

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

The Members of the Communications Consumer Panel would like to wish all our subscribers the very best for the festive season.

Telephone charges to be made simpler

For some time, the Panel has highlighted that charges for 0800 calls from mobiles particularly affect people on lower incomes, who are more likely to rely on a mobile at home and use it to make calls to essential services. The Panel has also been concerned that calling non-geographic numbers can be confusing and costly for consumers. We're therefore pleased that Ofcom has announced a series of measures to make the cost of calling businesses and services more transparent for consumers from June 2015 and freephone will mean free. The measures are designed to tackle consumer confusion about how much it costs to call companies, public bodies and other organisations on numbers starting 08,09 and 118, as well as provide greater transparency of prices, improve competition and restore consumer confidence in non-geographic service numbers.

The measures include:

- Consumer calls to Freephone numbers (0800, 0808 and 116) which are generally free from landlines, will become free from mobile phones too.
- Clearer pricing for all numbers starting 08, 09 and 118. These non-geographic service numbers have a range of uses, from finding out information to banking, directory enquiry and entertainment services.
- Consumers will have the cost of non-geographic service numbers broken down into an 'access charge' made by the phone company, plus a 'service charge' from the company or organisation they are calling.
- The service charge for premium rate (09) numbers will be capped

The full statement from Ofcom can found [here](#).

Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Digital Participation

Panel Member for Scotland, Mairi Macleod, attended a meeting of the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Digital Participation on 10 December, where the main topic of discussion was promoting digital participation in the workplace, especially in the public sector, plus the barriers and benefits.

Speakers felt that, in order for organisations to engage with people where *they* are, for example, via social media platforms, staff would require the skills to use these platforms effectively and be allowed access at work. Managers need to understand the importance of social media, not to be afraid of it, and have a strategy for using it and supporting their staff. There was also debate about the level of digital skills in the workforce generally and the need for a bottom up/top down approach to tackle the problem of low skills. This discussion continued online at [Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group - digital participation](#).

The meeting also heard from Doreen Kelly of [Partners for Inclusion](#). She identified some of the barriers to digital participation that they have encountered, including affordability, the ability to use standard equipment, safety and confidentiality and a lack of creative solutions from manufacturers.

Independent Living in Scotland

Mairi Macleod also attended the latest in Independent Living in Scotland's "Solutions" series of pop-up think tanks on 18 December. Entitled "Mock The Weak - the representation of disabled people in the media", it brought together disabled people and other key experts to consider the solutions to mis- and under-representation of disabled people in the media. A report will be published on ILiS's website in January. [Independent Living Policy/new-policy-entry](#)

Superfast broadband - deployment challenges and commercial opportunities

This month Panel Member Craig Tillotson spoke at a Westminster eForum seminar focused on next steps for the provision of broadband across the UK and the options to encourage greater use by customers and service providers of the 'superfast' network. Delegates examined the emerging investment and regulatory challenges for deployment of the UK's next generation broadband infrastructure and the options to encourage SMEs to utilise new infrastructure for competitive advantage.

Speaking on the panel about Broadband Service and Competition Challenges, Craig highlighted the Panel's work on digital participation but focused on the need for: ubiquitous access to 'fast enough' broadband; competition to bear down on prices and improve service levels; universal choice of services, good information for consumers and very easy switching; suppliers to ensure they do not obscure the ability to compare bundle elements across providers and do not constrain switching by forcing different contract lengths for different elements of the bundle. He also cautioned against becoming fixated on speed and not addressing the issues faced by poorly served customers in need of better quality basic broadband.

New 'Easy Read' mobile phone guide for people with learning disabilities

The Panel and ACOD have welcomed Ofcom's publication of a [guide](#) to using a mobile phone, designed to be easily understood by people with learning disabilities.

Ofcom is the first UK regulatory body to publish consumer advice in the 'Easy Read' format, which makes information more accessible to people with learning disabilities. Easy Read presents information in a clear and simple way and uses pictures to support the meaning of the text. It can also be helpful for those with a limited knowledge of the English language. The guide was produced in partnership with a specialist Easy Read agency and meets current [European](#) and [UK Government](#) standards for making written information easily understandable.

The [Easy Read guide](#) offers advice to people with learning difficulties on how to get the most out of their mobile phone and on how much it could cost. It gives useful information on:

- the different types of mobile phone handsets available;
- the costs of mobile phone calls and ways to pay;
- free services available for disabled customers; and
- how to complain when things go wrong.

Ofcom has printed 5,000 copies of the guide and is sending them to every social services director in the UK. Ofcom has also secured support from organisations including Mencap and the National Autistic Society for help with distributing the guide to those people who will benefit most.

Ofcom's Easy Read guide to using your mobile phone is now available to download from the Ofcom [website](#).

