

**Minutes of the 91<sup>st</sup> meeting of  
the Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland  
held hybrid (at Landmark House, Belfast and via Microsoft Teams)  
on Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**Present**

Carrie Matchett	ACNI Chair
Aodhan O'Donnell	ACNI Member
Jackie Neill	ACNI Member
Michael Wilson	ACNI Member
Paul Wickens	ACNI Member
Karen Baxter	Ofcom Board Member for Northern Ireland (via Teams)
Maria McCann	Content Board Member for Northern Ireland
Rick Hill	Chair & NI Member of Communications Consumer Panel

**In attendance**

Jonathan Rose	Northern Ireland Director
Judith Carville	Regulatory Affairs Manager
James Stinson	Regulatory Affairs Manager
Bimpe Archer	Regulatory Affairs Manager
Jane Hillis	Regulatory Affairs Advisor

NextGen NED observer

Kate Biggs	Public Policy Director
Lindsey Fussell	Networks & Communications Director (via Teams)
Representatives from BBC Northern Ireland	
Other Ofcom Colleagues (via Teams)	

**Apologies**

Colm Murphy	ACNI Member
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**Item 1: Welcome, apologies and declaration of Members' Interests**

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, particularly this year's NextGen Non-Executive Director observer attending their first meeting and Kate Biggs, who was also attending in person.
2. Brief introductions were given for the NextGen NED and Kate's benefit.
3. Apologies were received from Colm Murphy.
4. Michael Wilson advised he would have to leave the meeting early.
5. Members did not have any interests to declare.

**Item 2: Minutes of the 90<sup>th</sup> meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023 and Actions**

6. The Minutes of the 90<sup>th</sup> meeting were approved with one change.
7. Members noted the Actions Table from the previous meeting and agreed all actions were complete, apart from an update on the Ofcom and Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum AI & Digital Hub pilot, which will be provided at the next meeting when the Hub has been launched.
8. A Committee member queried if the latest biannual Television Broadcasters in Ireland Group meeting, as mentioned in the 90<sup>th</sup> Minutes, had taken place at the beginning of the year. The Northern Ireland Director informed the Committee the meeting has not been held yet, but the Committee would be informed when a date is agreed.

**Item 3: Interim Committee Business & Issues since last meeting**

9. The Chair invited updates from Connectivity & Consumer and Broadcasting subgroups:  
Broadcasting
10. The subgroup lead reported on behalf of the Broadcasting subgroup:
11. Recent Consultations: Two substantial consultation responses had been submitted since the last ACNI meeting, Protecting People from Illegal Harms Online and Channel 4 licence renewal. The Committee noted the significant work involved. The subgroup lead encouraged members to read other Channel 4 licence renewal consultation submissions, as many reflected the ACNI's perspective.
12. Local media review: Ofcom colleagues visited Belfast and met with numerous stakeholders. The team would like to meet the ACNI at the end of Spring/start of Summer. This is planned as a subgroup event, but all Committee members would be welcome.
13. Channel 3/Channel 5 licences: The Committee noted that both current licence holders have applied for a renewal of their licence. They have until 22 March to accept or reject the financial terms set by Ofcom. After this, formal relicensing would take place.  
Connectivity & Consumer
14. The subgroup lead reported on behalf of the Connectivity & Consumer subgroup:
15. 2024/2025 planning: The subgroup met for the first time at the start of the year to plan & prioritise for the year ahead (using Ofcom's Plan of Work 24/25 as a reference), and to identify key areas of focus where they could have the biggest impact. This information was shared with Committee members.
16. Consultations: ACNI had submitted a response on inflation-linked price rises and the subgroup will be considering a response to the Call for Input on The Future of the Universal Postal Service in the coming weeks.
17. The Communications Consumer Panel member undertook to share the results of research the Panel had previously undertaken on Post.  
Online Harms

18. The Chair thanked colleagues on the subgroup for their work in developing ACNI's response to the consultation on Protecting People from Illegal Harms Online. The response had highlighted the need for the regulatory regime and guidance to reflect distinct ways in which illegal harms can present in NI, notably with regard to sectarianism and paramilitarism. The Committee looked forward to feedback from the project team in due course.

Chair's and other Business

19. The Chair acknowledged and thanked Committee members for the great deal of work they had put into recent consultations. She also noted ACNI's response to the Plan of Work consultation which had recently been submitted.

20. The Chair explained that the Committee usually held a planning meeting following the Plan of Work event each year. However, it was agreed that this wasn't necessary as this work had been taken forward in reconstituting the subgroups and their own forward plans. The Chair invited colleagues to consider which external guests the Committee might wish to invite in the coming year.

