



**OFCOM CONSULTATION DOCUMENT ON THE REVIEW OF THE UNIVERSAL
SERVICE OBLIGATION.
HEARING CONCERN RESPONSE**

Preamble

Hearing Concern is a membership organisation with the aim of enabling hard of hearing people to participate fully in society. It is estimated that there are, of the order of, 9 million hard of hearing people in the UK with, in addition, an extensive network of families, friends and work/education colleagues. Hard of hearing people include those in the early stages of losing their hearing, hearing aid users and text users. It covers all age groups although many will be older.

In the context of telecommunications, most of these people communicate using speech and residual hearing, although, for the more severely affected people, other forms of support will be required. Equivalent access to telecommunications at equivalent cost is vital for hard of hearing people.

The Telecommunications Committee of Hearing Concern deals with access to telecommunications for hard of hearing people.

Prime issues

Our concern is for hard of hearing customers so this response will focus on Section 6 of the consultation document.

There are still some basic issues that need addressing and these are dealt with in Comment 3. We believe that a large number of hard of hearing users would benefit from some form of voice support and we should like to see Ofcom being pro-active, investigating the concept of voice support, considering solutions and encouraging innovation. (Comment 6)

Comments

1) SRT2

The separation of current and future USO issues between this consultation and the Strategic Review has proved difficult. As a result some of our comments here may belong to SRT2 but we understand that they will still be considered.

With respect to mobile and broadband we understand that the Strategic Review of Telecommunications will look at the broader policy issues such as extending USO to broadband and the use of mobile to fulfil USO requirements (2.7). We hope that the consultations around SRT2 and USO will address these issues in a properly comprehensive way.

2) The basis of the USO

We agree wholeheartedly with the comment in 2.1 in regard to the positive developments in telecommunications and access to the internet.

However, this leads on to "These positive developments have not been shared by everyone; Universal Service aims to make the benefits available to all sectors of our society. USO provides a safety net that ensures basic fixed line services are available at an affordable price

to all citizen-customers across the UK.” We believe that this statement epitomises the negative as well as the positive aspects of USO as it stands.

The statement refers to a "safety net" and "fixed line services". We regard the former as an indicator of failure - although a safety net is vital under current conditions. Were inclusive design central to telecommunications systems and equipment, then disabled user issues would be built into the design process rather than tagged on afterwards and needing a safety net. The latter is out of date as mobile and IP based services develop.

Discussion of USO costs centres on the costs and benefits to service providers whereas we should like it to tackle the costs and benefits to all consumers also.

We believe that Ofcom should be looking ahead in a positive manner, considering how services can be developed to maximise inclusion of all citizen-consumers in this vital aspect of our lives. We can understand that Ofcom may be wary of being pro-active as one might assume that competition will lead to development of services. However, as regards minority groups (although 9 million hearing impaired people is surely a large minority) competition is unlikely to result in parity with other consumers as regards technological change and the industry will need encouragement.

3) Basic Issues

Clarity and volume of the speech signal, telephone coupling to hearing aids and the availability of suitable terminals are vital for hard of hearing telephone users.

Hard of hearing people are often walking on a tightrope during a telephone conversation.

Any reduction in clarity or volume has a disproportionate effect on such users. For home use, hard of hearing users tend to purchase handsets with inductive coupling and increased clarity and volume but are dependant on standards handsets elsewhere. Although including inductive coupling in a handset is relatively cheap and easy, not all handsets available on the market have inductive coupling, nor is it's existence always clear on the packaging so that hard of hearing people still have problems when purchasing a new handset.

It is sometimes said that inductive coupling is old technology. However, this is not an argument for equipment suppliers and service providers to ignore inductive coupling. There is a huge base of inductive systems for home and public loop systems as well as on telephones and the demise of the BlueEar project demonstrates that improved methods of coupling will not be available in the foreseeable future.

Mobile telephones are still incompatible with most hearing aids. Despite years of complaint, this issue is still a problem for hard of hearing users. We request Ofcom to consider similar legislation to the FCC ruling that manufacturers must make some hearing aid compatible digital phones available by 2006.

We expect Ofcom to monitor the situation to ensure that equivalent access to services through existing telecommunications systems, especially those involving the use of voice, are safeguarded.

4) Broadband

There are several references to broadband being outside of the remit of USO as it stands.

However, some of the developments mentioned (eg a video relay) will depend on IP protocols so that exclusion seems inappropriate.