Ofcom issues statement on broadband and landline switching process

Ofcom has confirmed how changes will be implemented to help consumers switch landline and broadband providers on the Openreach copper telecoms network with greater ease and convenience.

Under new measures announced in August 2013, consumers will only need to follow a single switching process, which will be managed by their new communications provider. In its statement, Ofcom confirmed and provided further detail on these enhancements to the switching process. The regulator has also set out additional measures to help prevent consumers losing their service during the changeover process, or being switched without their consent. It has also finalised the deadlines by which these improvements must be delivered.

A copy of the full statement can be found [here](#)

Panel highlights customer service recommendations made in “Going Round in Circles?”

This month the Panel has continued to highlight the customer service recommendations it has made following its new research [Going round in circles? The consumer experience of dealing with problems with communications services](#). Panel Chair, Jo Connell and Member Chris Holland discussed the report with the Consumer Forum for Communications. Jo also invited Forum Members to express their views as the Panel begins the process of developing its workplan for 2014/15.

The Panel has urged the communications industry to raise the level of customer service it offers and will be discussing the research, findings and recommendations with communications providers and Ofcom over the coming months. Following the issues

highlighted by the research, and our own subsequent exploration of the issues, the Panel has made recommendations in five key areas:

- The provision of information
- Review and strengthen contact centre staff training
- Improving the consumer contact experience
- Provide greater support for older and disabled consumers
- Review and strengthen escalation and ADR referral processes

Read more about the report and the Panel's detailed recommendations [here](#)

Most complained about telecoms and pay TV providers

Ofcom recently published research on the volumes of complaints against the major telecoms and pay TV providers between July and September 2013. This is Ofcom's [eleventh quarterly report](#), which aims to provide useful information for consumers and incentivise operators to improve their performance.

Overall, the total volume of telecoms and pay TV complaints made to Ofcom during the third quarter of 2013 increased slightly. Complaints about landline telephone, broadband and pay TV were higher than for the previous quarter, while complaints about mobile services decreased.

Ofcom publishes latest Quality of Customer Service Report

Ofcom has published its latest research on customer service satisfaction. Over 6,000 consumers who had contacted their provider between July and September 2013 were interviewed and asked to rate their customer service experience. Overall satisfaction with customer service is highest in the pay TV and mobile markets. Various aspects of the providers' customer service were scored including: the speed with which issues were dealt with; the standard of advice given; and the attitude and ability of the advisor.

A copy of the [full research](#) can be found here

Telecoms Consumer Action Plan developments

Following government's announcement of its intention to develop a Telecoms Consumer Action Plan in September, DCMS has announced that it has started to work with the telecoms industry on this, and has made progress in several areas to help improve the consumer experience:

- **Helping consumers to avoid unexpectedly high bills:** Mobile operators already offer protection to consumers from the point at which they report a phone as lost or stolen. DCMS announced that 3, EE, Virgin Media and Vodafone have agreed to work towards the introduction of a monetary cap on customer liability for usage charges associated with a lost or stolen phone. Government, Ofcom and the mobile operators will undertake detailed work to determine the level of the cap and the conditions that will apply to it with the ambition of introducing the cap in spring 2014. DCMS said that it

will continue to work with the wider industry to find ways to improve phone security and reduce theft including ways to educate consumers to take simple security measures to help avoid problems, such as always setting passwords or PINs.

- **Bill transparency and certainty over the lifetime of a contract:** Ofcom recently published guidelines promoting transparency in contracts when prices change. The guidance protects mobile, landline, and broadband consumers from mid-contract price rises, by giving them the right to exit a contract without penalty if their provider increases the cost of their monthly deal. 3, BT, EE, Sky, TalkTalk, Virgin Media and Vodafone have agreed to work with government and Ofcom on ways to improve transparency in contracts in line with the principles underpinning the Ofcom guidance. DCMS stated it will continue to work with the industry to promote further ways of ensuring that consumers have the best possible information to help them make informed choices about the communications services they purchase.
- **Eliminating roaming charges:** DCMS stated that it will work with Ofcom and the industry to develop a UK government position for on-going negotiations in the EU that will help to achieve the goal of eliminating roaming charges within the EU by 2016. DCMS note that this will need to be accompanied by appropriate safeguards to prevent abuse and ensure that UK mobile operators are encouraged to continue to invest in their networks.

You can read the agreement [here](#) (pdf)

Missing Phone? Report it lost or stolen

At this time of year, with the festive season in full swing, consumers can be particularly vulnerable to mobile phone theft, with opportunist thieves preying on distracted shoppers or partygoers.

Ofcom's latest [consumer research](#) reveals that consumers pay, on average, an additional unexpected £65 on their bill as a result of losing or having their mobile phone stolen.