21. The Chair thanked members for making time for their 'annual contribution meetings' scheduled for the following week.

22. The Chair advised that the annual meeting of Advisory Committee Chairs with Ofcom's Chair & Chief Executive had not been rescheduled from November. The Chair would be keen for this to be held ASAP as it is a very beneficial meeting.

23. The Committee noted that the Ofcom Board would be visiting Belfast this November for their annual Nations meeting.

**Item 4: Committee discussion on Agenda items:**

24. Members discussed key items to raise in its discussions with BBC, the Resilience Team and Ofcom's Consumer Update, in items 7, 8 and 11.

25. The Chair suggested a structure for topics to discuss with the BBC to make best use of the time given.

**Item 5: Board update from Northern Ireland Member**

26. The Board member reported on the Board's recent February meeting, and highlighted several items discussed, including: the changing political context in which Ofcom is operating; the future of TV distribution and Ofcom's role; and updates from the World Radiocommunication Conference held in Dubai at the end of 2023, as well as Ofcom's work on the postal USO and Illegal Harms consultation.

27. The Committee discussed the Channel 4 relicensing process at length. They noted Channel 4's underinvestment in Northern Ireland throughout the current licence period, and the poor portrayal scores in audience research. They also noted the recent joint response of the screen agencies for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, calling for a larger out-of-England production quota for Channel 4, split pro-rata between the three nations.

28. The Board member agreed to raise these matters at the next Board meeting.

**Item 6: Content Board update from Northern Ireland Member**

29. The Board member reported on the Board's recent February meeting, and highlighted several items discussed, including: Channel 4 licence renewal, GB News complaints, AI,

advertising restrictions for products high in fat, salt and sugar, and people's sources of news.

30. The Chair requested the Content Board member share any relevant information/research that they can with the Committee.
31. The Committee noted the timings for the discussion of the Channel 4 relicensing process, and that decisions on the new licence would rest with Content Board. The Content Board member agreed to raise the concerns discussed earlier at the next Content Board meeting.

#### **Item 7: BBC Northern Ireland**

32. The Chair welcomed and thanked the BBC NI representatives for attending. The Chair noted the Committee's recognition of the BBC's contribution to Northern Ireland. The objective of the session was to discuss issues that would make the Committee better-placed to advise Ofcom.
33. The BBC NI representatives introduced themselves, thanked the Chair for the invitation and welcomed the Committee's interest.
34. Making introductory remarks, a BBC representative outlined some of the challenges facing the BBC, many of which were common to other broadcasters. They also noted that BBC NI's main objective was to achieve as much value as possible for local licence fee payers, while reflecting Northern Ireland to itself and also to the rest of the UK.
35. Committee members and BBC NI representatives discussed recent publicly announced changes to output and staffing at BBC NI, the audience and editorial impact of those announcements and the BBC's reputation more generally.
36. There was a discussion on the budgetary pressures facing BBC NI. BBC representatives noted that while the BBC is spending more money in Northern Ireland than ever before, and more than the licence fee generates here, there were challenges also in responding to the pace of technological change, inflationary pressures and the balance between digital and traditional linear output.
37. The Committee encouraged BBC NI to reach out to underserved audiences, and to be mindful that while the transition from linear to digital was inevitable, it would not suit everyone, and it was vital that no audience groups were left behind. BBC NI representatives advised they carry out regular audience research to help inform decisions.
38. There was a discussion on local digital content, and the Committee stressed the importance of making local content more prominent on the BBC news app, iPlayer and Sounds.
39. There was a discussion about TV commissioning. The Committee continued to support NI produced programmes for the networks but expressed concern that the new co-commissions model may come at the expense of the range and volume of non-news content aimed specifically at local audiences. Members were further concerned that this wouldn't lead to a further increase in network production from Northern Ireland, over and above the existing quota.
40. Committee members discussed future development plans for Broadcasting House in Belfast with the BBC NI representatives.
41. The Committee expressed their support for the appointment last year of the first BBC Board member for Northern Ireland, and expressed their hope that the appointment would bring greater representation and influence for Northern Ireland within the BBC.
42. The Chair thanked the BBC NI representatives for their time and the open and constructive discussion.

**Item 8: Resilience Project Team Update – Telecoms Networks**

43. The Chair welcomed the project team and thanked them for their presentation. The team gave brief introductions and advised that, although the public consultation had closed, they would still welcome comments from the Committee at this stage.
44. A Committee member noted the difference in appropriate resilience requirements in different parts of the UK, and between rural and urban areas. The Committee agreed and discussed how mobile network resilience in particular needed to be improved, as it is used as a fall back in an outage, particularly for people in rural areas.
45. The team advised that the aim of the call for input was to get as much information as possible to inform potential solutions and that they are actively engaging with stakeholders to get more granular Northern Ireland data. The Committee encouraged the team to discuss their work with the NI Utility Regulator, and to also consider the impact of the NIS Directive and the Shared Rural Network in Northern Ireland.
46. Members further noted the importance of good consumer information and advice in relation to resilience issues, and also cautioned against any actions which might inadvertently increase costs for consumers.

