

**Minutes of the 75th meeting of
the Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland held at held at Ofcom
Belfast on Tuesday 10 March 2020**

Present

Carrie Matchett	ACNI Chair
John Ellison	ACNI Member
Phil Flanagan	ACNI Member
Kathy Graham	ACNI Member
Alan Meban	ACNI Member
Paul Wilson	ACNI Member

In attendance

Bob Downes	Ofcom Board Member for Scotland and Northern Ireland (Acting)
Rick Hill	Consumer Panel Chair and Member for Northern Ireland
Jonathan Rose	Director, Northern Ireland
Sinéad Lee	Regulatory Affairs Manager, Northern Ireland
Rebecca Lennon	Regulatory Affairs Advisor, Northern Ireland
Emma McFadyen	Public Policy Principal
James Stinson	Regulatory Affairs Manager, Northern Ireland

Other Ofcom colleagues

A colleague from Digital Radio UK (items 26 - 27)

Colleagues from Channel 4 Corporation (Items 36 - 41)

<p>Introduction</p> <p>1. The Chair welcomed members and attendees to the meeting. Angelina Fusco, Content Board Member for Northern Ireland, and Katie Pettifer, Ofcom's Director of Public Policy, were regular attendees but were unable to be present.</p>
<p>Declaration of Members' Interests – Oral</p> <p>2. No interests were declared by Members or attendees.</p>
<p>Minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2019 and matters arising – Minutes 74(20)</p> <p>3. The minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2019 were APPROVED for signature by the Chair as an accurate record and actions from the previous meeting were discussed.</p> <p>4. The Committee was advised that the Ofcom Statement on Small-Scale DAB was due out soon and would be circulated to Members.</p> <p>5. The Committee suggested that information leaflets produced on the Broadband USO should be available in accessible formats.</p>

6. It was **NOTED** that the NI Consumer Council had been invited to present to the Committee at a future meeting.

Interim Committee Business since last formal meeting – Oral

7. Informal Planning Meeting: Members had held a planning meeting at Raidió Fáilte on 10 February. The main purpose of the meeting was to agree the Committee's focus for the year ahead, based on Ofcom's proposed Plan of Work. A document outlining suggested priorities had been distributed to Members in advance.

8. It was suggested that Ofcom's work on the migration from PSTN to VOIP telephony services would be of interest to the Committee, as it was for the Communications Consumer Panel who had been briefed on progress recently.

9. It was **NOTED** that Brexit could present unforeseen consequences for Northern Ireland and the issue of potential additional charges and checks on parcels coming from Great Britain was raised.

10. There was a discussion on the Wholesale Fixed Telecoms Market Review, and specifically the changes to the proportions of Northern Ireland premises now in the potentially competitive and non-competitive areas. The Committee **AGREED** to finalise its consultation response, drafted by a sub-group of Members.

11. The Committee asked about the current status of the Department of the Economy's broadband investment programme – Project Stratum. Reports were **NOTED** that monies from the Confidence and Supply Agreement were no longer ringfenced for broadband and that DfE officials were due to give evidence to the Assembly's Economy Committee that week.

12. 'Recognition of Contribution': The Chair reported that all of the one-to-one discussions, focusing on how members could develop their contributions, had taken place. The meetings had also provided an opportunity to consider how the Committee could work better and what additional support might be needed, and the Chair outlined key themes from the conversations.

13. Advisory Committee Chair's meeting: The Chair reported on a conference-call with the Chairs of the other National Advisory Committees and this would be repeated to keep the Committees up to date with each other's work.

14. CCP Consumer Hub: The Chair had attended the first meeting of the Northern Ireland Consumer Hub in Belfast, organised by the Communications Consumer Panel. She reported that the range of attendees generated very useful conversations, and further feedback would be provided in the CCP update later in the meeting

15. UTV and U105: The Chair gave a brief overview of her visit to UTV and U105 offices and studios, with an Ofcom colleague.

16. The Chair thanked ACNI members for their contributions across the wide range of work progressed outside the Committee's formal meetings.

Committee discussion on Agenda items and papers

17. The Committee had a short discussion on the agenda items and papers, focusing particularly on Digital Radio and how listening was increasingly online.

For Information: Ofcom Board update

18. The Committee was briefed on recent Board meetings and **NOTED** the appointment of Ofcom's new Chief Executive.

19. The Committee discussed Ofcom's forthcoming powers in regulating video sharing platforms, and the challenge for Ofcom given the volume of content on these platforms, and the need to skill-up for these new duties.

20. The Committee was encouraged to consider how it could best play a role in this new online area, because while the regulation of online platforms could be seen as a 'global' issue, the consequences were local and felt by users in every corner of the UK.

Public Policy Update

21. Members **NOTED** a number of points. Following the recent Government announcement that it was minded to appoint Ofcom as the online harms regulator, Ofcom was engaging closely with Government as it finalised its policy positions ahead of the full response in the spring, with legislation following in the Autumn. This would be a major programme of work internally to deliver such duties and Ofcom was currently focusing on the skills needed in this area. The Government's Consumer and Competition Command Paper was delayed until summer 2020. It was possible that DCMS could appoint the Consumer Council NI as the body for Consumer Advocacy in Northern Ireland. BEIS consumer forum meetings were delayed due to coronavirus affecting timings.

