

## October 2013 Panel bulletin

### Panel publishes new report into the consumer experience of dealing with problems with the communications services - “Going Round in Circles?”

The Communications Consumer Panel has urged the communications industry to raise the level of customer service it offers, based on the findings of new research into the consumer experience of dealing with problems with communications services.

Following a review both of existing quantitative studies and new independent qualitative research, the Panel has published its report ‘[Going round in circles? The consumer experience of dealing with problems with communications services](#)’. Panel Chair, Jo Connell said; “Our research highlights that some consumers are suffering in silence while for others, the negative experience of contacting their provider - the time taken to resolve a complaint, the number of contacts required and the sheer level of persistence demanded to reach a solution - made the whole situation worse. This is simply unacceptable. That’s why we’re urging communications providers to provide better support for those consumers who are experiencing problems. We’d like to see providers review their processes and give consumers better, clearer information about service expectations. We’d urge providers to improve the customer contact experience through strengthening call centre staff training and achieving recognised accreditation.”

The research was commissioned as the Panel was concerned by the levels of consumer complaint highlighted in Ofcom’s Customer Service Satisfaction research and Consumer Experience Report 2012 (CER). The CER reported on the number of people who said that they had ‘cause to complain’ in the last 12 months. It found that 10% of UK adults said that they had cause to complain about broadband services, 6% about their fixed landline services and 5% about mobile phone services. When extrapolating these percentages into approximate numbers of UK households, the number of UK households estimated to have had cause to complain range from 1.2 to 2 million, depending on the sector - with broadband receiving the highest levels of cause for complaint.

The Panel commissioned independent [qualitative research](#) from Ipsos MORI with participants across the UK who had experienced a problem with their communications service. The Panel wanted to understand why some people who had cause to contact their suppliers about an issue did not do so, as well as explore the experiences of those who had contacted their supplier to try and resolve an issue.

Key findings from the new qualitative research and quantitative review include:

- For a variety of reasons, some people who don’t contact their provider are suffering in silence and ‘getting by’ on a sub-standard service;
- For some who did contact their provider, their initial frustration was exacerbated by a

negative contact experience;

- The loss of time and money by consumers trying to get a problem addressed and the emotional perseverance required are rarely acknowledged by communications providers;
- Some older consumers and some consumers with a disability seemed to be at a particular disadvantage in their dealings with providers; and
- Escalation of problems frequently appears to be ineffective and communications providers seem to be poor at telling customers about Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR).

Comments from consumers highlighted difficulties they faced:

*“Every single phone call that you placed you were speaking to maybe three or four different people and you were having to explain the problem each and every time.” Male 35 - 64 years, Northern Ireland*

*“They use terms I don’t understand [...] you know, they’ll say ‘have you sorted the router’ or something and I’ll say ‘what router?’. You know, that sort of thing.” Female 65 years+, Wales*

Based on the review, the Panel has issued five recommendations for communications providers to help improve the consumer experience.

1. The provision of better, jargon-free information to consumers about service expectations, simple troubleshooting tips as well as information about the complaints process.
2. A review and strengthening of contact centre staff training to ensure that staff:
  - a. Are able to establish a shared understanding of the problem with the consumer;
  - b. Have relevant technical expertise and are able to explain technical terms in layman’s language; and
  - c. Have the ability to go “off script” and be empowered to take ownership of complaints, escalating the problem earlier in the process if necessary.
3. Improving the customer experience by:
  - a. maintaining better records on previous conversations with the consumer as well as providing the consumer with a free copy of their complaint records quickly and easily;
  - b. the provision of a unique reference number and firm timescales, calling the consumer back when promised; and
  - c. ensuring that consumers can contact their supplier at a minimum via a freephone telephone number, email and post.
4. Providing greater support for older and disabled consumers, such as more signposting for those with severe hearing or speech impairments to their preferred contact method, e.g. email, SMS, text phone or text relay or video relay services.
5. Review and strengthen escalation and Alternative Dispute Resolution referral processes to ensure that both staff and consumers are aware of the options available.

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

## All-Party Parliamentary Group report on Nuisance Calls

Responding to the [report](#) published today by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Nuisance Calls, Communications Consumer Panel Chair, Jo Connell, said; “We are pleased that the APPG calls for Caller Line Identifier (CLI) to be free of charge for all customers. During its work in this area, the Panel has highlighted that CLI technology is one of the key defence mechanisms against nuisance calls and it makes sense for it to be freely available for all consumers. People cannot make an informed decision about whether to answer a call if they cannot see immediately a number displayed - and if so, what that number is.”