Many services are accessed by means of broadband, and represent a good means of access for deaf and hard of hearing people, as borne out by the findings of the City University Survey. However, an area that requires consideration is support in the case of internet (broadband or otherwise) failure. Currently when there are problems with the internet, it is necessary to make a telephone call to seek help. This is not an accessible form of communication for a hard of hearing person, who may already be very stressed by loss of a vital source of

communication (which for many deaf and hard of hearing people, is what the internet has become)

5) Relay services

Section 6 concentrates on relay services although there are other issues that we shall refer to later. In some respects relay services using a third person are an admission of failure. Certainly, in face-to-face communication, people prefer to communicate directly rather than rely on a third person. We should like to see Ofcom to have as a horizon a situation where all consumers can communicate directly with others by their chosen method. This is currently a tall order but we should have this as an aim for developments in technology.

We welcome the consideration of web-based access to relay services as this will increase choice and facilitate experimentation. Although we recognise the problem of free access we would point out that many free systems and software are now available on the internet in general and do not seem to have resulted in undue problems.

We are not qualified to comment on the current text relay although many hard of hearing people are unwilling to use it.

We welcome consideration of a video relay although, whilst we understand Ofcom's preference to a feasibility study, we wish to point out that RNID are already trialling a service so that there is no cause for undue delay. There is a problem of availability of BSL interpreters but broader consideration may find that a video relay service could ameliorate the situation rather than lead to further shortages.

Our main concern is consideration of a voice support relay and this is dealt with separately below.

6) A voice support relay

There is a very large group of hard of hearing people who prefer to use voice telephony but have difficulty doing so. They do not sign and find text-phones difficult. There are no hard data but estimates range from about 400,000 to 1 million people in this difficult position. These people would benefit from systems where speech is supported by text or video (for lip-reading).

Some of our members have trialled Captel, a commercial relay service where the recipient has a small text display on their phone and the transcription is by an intermediary who uses trained speech recognition software to speed up the transcription. (Of course we trial and cite Captel to illustrate the technical feasibility, with its pros and cons, but in no way endorse it) Captel is expensive, available only during business hours and has to be booked in advance. Last summer, we ran a short article in the Hearing Concern magazine and readers were asked to write in. The response was much greater than we would normally expect, saying that it would be eminently suitable for them and asking for such a relay service to be available at equitable cost.

Ideally, one would like to see a system whereby a hard of hearing user buys a telephone with a real-time text display and the caller is unaware of any transcription. However, we have to accept that, in the medium term, viable voice recognition software may not be available and transcription services using an intermediary are the only practical solution.

Captel currently will do the job but its proprietary nature might well stifle development by others. Therefore, whilst a Captel based relay service would offer an immediate solution, we should also like to see Ofcom investigating and encouraging a variety of developments to give text support to speech.

An obvious solution would be to develop Typetalk so that parallel voice and text are possible. The user then might listen to the caller but be able to observe text on a "text-phone". Typetalk would probably need to reduce the transcription delay time to compete with Captel.

However, the advent of VoIP offers the possibility of innovation and competition. If VoIP protocols were to include parallel voice, text and video, then a window would be open for competing organisations to offer voice support with reduced transcription delay, simplicity of use, better terminals, lip-reading support, lip-speaking etc. With the extra number of potential users, potential income might generate competition.

We should like to see Ofcom being pro-active, considering solutions and encouraging innovation. We would ask Ofcom to consider a feasibility study as a first step.

7) Annex G G29 & G30

We warmly welcome this consideration of terminal equipment. Hearing Concern has long protested that restriction to networks and services makes a mockery of the needs of hard of hearing users for whom the handset has been the important issue.

We wish to point out that hearing aid users are still not catered for in mobile telephones. Although the hearing aid manufacturers have worked hard and made modern aids resistant to mobile interference, even they suffer from interference when the user needs to use inductive coupling. Users of analogue hearing aids (the majority) find it impossible to use a mobile phone.

We welcome your mention that equipment should be capable of being used by the widest possible range of individuals and should be widely available.

We look forward to Ofcom's proposals for how it should carry out its duties in this respect.

8) Specific Ofcom questions

Our remaining comments can be included under the specific questions raised in the consultation document. We shall only comment on those questions of special relevance to hard of hearing users.

