

By email

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Dear Stakeholder

Voice over Broadband (VoB) services and consumer protection

This letter contains information about Ofcom's approach to consumer protection for Voice over Broadband (VoB) services and the need for providers to make certain that consumers are aware of what facilities their VoB service does and does not provide, in particular whether the service offers access to Emergency Organisations (999 and 112).

Background

Ofcom welcomes the introduction of new VoB services that have the potential to offer consumers lower prices and greater choice. Ofcom uses 'Voice over Broadband' as a loose descriptive term for voice services delivered over broadband networks such as cable and DSL, and recognises the wide range of services that might be offered - for example, services delivered over private IP networks and the public Internet, primary and secondary services, etc.

On 25 February Ofcom held a discussion group meeting on VoB. This meeting was the first step in Ofcom's process of consulting with stakeholders on VoB services. A note of the discussions can be found at – http://www.ofcom.org.uk/ind_groups/ind_groups/telecommunications/vob/?a=87101

A number of important issues were raised by stakeholders at the meeting including numbering and interconnection arrangements for VoB and the interpretation of the definition of Publicly Available Telephone Services (PATS). Ofcom has also been made aware of many other issues through its discussions with stakeholders. Ofcom is currently considering these issues, and although some of this work is still being scoped and prioritised, we would like to provide as much transparency as possible to this process. Our current work includes:

- Consultation on numbering for VoB. The first part of this consultation has closed and the second part closes on 4 May 2004.

- Publication of 'VoIP Questions and Answers' in May 2004. This will indicate the status of our thinking on a number of issues and how these are being addressed.
- Ofcom's consultation on VoB, scheduled for June 2004, is expected to include the policy questions surrounding the PATS definition, access to emergency services and Ofcom's approach to consumer information.

Protecting consumers

This letter focuses on the provision of consumer information for services that do not offer access to Emergency Organisations (999, 112) but which look to the consumer like traditional telephone services.¹ In particular, this includes VoB services provided using an ordinary telephone handset with an adapter attached or using an IP telephone (rather than a PC or laptop). However, this letter does not replace and is not intended to pre-empt, Ofcom's forthcoming consultation (see above) which is expected to cover the broader issue of PATS and access to Emergency Organisations, as well as the future policy framework for consumer information.

At the stakeholder meeting on 25 February, there was general consensus among providers and consumer representatives that consumers of VoB services need to be made aware of what their services do and do not provide. In particular, all potential users (not just the purchaser of a service) need to be aware if a service does not provide access to Emergency Organisations

Ofcom is aware that an increasing number of VoB services are now being launched. Without pre-empting the consultation, Ofcom would like to strongly encourage all providers of non-PATS VoB services that are offered either as substitutes to normal telephone services, or could be regarded by the user as such, to provide clear information to consumers about what the service does and does not provide.

Most significantly, Ofcom would like to encourage providers to ensure that if the service looks like a normal telephone but does not provide access to 999 and 112, then clear information on this should be provided to all potential users of a service. This should include for example, colleagues, friends, babysitters and other visitors to the premises, and not just the purchaser. Some providers have suggested labelling of handsets as a solution, however Ofcom is open minded at this stage about the actual means used.

In addition, please let Ofcom know if you would be prepared to dedicate time to contribute to a self or co-regulatory working group for VoB consumer protection. Such a working group might, for example, work out the details of appropriate industry guidelines for consumer protection, although it would not be a replacement for formal consultation on Ofcom's policy in this area. If you are interested, please email vob@ofcom.org.uk.

¹ See Ofcom discussion paper Consumer protection for Voice over Broadband (January 2004) for further information
http://www.ofcom.org.uk/ind_groups/ind_groups/telecommunications/vob/?a=87101

Ofcom considers that by delivering transparency and providing good quality information to customers on the services on offer, providers will help foster consumer confidence in VoB services. This will encourage take-up of new services and will be to the benefit of the VoB market more widely.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Philip Rutnam". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Philip Rutnam
Partner, Competition and Markets, Ofcom