The Panel was also very encouraged that the APPG’s report highlights the need to tighten rules around the collection and use of customers’ personal data. The Panel has previously expressed its view that the issue of consent is fundamental - both in relation to people being able to give informed consent to be contacted or otherwise, and the proving of such if there is a dispute. The Panel is pleased to note that the APPG shares the view that a company making a call should be able to state when and where consent was given - and have this information on hand.

## Panel member Chris Tillotson comments on BBC’s “You & Yours” on mast rationalisation

In April, the Panel became concerned about the effects of mast rationalisation. Mast closures may lead to people experiencing worse or no mobile coverage in areas that are critical for them. This could also lead to a loss of profits for small businesses, as well as raising safety issues for individuals and communities. Associated consumer support issues are also of significant concern to the Panel.

We have discussed the matter with Ofcom and have written direct to mobile network operators to raise our specific concerns.

Panel Member Craig Tillotson joined BBC Radio 4's You and Yours programme last week to talk about the issue. You can listen to the item on the BBC's site [here](#)

## Protection for consumers against mid-contract price rises

The Panel has welcomed Ofcom’s announcement that consumers and small businesses should be allowed to exit their landline, broadband or mobile contract without penalty if their provider increases the cost of their fixed monthly deal.

Ofcom has told providers how to interpret and apply current telecoms sector rules in relation to price increases during fixed-term contracts. Ofcom has also confirmed the cancellation rights it expects providers to give consumers following price increases.

This Guidance sets out that:

- Ofcom is likely to regard *any* increase to the recurring monthly subscription charge in a fixed-term contract as ‘materially detrimental’ to consumers;
- providers should therefore give consumers at least 30 days’ notice of any such price rise and allow them to exit their contract without penalty; and

- any changes to contract terms, pricing or otherwise, must be communicated clearly and transparently to consumers.

Ofcom's decision follows a consultation on how to give consumers a fairer deal in relation to price increases during fixed-term contracts. The Panel's response can be found [here](#).

The new Guidance comes into effect three months from the date of publication (23/10/13). It will apply to any new landline, broadband, and mobile contracts (including in some cases bundled contracts) entered into after this date.

Ofcom's full statement is [available online](#).

## Measuring the quality of live subtitling

Panel Member Mairi Macleod reports that earlier this month, Ofcom published the results of an investigation and consultation process on the quality of subtitles on live TV programmes. Ofcom's work began in response to concerns expressed by hearing-impaired subtitle users and their representatives.

Mairi notes that subtitling has always been an exercise in compromise, balancing such considerations as editing, subtitle speed and the need to synchronise subtitles, speech and pictures to meet the differing needs of a range of users, such as children, viewers whose hearing has deteriorated with age, and the profoundly deaf. Increases in the amount of subtitled programming has given hearing-impaired viewers greater access to breaking news programmes, live chat shows or live reality TV programmes, which was not possible until relatively recently.

However, the quality of subtitling in live programmes in terms of accuracy, the reading speed of the subtitles and the delay in subtitles appearing on screen can sometimes be quite different to that of pre-recorded programmes. The intention of this piece of work is to audit that quality over a period of two years to allow viewers, broadcasters and subtitling companies to see where there is room for improvement. Ofcom will publish the data supplied by broadcasters every six months and will then consider whether its current guidance on subtitling speed and latency (the time lag between speech and subtitles) should be changed, and whether broadcasters should have targets for these. The first set of figures will be published in Spring 2014.

The consultation also encouraged broadcasters and subtitle providers to consider ways of improving the subtitling experience, with one notable suggestion being a short delay (perhaps 20-30 seconds) in the transmission of some live programmes to allow for the preparation of subtitles in sync with the speech, and in block rather than scrolling format. Another suggestion, and one supported by the Panel in its response to the consultation, is for broadcaster to ensure that programme makers deliver their work sufficiently in advance of transmission to allow time to produce good-quality subtitles. This would cut down on the number of programmes which are subtitled live and thus provide much better access for viewers.

The Panel was encouraged by the evident willingness to listen to viewers and the openness to considering improvements and changes demonstrated at a roundtable event held by Ofcom and which included broadcasters and subtitle providers as part of the consultation process. We would urge all parties to co-operate in pooling resources and specialist areas of knowledge to improve the service they jointly provide.