1. What should be the arrangements for funding USO in future?

We agree that the current arrangement may not be relevant as both technology and competition change and that a "Universal Service Fund" may be appropriate. We would prefer to see a direct or indirect levy rather than direct Government funding.

2. How could competition for the delivery of USO be organised in future?

We can see the advantages of a competitive approach. However, this will only be viable when Ofcom has solved the issue of quality of service and how quality is to be measured. Certainly, we would not be in favour of an auction based on price alone.

3. Should mobile technologies be used to help address the existing USO?

We see no reason why mobile and broadband technologies should not be used to deliver USO. However, Ofcom already mentions the problems for broadband equity and we believe that equity has to be central to decisions about delivery of USO via a particular technology. For instance, current gsm mobile phones are still incompatible with hearing aids and we are concerned about the quality of VoIP voice services for hard of hearing people who will suffer more than most if voice quality deteriorates. We understand that voice quality can deteriorate when system traffic is high and we are particularly concerned about emergency use.

8. Comments are invited on the approach to defining a Universal Service PCB, in particular on:

whether the use of an algorithm would be a practical, effective, transparent mechanism for defining a USO PCB; and if so the factors that might be included in the algorithm; whether there are other alternative methods of defining a USO PCB that could be considered.

Although we recognize that the algorithm is designed primarily for siting issues, we wish to emphasize that PCBs should be designed appropriately for disabled users. For instance, the handset must offer amplification and inductive coupling if hearing aid users are to be able to use the PCB. We would also ask that USO be extended to all PCBs including those on private premises (managed payphones). Emergencies often arise on privately owned premises.

10. Comments are invited on the introduction of emergency and freephone call boxes. In what circumstances could they replace the PCB? Should the local public body have to consent if they are to replace the last PCB on a site?

Access to emergency services are an important issue for hard of hearing people who have problems with normal telephone access. We believe that PCBs should facilitate access to both public emergency services (fire, police and ambulance) and private services such as vehicle recovery. We would also hope for a facility to contact friends and family when necessary.

11. Do you agree that a feasibility study of a video relay service should be carried out? Comments are invited on the scope of such a study.

We do not favour a long, drawn out feasibility study of video relay services. The RNID are already offering a trial service and the experience of this should surely be sufficient for the bulk of any study? If the aim of the study were to be focussed on the cost of providing a video relay, then we would oppose. Although the numbers are likely to be small, the national cost is likely to be proportionately small especially as a video relay service may well reduce the crisis in BSL interpreter provision.

12 Ofcom invites views on a Stakeholder Advisory Panel including the membership and terms of reference of such a Panel.

We observe several problems in the current arrangements with BT providing funding and RNID running the service and a Stakeholder Advisory Panel may offer a solution. However, such a body will be vital if relay services become open to auction and if more than one service comes on offer.

We would suggest that the Consumer Panel and the Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People have a large say on membership and terms of reference although we imagine that neither group will be in a position to carry out the duties of the Panel.

13 Do you agree that the relay service could publish an annual plan and report? Yes. We believe that Typetalk already does this in part.

15 Do you agree that Option 2 (ie maintain existing obligations) offers the best opportunity for improving the accessibility of public call boxes?

We are of the opinion that maintaining the existing obligations together with an obligation to consult is the best option. We have cooperated in the design of roadside emergency service telephones and found that this resulted in more acceptable designs. We would like to see reference to inductive coupling in Sections 6.24 and 6.25, as it is understood that there is a requirement for coupling to be considered along with amplification. We also believe that the 70% requirement should be changed to 100% - which we understand reflects the BT callbox situation.

G1 Supplementary question: (Annex G). Do you agree that communications providers should be required to consult Ofcom to ensure that the requirements and interests of disabled End-users are fully taken into account in the development and provision of services?

We believe that this is a vital issue. Some service providers may not be interested in disabled users but some may simply be ignorant of the details of the needs of disabled users. Therefore, we consider it vital for service providers to be *required* to consult in regard to the needs of disabled users. If the remit of the Panel prevents direct consultation, we would agree with the consultation being with Ofcom as long as Consumer Panel advice is sought by Ofcom.

21. Do respondents consider a more detailed assessment of cost and benefits should be undertaken once the new USO regime is in place?

One clear omission from the assessment is any consideration of consumers. They too have costs that arise from poor USO provision and benefits from good USO provision. The assessment should not be based simply on the potential “unfair burden” on the provider.