



**OFCOM CONSULTATION DOCUMENT ON THE REVIEW OF THE UNIVERSAL SERVICE OBLIGATION 30th June 2005.
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 Working Group of Hearing Concern deals with access to telecommunications for hard of hearing people and we welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation. Our comments relate primarily to Section 6: Services for customers with disabilities.

General

We are pleased to observe that Ofcom has responded positively to many of the comments made by consumer stakeholders.

Ofcom's conclusion on the relay service

We are pleased to see that Ofcom intends to investigate alternative relay provision (6.11 & 6.12), in particular captioned telephony. As you will know from our previous response, several members of Hearing Concern have commented that Captel meets many of their needs and we look forward to your investigation. If Hearing Concern can help in any way, we should be pleased to do so.

Ofcom's conclusion on a Stakeholder Advisory Panel

We welcome the establishment of an Advisory Panel (6.16).

We would agree with the proposal that the panel should address quality issues (6.20) and we should like to suggest also consideration of development issues. We believe that the relay service should not stagnate but actively consider technical and other possibilities to maximise the value of the service to disabled users.

Ofcom's conclusions on the accessibility of public call boxes

We welcome the approach to improving accessibility in 6.37 and look forward to the one-day event.

Although we should like to see a faster moving incremental approach to accessibility requirements (6.38), we welcome the change from 75 to 80% proposed for General Condition 6 and the proposal to restore the inductive coupling requirement. However, when we read the actual proposal (6.3 a iv – page 73), we find no mention of inductive coupling in the rather convoluted paragraph. We assume that the text is designed to allow other forms of coupling in

the future. However, with the installed base of hearing aids and loop systems, we cannot see inductive coupling being sidelined for many years to come so we would prefer explicit mention of inductive coupling.

We do not agree with the conclusion that there should be no extension to “managed payphones” (6.39). Even if there is no evidence that managed payphones are less accessible, we cannot see why they should not be included. They are open for use by the public and, therefore, should be just as accessible as PCBs. Even if the current generation of managed payphones are accessible (and we have no good evidence), Ofcom cannot guarantee that any new versions are accessible unless they are included in the provision.

SMS access to the emergency services

We welcome Ofcom's support of the Emergency SMS Sub-Group of the 999/112 Liaison Committee. We trust that Ofcom will consider its duties when the Sub-Group completes its work.

Accessible communications apparatus

We welcome Ofcom's recognition of the importance of accessible and affordable terminal equipment so that people with disabilities can use telephony services (6.53). The exclusion of terminal equipment from all regulation and discussion of telecommunications services has been a running sore for many years for hard of hearing people who feel excluded from the benefits of development that they see offered to other users. We welcome the idea of work at European level on e-Accessibility. However, we believe that Ofcom and HM Government should also consider firm UK action. Hard of hearing users here envy their American counterparts who have government support in terms of FCC rules for hearing aid compatible digital wireless phones (for example).

We welcome the recognition that Ofcom has a duty to encourage others to develop accessible equipment (6.54). However, we wish to point out that disabled users consider special equipment as second best and prefer normal, mainstream equipment to be accessible. We accept that, in some situations, special equipment is the only option. However, we suspect that mainstream suppliers often rely on the fact that there are specialist suppliers in order to make life easier for themselves. For instance, hearing aid users would like to be able to clam a mobile phone to their ear just like anyone else but they have to make use of cumbersome, specially purchased neck-loops that are not compatible between makes. Meanwhile, it is uncertain what mobile phone manufacturers are doing to resolve phone radiation problems.

We note (6.55) that Ofcom intends to “focus on those types of communications apparatus in daily use by consumers where available research indicates consumers find particular difficulty”. We suggest that telephones (and mobile phones in particular) come into this category as regards hard of hearing people. Most hearing aid users would like to be able to purchase normal telephones with inductive coupling and volume control that they can use with their hearing aid set to T. The majority of cordless land-line phones on sale are DECT and, like digital mobile phones are incompatible with most hearing aids. Many of us happily use telephones specially designed for us – although this does generate a degree of isolation from the family. However, it would be better to be able to choose a mainstream phone that suits the rest of the family or to be able to use someone else's phone when visiting.

We appreciate the intention to make use of the Consumer Panel, ACOD and the Consumer Forum to assist Ofcom and we are sure that they will support the call for inclusive design rather than specialist equipment.

Funding USO

Section 8 emphasises cost benefit analyses for the provision of USO. Although we are not in a position to comment on the relative costs and benefits as regards PCBs etc, we wish to point

out that other issues arise when one considers services for customers with disabilities. We would like to see a much broader consideration of USO funding. We appreciate that BT places considerable emphasis on its duties to disabled users. However, with the best will in the world, there will be financial pressures to limit activities as funding has to come from BT. Some form of universal fund, together with competitive provision of services would eliminate the drawbacks associated with the funder being also the manager and allow a fair distribution of costs between BT and other land-line service providers, mobile service providers etc.

Please note

One of our members, Mrs. Vivienne Pozo has responded directly to Mr Buckley in her personal capacity. We have seen this response and agree with all her comments – some of which expand and add further information to the above, especially as regards terminal equipment.

We have also had sight of the very detailed TAG response and wish to express our support for their comments.