A summary and a link to the document can be found [here](#)

## Enabling Technology - report from Scope

Panel Member Bob Twitchin reports that the disability charity Scope has been working with BT and the RCA's Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design to look at how to make mainstream technology work better for disabled people. Their report, [Enabling Technology](#), summarises the project, suggests that their design prototypes can stimulate new innovations in the technology sector and presents their key findings:

- Use adapted mainstream technology as much as possible
- Use open, flexible technology
- Tailor it to the individual

## Sky trials video relay

Sky is currently trialling a service which allows people to contact their Accessible Customer Services team using British Sign Language (BSL).

Since the beginning of October, deaf customers who prefer to communicate in BSL can try out the service by visiting Sky's Accessibility website. From there they can be connected to a Video Relay service provided by a BSL interpreter based at a social enterprise called SignVideo. The interpreter will connect with a member of the Accessible Customer Services team and facilitate the call, relaying information between the Sky agent and the customer. The trial period runs until 1 January 2014 and the service is free to use. Further details can be found on [Sky's website](#)

## Ofcom joins international taskforce to tackle number 'spoofing'

Ofcom has joined forces with regulators from Canada and the United States to tackle the problem of phone number 'spoofing'.

Spoofing involves callers hiding their identity by causing a false or invalid phone number to display when making calls. It is a tactic often used by organisations carrying out unsolicited, misleading or even fraudulent telemarketing activities and can increase the harm caused to consumers from nuisance calls.

A 'spoofed' number on a call display might be a random series of digits, or even mimic the number of a real company or person who has nothing to do with the real caller.

As a result, consumers can't return the call to find out who is contacting them or opt out of future direct marketing calls from that organisation. Number spoofing can also make it more difficult for regulators to trace those companies responsible for making nuisance calls.

Calls with spoofed numbers can and do come from all over the world and account for a significant and growing proportion of nuisance calls made to consumers in English-speaking countries. International cooperation is therefore vital in addressing this complex problem.

Ofcom and the Information Commissioner's Office in the UK, and international regulators from Canada and the United States, have pledged to combine resources, share intelligence and work collaboratively to find solutions to the problem of phone number spoofing. Assistance from the telecommunications industry in each of the four countries will also be sought as part of the initiative.

This work complements Ofcom's ongoing work to improve call and message tracing processes, as

set out in its [joint action plan](#) with the Information Commissioner's Office.

A [guide](#) for consumers on preventing and complaining about nuisance calls is available on the Ofcom website.

An [online portal](#) to help consumers register a complaint by directing them to the appropriate UK regulator can also be found on the Ofcom website.

## Safer smartphones - a guide to keeping your device secure

The Information Commissioner's Office, Ofcom, the Office of Fair Trading and PhonepayPlus have produced a new guide to help people keep their smartphones safe and secure.

They highlight that smartphones are revolutionising how millions of us go online each day and we use them to make calls, send texts, check emails and run an ever-growing number of applications.

However these devices may also carry some risks. Should your smartphone fall into the wrong hands, it is a potential treasure trove of information. If you download a rogue application, it's even possible for hackers to hijack your phone without it leaving your side.

The [guide](#) offers some tips to help keep you and your device safe and secure.

## New infrastructure report highlights areas of continuing concern in relation to the availability of services

Ofcom's latest annual [Infrastructure Report](#) includes for the first time analysis of coverage of mobile voice (2G) and voice-plus-data (3G) services on UK roads. While coverage for voice calls on motorways is good, there are gaps in coverage on 'A' and 'B' roads, particularly for 3G data services. Ofcom estimates that just 35% of the length of the UK's A and B roads are served by all four 3G networks, and 9% has no 3G coverage at all. The report says this shortfall should in part be addressed by the roll-out of 4G services, but Ofcom will be carrying out further analysis in the coming year to examine whether regulatory or Government intervention may also be required to achieve wider mobile coverage on roads.

Ofcom says it will also examine mobile coverage on major rail routes over the coming year. Once this data has been collected, it will offer technical advice to the Department for Transport and Network Rail on how mobile coverage on railways might be improved.

Ofcom states that it believes the challenge is to focus on wider coverage for consumers, including those in hard-to-reach areas. It will also be conducting work aimed at ensuring wider coverage does not come at the expense of service quality.

Ed Richards, Ofcom Chief Executive, said: "Superfast broadband is rolling out fast across the country, and 4G mobile will reach at least 98% of the population. This is really good news but there remain considerable challenges, not least in hard-to-reach areas for mobile and home internet services.

"We know consumers increasingly expect superfast speeds, but it's also important to make sure people can connect over a very wide area. That is why we are doing everything we can to support moves to improve coverage in difficult areas such as roads and train lines.