However, consumer complaints highlight that, in some instances, charges from unauthorised use of lost and stolen phones can present consumers with unexpected bills of hundreds or even thousands of pounds. Waiting to see if the phone turns up and failing to report it quickly can be a costly mistake as consumers are currently liable for all charges incurred until the point the phone is reported as lost or stolen to their provider.

Ofcom has published a guide offering consumer advice on how to keep a mobile safe and help protect against unauthorised use. Full details of the consumer guide can be found on [Ofcom's website](#)

DCMS Select Committee report into nuisance calls and text messages

The DCMS Select Committee has [published its report into nuisance calls and text messages](#). The inquiry into nuisance telephone calls and text messages was announced in July 2013 and focused on the current regulatory system and its enforcement, the

effectiveness of the Telephone Preference Service and what practical measures could be taken by communications service providers to curtail such communications.

Some 200 individuals and organisations contacted the Committee in response to its call for evidence. It also held two oral evidence sessions. The Panel submitted [evidence to the Committee](#) in August. The Committee then published its report on 5 December 2013.

Information published about main services offered by phone companies that help consumers protect themselves against nuisance calls

Ofcom has published [information](#) about the main services offered by phone companies that can help consumers protect themselves against nuisance calls and compare any charges that may apply.

Some of the call features offered by landline providers include Caller Display, Incoming Call Blocking, Anonymous Call Rejection, Last Caller Identification (or 1471) and Voicemail (or 1571).

Ofcom has set out the charges for these services across seven landline providers. In some cases, these services are free. In other instances, monthly charges can apply and may vary depending on which particular package a customer is signed up to. Read more [here](#)

New national infrastructure plan announced

A new national infrastructure Plan containing information on over £375 billion of planned public and private sector infrastructure investment has been announced by the government. The Plan sets out investment for energy, transport, flood defence, waste, water and communications infrastructure up to 2030 and beyond.

The Plan notes government's intention to open a £10 million competitive fund in early 2014 to test innovative solutions to deliver superfast broadband services to the most difficult to reach areas of the UK. Options may include enhanced mobile services, new fixed technologies and alternative approaches to structuring financial support, working closely with the communications industry.

The Plan is published alongside the infrastructure pipeline, which includes detail on the status of UK infrastructure projects. Read more [here](#)

Managing the costs of communications

Ofcom has published a series of guides that explain how consumers can get the most from their landline, broadband and mobile deals while being kind to their pockets.

Although UK consumers enjoy some of the most competitive phone, TV, broadband and mobile deals just because a particular deal once seemed the best option, it doesn't mean it still is. An increase in charges - or changes in the way people use their communications services - could make switching to a different deal more economical, though in some cases

people may have to pay a charge for the rest of their current contract. Or if a change in circumstances means people are looking to cut back, there are ways you to save money without having to miss out on services.

The guides are available on the [Ofcom website](#).

Dame Patricia Hodgson named as next Ofcom Chairman

The Government has announced that Dame Patricia Hodgson will be the next Chairman of Ofcom. This follows the Culture, Media and Sport pre-appointment hearing on December 17 and confirmation from Secretary of State, Maria Miller, on the appointment.

Dame Patricia will replace Chairman Colette Bowe when she steps down at the end of March 2014 after serving her full term. Read the DCMS' press release [here](#)

Ofcom publish draft 2014/15 Annual Plan

Ofcom has published its [draft 2014/15 Annual Plan](#) for consultation, outlining its work programme for the next financial year.

The proposed plan of work will focus on seven broad themes - promote effective competition and informed choice; secure optimal use of spectrum; maintain audience confidence in broadcast content; availability; quality of service; cost and value; and adoption.

Those with an interest in Ofcom's work are encouraged to respond to the consultation by the closing date of 14 February 2014, or to attend one of the meetings, further details of which can be found [online](#)

PhonpayPlus consults on its Business Plan and Budget 2014/15

PhonpayPlus, the UK regulator of premium rate services (PRS), has issued a public consultation on its Business Plan and Budget 2014/15 - *Adding Value in a Complex and Converging Market*.

The PhonpayPlus Business Plan 2014/15 is structured around the following themes and priorities:

- Strengthening compliance and enforcement - PhonpayPlus will work with industry to build compliance through improved due diligence, risk assessment and control, make sure that polluters pay for the harm that they cause in the market and help to ensure that affiliate marketing is used compliantly.
- Improving the customer experience - PhonpayPlus will work with industry to raise standards of customer care and redress, further improve its own customer support and further develop protections for vulnerable consumers.
- Future proof regulation - PhonpayPlus will work with industry, regulators and other partners to tackle the increasing risk from new online and security threats, update and future proof its Code of Practice and work with Government and other bodies to

ensure that the regulatory framework for low-value digital purchases, such as premium rate services, keeps pace with changes in the market.

