other dimensions. Awareness of this had to be part of general Ofcom thinking. As to the Panel itself, it was about to publish a statement on its priorities and workplan. A version would be submitted to the Ofcom Chairman as the Panel's response to the Annual Plan. The Chairman requested that the Panel's response be highlighted in Ofcom's Annual Plan statement.

Ofcom's consumer research programme

13. Ofcom's thinking on research was outlined, its research team and style of working, its role in the Strategy and Markets Group, and its engagement with Ofcom's Mission and Annual Plan. Work included input to strategic reviews and market reviews and activities ranged from market monitoring, public perception of Ofcom and employee satisfaction. There was brief discussion about 'ownership' of Panel research conducted by Ofcom. The Communications Act was explicit that the Panel had the right to publish its research.

Any Other Business

14. A Panel training session on disability awareness/equality issues had been proposed. This would be discussed further outside the meeting.

Date of the next meeting

15. The next meeting would be held on 26 April 2004 at Ofcom in London.