

Minutes of the 89th meeting of the Advisory Committee for England, connected meeting at Riverside House and via Teams on 3 October 2024

Present

| | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Paula Carter | Chair |
| Aaqil Ahmed | Member |
| Grant Davis | Member |
| Caroline Gardner | Member (via Teams) |
| Edleen John | Member |
| Mauro Mortali | Member |

In attendance

| | |
|--|--|
| Dekan Apajee | Ofcom Content Board Member for England (via Teams, mins 8 - 9) |
| Angela Dean | Ofcom Board Member for England |
| Michelle Goddard | Communications Consumer Panel Member (mins 1 – 15) |
| Stephen Darke | Director, England |
| David Edwards | Governance Manager |
| Colleagues from Deloitte | |
| Colleagues from the Independent Networks Cooperative Association | |
| Other Ofcom colleagues | |

Introduction

1. The Chair welcomed Members and attendees, in particular Michelle Goddard who, in the absence of Richard Spencer, was an observer representing the Communications Consumer Panel.

Declaration of Members' Interests

2. Aaqil Ahmed declared a factual TV commission from the BBC to be shot in Bradford in 2025. No additional interests were declared.

Minutes of the meeting held on 6 June 2024 and matters arising – Minutes 88(23)

3. Subject to minor amendment, the minutes of the meeting held on 6 June 2024 were **APPROVED** for signature by the Chair as an accurate record. Slides presented for an agenda item at that meeting on UK economic/ geographic disparities would be shared with Members by email.

Ofcom Board update

4. Angela Dean summarised some recent topics considered by the Board (minutes and notes of meetings being available on the Ofcom website). The Board had met three times since the last Committee meeting.

5. At its June 2024 meeting, and at subsequent meetings, the Board was updated and discussed relicensing of Channel 4, including Made Outside England quotas. At its July meeting topics discussed included Ofcom's communications strategy and plans to increase public awareness of the organisation amongst harder to reach audiences and

stakeholders; a post-election update, the volume of election-related standards complaints being noted and that the Ofcom Election Committee had not been required to convene; and a briefing on new Ministers at DSIT and DCMS. At the September meeting, the Board discussed topics including Ofcom's online safety roadmap; spectrum (including a space spectrum update); Ofcom's Three-Year Plan; and financial resilience in Ofcom's regulated sectors.

6. The Committee was interested to hear about the communications strategy, levels of awareness of Ofcom amongst different groups and whether greater awareness could lead to greater engagement with Ofcom.

7. The Committee noted senior Executive changes, with the appointment of Natalie Black as the new Group Director, Networks and Communications, and as a new Executive Member of the Ofcom Board. Meanwhile Lindsey Fussell, her predecessor in those roles, would move to be Interim Group Director, Online Safety Group following the recent departure of Gill Whitehead.

Content Board update

8. Dekan Apajee reported on recent topics considered by the Content Board (minutes being available on the Ofcom website). The Content Board had met earlier in the week and topics discussed had included the statutory framework for Ofcom's broadcast standards decisions; an open discussion about due impartiality; a deep dive on the audio aspects of Media Act 2024 implementation; and updates on Ofcom's work on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) reporting for the broadcast sector and on Channel 4 relicensing.

9. EDI was of interest to Members of the Committee and the Chair suggested that conversations with Dekan could continue outside the meeting.

Consumer Panel update – ACE 13(24)

10. Members noted an update paper reporting on recent Communications Consumer Panel (CCP) activity and current priorities (minutes of meetings being available on the Panel's website). A colleague from the CCP flagged that recruitment was in train to fill vacancies on the Panel; a 'think-piece' commissioned in collaboration with Ofcom that invites more inclusivity in the way market research is conducted¹ (with disabled people and people with long-term conditions); postal services, 2G/3G switch-off and digital voice (VoIP migration) continued to generate the Panel's interest.

11. Committee Members picked up on 2G/3G switch-off, commenting that a useful additional metric would be capacity (bars displayed on mobile phones/ relative signal strength) and noting the potential safety risks related to emergency call services in motor vehicles currently reliant on 2G/3G SIMs. The Chair confirmed that the Panel could rely on the Committee's support as it maintained a watch on these issues.

¹ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/equity-and-diversity/inclusive-research/>

Public Policy update – ACE 14(24)

12. A range of issues were flagged including post-election ministerial changes and their shadows; Labour’s manifesto commitment to create a Regulatory Innovation Office (RIO), more information could be provided on the RIO when its role became clearer; a new Modernisation Committee in the House of Commons, which could put MP’s second jobs under the spotlight, including media roles; that Ofcom was in the process of implementing the Media Act 2024, including radio and audio provisions and work on a VOD code; it was noted that the King’s Speech did not include a specific Bill on AI regulation, instead setting out the need for regulation in this area but without providing specific details; and a substantial fine levied on Tik Tok in July for providing inaccurate data on parental safety controls to protect children from harmful content.

Deloitte – Global Consumer Trends

13. Colleagues from Deloitte had been invited to update the Committee on Global Consumer Trends in communications (following a similar presentation in November 2023). Deloitte findings continued to indicate that consumers had entered the ‘era of enough’.