The report states that superfast broadband is now available to almost three quarters of UK homes, and the number of people using the technology has more than doubled in the last year. The update shows that in June this year 73% of UK premises could receive superfast broadband, up from 65% in 2012. Some 22% of broadband connections are superfast, up from 10% last year. Around 4.8m UK customers have taken up the technology, up from 2.1m last year.

The report also shows that consumers are also making far greater use of public Wi-Fi 'hotspots' - which allow them to access fixed-line internet via their mobile devices in places such as restaurants, hotels, banks, supermarkets and coffee shops. The number of public Wi-Fi hotspots throughout the UK doubled over the year to 34,000 (from 16,000).

Read about the report on Ofcom's site [here](#)

## Games industry should not pressure children to purchase, says OFT

The rapidly growing online and app-based games industry should not be pressuring children to make in-game purchases, according to new sector-wide [principles published for consultation](#) by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT).

The eight principles also state that consumers should be told upfront about any possible in-game costs or advertising, and any important information such as whether their personal data is to be shared with third parties. They also make clear that in-game payments are not authorised, and should not be taken, unless the payment account holder, such as a parent, has given their informed consent.

The proposed principles follow the OFT's investigation into whether children are being unfairly pressured or encouraged to pay for additional content in web and app-based games.

The OFT investigation found that some games included potentially unfair and aggressive commercial practices to which children may be particularly susceptible. For example, games implying the player would somehow be letting other players or characters down if they did not obtain something by making an in-game purchase.

Other areas of concern include:

- a general lack of transparent, accurate and clear upfront information about costs and other information that may impact on the consumer's decision to play, download or sign up to a game
- blurring the distinction between spending in-game currency and real money
- children being encouraged or incited through in-game statements or images to make a purchase, or persuade others to make a purchase.

The OFT believes that commercial practices of this nature are likely to breach consumer protection law and that companies in the market need to implement changes to ensure full compliance with their legal obligations.

The draft principles clarify the OFT's view of the rapidly evolving sector's obligations and are designed to tackle inconsistencies in the way the sector is interpreting the law. The OFT is inviting [comments on the Principles](#) and welcomes responses by 21 November 2013.

## Ofcom consults on its spectrum management strategy

Ofcom has published a consultation on its [spectrum management strategy](#), setting out its approach to and priorities for spectrum management over the next ten years.

The consultation discusses how Ofcom has refined its approach to spectrum management in light of past experience. It also assesses how the demands of major sectors that use spectrum are likely to develop in the future. This has identified a number of areas where Ofcom plans to focus its efforts over the next ten years.

Separately, Ofcom has announced the [participants in its white space trial](#). Over the next six months, around 20 public and private organisations will be participating in Ofcom's pilot by running trials to test a variety of innovative applications. TV 'white space' devices will use gaps in radio spectrum that sit between frequency bands used for Digital Terrestrial TV. Use of these white spaces allows devices to transmit and receive wireless signals for applications such as broadband access for rural communities or innovative 'machine-to-machine' networks.

## Call for inputs on Emergency Caller Location Information

Ofcom has published a call for stakeholders' views on emergency caller location information ('ECLI') for mobile phones.

Ofcom's General Condition 4 requires communications providers to make accurate and reliable caller location information available for all calls to the emergency services. The document seeks views from stakeholders as to what (if any) concerns currently exist with respect to the accuracy and reliability of ECLI for mobile calls. The document further discusses if and how technologies such as smartphone mapping applications and enhanced mobile network capabilities could now, or in the future, help improve the accuracy and reliability of caller location information.

Communications providers, consumer groups, the emergency services and individuals are invited to contribute to Ofcom's preliminary examination of the opportunities and potential issues in this area. This may help inform Ofcom's future policies.

[The call for input](#) closes on 23 December 2013.

## Children's media use

Ofcom has published its 2013 [Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes](#) report, which provides detailed evidence on media use, attitudes and understanding among children and young people aged 5-15. It also provides detailed information about access to, and use of, media among children aged 3-4.

The report includes findings relating to parents' views about their children's media use, and the ways that parents seek to monitor or limit such use.

Among the report's findings are:

- There has been a decline in the number of 5-15s owning a mobile phone;
- The use of tablet computers at home has tripled among 5-15s since last year;
- Children's preference for internet-enabled devices reflects changes in how and why they are going online;
- For the first time there has been a decrease in the number of children with social



networking profiles; and

- Most parents of 5-15s say that they know enough to keep their child safe online; but around half of parents feel that their child knows more about the internet than they do.

Ofcom has also published the report's underlying [questionnaire and data tables](#).

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