- Enhancing regulatory efficiency and effectiveness - PhonepayPlus will further strengthen its partnership working with other bodies and continue to improve its business systems and processes.

The closing date for responses to the consultation is 22 January 2014. [The full Business Plan & Budget 2014/15 Consultation can be viewed here](#)

Digital Strategy Review

The government has reviewed its Digital Strategy one year on and reports that progress has been made on four key areas of its digital strategy, including creating digital leadership in government by building the Government Digital Service (GDS), launching an consolidated government website, [GOV.UK](#), transforming 25 high volume services from across government into digital services, and changing the way government procures its IT services.

The report states that the government has:

- established digital leadership in government; both through building expertise in Government Digital Service (GDS) but also by helping departments get the right people with the right skills into the right roles
- built GOV.UK, which makes it simpler, clearer and faster for users to get to the services and information they need
- improved 25 high-volume and high-profile services across government; currently, there is 1 service with live elements (Student Loans Company), 15 are in beta and 6 in alpha
- secured agreement from Ministers to start exploring how to open up government transactions so they can be delivered easily by commercial organisations and charities; and make information available wherever people are on the web, by syndicating content
- ensured no one gets left behind as government goes digital by default; by helping departments think about what they can do to help people get online, and also what they need to do to assist people who may never be able to
- Two new actions are to be included as actions 15 and 16: These are:
 - to reiterate the formal commitment by government to work on digital inclusion
 - a proposal to undertake further exploration of ways to syndicate information and transactions so third-party organisations can create new services and better information access for their own users

A full copy of the report can be found via the link: [Government's digital strategy annual report 2013](#)

Shoppers set to spend twice as much on mobile this year

A new report by IMRG and Capgemini predicts that consumers will spend twice as much via smartphones and tablets this Christmas as they did last year. New data suggests that £2.9bn will be spent through mobile devices on UK websites during December compared to £1.45bn last year. The full report can be found on [IMRG's website](#)

New guide for parents on buying a mobile phone or tablet for your child

Ofcom has [published a guide](#) for those considering buying their child a new mobile phone or tablet.

The guide is designed to help people make an informed decision about which device and deals might best suit their child's needs.

It also offers advice on how to limit children's spend so people don't get an unwelcome surprise when the bills start arriving, and how to ensure they're protected when using the internet.

International Communications Market report

UK consumers are benefiting from some of the cheapest call rates in the world, according to Ofcom's International Communications Market report.

Compared to French, German, Italian, Spanish and US consumers, those in the UK can access consistently cheaper mobile phone, landline telephone and broadband deals. When it comes to mobile deals, a typical handset with 200 minutes, 50 texts and 200MB data costs £14 per month on average in the UK compared to £57 in the US.

In order to compare communication service deals in each country, Ofcom created five typical household profiles, ranging from a low use household with basic needs through to an affluent household that uses lots of communications services. These were then used to identify the best deals available in each country that matched the needs of these households.

Whilst the UK was consistently cheaper, not all communications services were the most competitive relative to other countries. Pay-TV, at an average cost of £66-a-month in the UK, is more than double the best deal in Germany (£27). France tops the table when it comes to 'All-in' monthly deals for landline, broadband and Pay TV at £86, with the UK's best deal costing £92.

Ofcom's International Communications Market report, which compares broadband, landline, mobiles, TV, radio and post, can be found on the [Ofcom website](#)

New rules for faster telecoms repairs and installation

Ofcom has proposed new rules which mean that telephone and broadband customers stand to benefit from faster line repairs and installations. The measures would require Openreach, the company which installs and maintains connections to BT's network on behalf of competing telecoms providers, to meet new minimum performance standards.

Should it fail to meet the new targets over a 12-month period, Openreach would face sanctions from Ofcom - which could include fines.

The requirements would mean the large majority of consumers and businesses encountering a fault with their telephone or broadband service must see it repaired within two working days; while the large majority of those requiring a new line must receive an appointment within 12 working days.

Ofcom is concerned about the time it can take for Openreach to complete this work. The problem was most acute during 2012, when installations and repairs were to some extent hampered by extremely wet weather conditions.

Since the start of 2013, under an arrangement brought about by Ofcom, Openreach has committed to new contractual targets for services, leading to automatic payments to other telecoms companies where it misses those targets. Openreach's performance has since returned to pre-2012 levels, but Ofcom wants to ensure it remains at an acceptable standard for the benefit of consumers.

Read more at <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/2013/12/19/new-rules-for-faster-telecoms-repairs-and-installation/>