14. Highlights included satisfaction amongst four in five consumers with their current broadband; reliability was more important than super-fast technology; and around 40% were not aware of their broadband speeds, an indication that speeds were sufficient. For mobile services there appeared to be limited use for any future 6G services, whilst an issue for consumers was indoor coverage, with 4G better than 5G. The most used devices were Smartphones, then Smart TVs, then laptops. No (game changing) new apps or devices were on the horizon. Regarding AI, 40% of UK consumers were unaware of it and only 4 in 100 utilised it on a daily basis.

15. In discussion about ‘missing data’ related to mobile services, a Member flagged network capacity, whilst Deloitte colleagues highlighted data usage per SIM broken down by quartile or quintile, as this would reveal variations in usage of cellular networks between light and heavy users. Deloitte slides would be shared with Members for information.

Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA)

16. The new CEO and colleagues from INCA had been invited to discuss both the role of the Association and competitive digital infrastructure in the UK. INCA, a membership body founded in 2009, represented the Altnets (alternative network providers).

17. Topics flagged by INCA included the number of premises passed by Altnets; investment to end 2023 and challenges; One Touch Switching; pole (infrastructure) sharing; relevant regulation; the role of Ofcom’s Openreach Monitoring Unit; and the suggestion of strategic overbuild by incumbents. INCA slides would be shared with Members for information.

Public Service Media review – ACE 15(24)

18. In the first phase of its PSM review, Ofcom would seek to explain how the PSBs had delivered for UK audiences over the last five years (2019 to 2023) and examine also how other providers of news and entertainment had contributed to PSM provision, including other relevant online and broadcast services. The review, in phase two, would

consider how best to secure public service content in the longer term and the availability of high quality and accurate news that audiences could trust. The Executive aimed to publish the review of past performance in winter 2024/25 and, following stakeholder engagement, a phase two findings document in Summer 2025.

19. Aware of the importance of local democracy, the Committee welcomed the inclusion of local news in the review's assessment of PSM news provision. The Committee noted that Ofcom had published its annual news consumption report² (in September) and a link to the report would be shared with Members. Topics raised by the Committee included sustainability and funding of local and community radio, local advertising being an income stream; what was understood by "news" and the issues of misinformation and disinformation; the erosion of trust in news, mistrust in experts and a preference for opinionated content amongst certain groups; whether regulatory tools remained appropriate in a changing media landscape; diversity of audiences and a need to understand how/ whether they were being served.

Ofcom Plan of Work 2025/26 – ACE 16(24)

20. The Committee noted that work was underway to develop the Ofcom Plan of Work 2025-26, its structure to be aligned with the upcoming Three-Year Plan and its four 'priority outcomes': internet and post we can rely on; media we trust and value; living a safer life online; and enabling wireless in the UK economy. There would be a consultation in December (closing early February 2025), consultation events in each of the Nations to engage with stakeholders and publication of the final Plan in March 2025.

21. Whilst noting that elements of the Plan of Work would be dictated by Ofcom's ongoing duties, Members commented that, in addition to trust and value, relevance was also an important media consideration; and that with the pace of change Ofcom would need to remain on the front foot, in relation to online safety, for example, where platforms could suddenly transform from low to high risk. Referring to consultation events, it was suggested that, when possible, linking these to other public or cultural events could boost engagement and participation.

Future of Wireless Connectivity – ACE 17(24)

22. Ofcom was working to develop a ten-year vision for the future of wireless broadband connectivity, an aim being to secure positive outcomes for consumers and enterprises.

23. Issues discussed with the Committee included trends for investment, related to deployment and demand for 5G services and potential for 6G services; whether capacity was more important than connection speeds; and the role of satellite services, in resilience and for device-to-device services, e.g. in remote areas and emergency scenarios. It was noted that the project would seek to identify any gaps, and the regulatory tools to address them, between today's wireless sector and the ten-year vision that emerges.

² [News consumption in the UK 2024 report](#)

Connected Nations 2024 – ACE 18(24)

24. In line with previous years, the annual Connected Nations report for 2024 would include a UK report, four Nations reports, and interactive dashboards with a suite of data products.

25. Whilst the various reports would include coverage data for networks (fixed and wireless), the Committee flagged capacity as being potentially a useful measure and noted that coverage without capacity impacted usability. Definitions of rural and urban and related data split were raised, whilst being noted that Ofcom's practice was to use standard statistical measures that allowed data analysis at Local Authority and Westminster constituency levels. It was further noted that reporting format consistent with past years would allow stakeholders to compare data across time series and this led the Committee to suggest that the most significant changes be highlighted in the executive summary of the report.

Members' open session

26. There were brief reflections on earlier agenda items, including the views shared by INCA and the issue of overbuild by incumbents; the issues of local news and local democracy; and on recent broadcast standards complaints.

Future agendas

27. The next Committee meeting would be held at Ofcom's office in Manchester. Ofcom was planning to publish its second Local Media Review report in November and a Member suggested local news as a topic for discussion at the November meeting. It was further suggested that a follow-up session could be held with media students (the Committee engaged with a group from Bury College as part of its meeting in Manchester in December 2022).

Information items

28. Broadcast, Postal and Telecoms data (England) – ACE 19(24): The paper was noted.

Any Other Business

29. There was no other business.

Date of the Next Meeting

30. The next scheduled Committee meeting would be held on 28 November 2024.