**Item 9: Communications Consumer Panel update**

47. The Panel member introduced their paper and noted the Panel's continued concern regarding awareness of migration to VOIP. Data from the Panel's 4<sup>th</sup> piece of research in this area showed over a third of the public are still not aware of the switch to VOIP.
48. The Panel member also noted forthcoming ITV programmes on consumer related topics including the Royal Mail and consumers who are left disconnected as a result of the switch from PSTN to VOIP.

**Item 10: Online Safety report**

49. Bimpe Archer introduced her paper and updated members on the Protection of Children and Making Sense of Media strategy consultations being published in the months ahead. She also noted the feedback to date on the Illegal Harms consultation and thanked the Committee for their detailed engagement and written response.
50. Bimpe agreed to direct members to upcoming Online Safety webinars and events which may be of interest. She also agreed to invite ACNI members to stakeholder discussion groups as part of the engagement plans for the Protection of Children consultation.
51. A Committee member warned that 'stakeholder weariness' is a potential concern with so many Online Safety consultations. Bimpe advised that Ofcom acknowledged this risk and is taking mitigating steps.
52. One member stressed the importance of working and learning from other regulators, Bimpe reassured the Committee that Ofcom was in close contact with their Irish counterpart, Coimisiún na Meán.

**Item 11: Ofcom Consumer Update**

53. The Chair welcomed Lindsey Fussell to the meeting. Lindsey introduced herself and stressed the importance of the Committee and other advisory bodies for the different perspectives they bring to Ofcom's consumer work.
54. Lindsey reflected on the current consumer issues noted in her paper and invited the Committee's comments.

55. A Committee member noted the importance of what affordability means specifically for Northern Ireland consumers and the different demographics and markets here, as they can differ from the rest of the UK. Members discussed how the cost-of-living crisis is a huge problem for Northern Ireland, with average disposable income in Northern Ireland significantly lower than anywhere else in the UK.
56. A Committee member noted the low uptake in social tariffs in Northern Ireland and asked what more could be done to promote them, while acknowledging Ofcom's limited resources.
57. A Committee member asked what powers Ofcom has when it comes to Mobile Network Operators and fair practice.
58. The Committee asked whether focus was still being put on Ofcom's 'Fairness Commitments' as members considered them an important part of Ofcom's consumer protection work. Lindsey reassured members that the Fairness Commitments were still in place and helped frame Ofcom's enforcement work, although due to resource restrictions there was reduced reporting on them.
59. The Chair thanked Lindsey for a helpful discussion of a range of issues which are especially important to consumers in NI.
60. Michael Wilson left the meeting.

#### **Item 12: Public Policy update**

61. The Chair welcomed Kate Biggs to the meeting. Kate highlighted a number of matters from her paper, including: the potential impact of a general election on Ofcom's work; the progress of the Media Bill through Parliament; and a proposed 'Growth Duty' for Ofcom and the utility regulators.
62. Kate agreed to share Ofcom's submission to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into the future of news.
63. The Committee discussed the BBC's planned launch of new DAB+ extension stations and Ofcom's role in that process, as well as Ofcom's forthcoming review of Public Service Media.
64. The Committee expressed concern at the delay in the industry's introduction of the 'One Touch Switching' process for telecoms consumers, and questioned Ofcom's response to the delay. Kate explained Ofcom's position and Judith agreed to provide a further update.

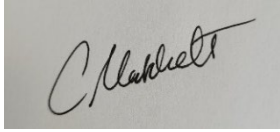
#### **Item 13: Any other Business**

65. The Committee formally noted two additional papers provided: the NI Directors report and Mobile Roaming Protections.
66. The NI Board member confirmed the Board's approval of a one year extension to the term of the Committee Chair, and a second term for a Committee member. The Board member explained that these extensions would help to ensure continuity and experience for the Committee.
67. The Chair noted that this was the last Committee meeting for the Communications Consumer Panel Chair and Northern Ireland member, Rick Hill, whose term on the Panel would finish before the next ACNI meeting. The Chair thanked Rick for the way he had enriched the work of the Committee and for the huge contribution he had made on behalf of consumers in NI and across the UK. Rick thanked the Chair and the Committee for making his time at Ofcom so enjoyable and fulfilling.

**Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next scheduled Committee meeting would be held on Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

**Approved:**

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'C. Makle...'.

**Date:** 20<sup>th</sup> June 2024