22. On Tuesday, the Government had announced it had reached agreement with the UK's mobile network operators to build the Shared Rural Network (SRN) to improve 4G mobile coverage through a combination of commercial and public investment.

23. It was **NOTED** that the current situation of coronavirus was affecting timings for Ofcom publications.

24. The Committee expressed concern at Ofcom's absence from European regulatory networks and reliance on bilateral meetings following Brexit. It was **NOTED** that Ofcom's international strategy was being discussed internally at present, and that Ofcom would be putting more emphasis on this work.

25. Members **NOTED** the reforming of telecoms advocacy in Scotland and queried whether this was a devolved matter that related to Northern Ireland. It was also **NOTED** DfE had powers to intervene in this area in Northern Ireland and that the Consumer Council and Citizens Advice handled consumer issues.

Digital Radio UK (DRUK)

26. The Communications Director for Digital Radio UK provided a presentation on DRUK and digital services and listening in Northern Ireland. Members **NOTED** a number of highlights from the presentation:

- The Government was undertaking a Digital Radio and Audio Review and DRUK invited the Committee to feed into this work. This collaborative review would consider listening trends and issues like the impact of Small Scale DAB and the potential for analogue switch-off.
- Most radio listening in UK continued to be via live radio, and the reach for live radio in Northern Ireland was 91%. Digital listening accounted for 58.5% of all listening UK-wide, and while Northern Ireland was lower at 43.1% there was steady growth. Local DAB reached 88% of the NI population.
- Listening was diversifying. e.g. online in-home listening via smart speakers and in-car digital listening as new cars come with digital radio as standard. Streaming services (Spotify) and podcasts were more popular among younger audiences.

27. The Committee:

- expressed concern that rural areas might not get as wide a choice of stations, especially when relying on broadband and mobile coverage for online listening. The Government review would be looking at these issues.
- discussed the continuing change in listening trends, for example newer cars with built in apps, and the tremendous opportunity for radio listening through smart speakers.
- discussed the potential for Small-Scale DAB in Northern Ireland and suggested other opportunities be considered such as the DAB+ platform and the creation of a second local radio multiplex.
- thanked DRUK for attending and presenting.

Northern Ireland Director's Report

28. The report included:

- Data from the recent Connected Nations report and progress from industry in rolling out fibre broadband - Northern Ireland was leading the UK for full-fibre with 31% of premises having access. In terms of mobile, 4G geographic coverage from all four mobile networks was now 90%.
- The success of Ofcom's recent 5G connectivity event in partnership with Mobile UK and NILGA. The event focused on coverage initiatives, planning regulations and public health concerns, and the experiences of Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Following the event, Mobile UK had met with the Infrastructure Minister to discuss planning regulations, and Ofcom was planning follow-up meetings with industry, Government departments and other stakeholders.

- With the return of devolved government, political work was a priority and DCMS was in discussions with DfE in relation to appointing an Ofcom Board Member for Northern Ireland.

29. The Committee **NOTED** the disinformation surrounding 5G and the impact this could have on planning applications, and it encouraged Ofcom to continue to work to facilitate 5G rollout.

Communications Consumer Panel update

30. It was **NOTED** that CCP:

- Had been given additional budget to expand its remit. Their plan was to do more research and more consumer engagement.
- Was carrying out research into people's experience of scams, particularly in the communications industry.
- Had discussed how customer services were increasingly moving towards an app-based approach and how the rules around this were unclear.

31. The Panel Chair also provided updates from meetings recently attended:

- CCP Consumer Hub: Held the first meeting in Northern Ireland and heard from a range of stakeholders that CCP wouldn't normally engage with. The focus was on rural issues and CCP would report back to Ofcom and DCMS following these meetings.
- CCP Industry Forum: This meeting included all Broadband providers and there was discussion on how consumer vulnerability was managed.

Small Screen: Big Debate in Northern Ireland:

32. Members were taken through an outline of plans to engage with academia, independent production companies and politicians - but these would be subject to guidance on hosting events in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak, and it was unlikely that the planned Ofcom PSB conference in Manchester in May would go ahead.

33. In addition to this, Ofcom was conducting audience research throughout the UK and had held focus groups in Ballymena, Larne and Newry. Ofcom was also considering how to reach audiences that it did not usually engage with, but who consumed PSB content.

34. The Committee encouraged Ofcom to engage with a wide range of sectoral bodies such as sports organisations, indigenous language agencies, business, rural agencies, arts organisations, education, voluntary and youth sectors to stimulate a wider conversation on the role of PSB.

35. The Committee also heard that Ofcom had set up a competition in conjunction with the Financial Times to seek the views of young people on public service broadcasting and that the PSB team was keen to hear other ideas on engaging young people.

Channel 4

36. Channel 4 representatives gave a short presentation highlighting the broadcaster's work and impact in the Nations. The '4 All the UK' strategy was in the early stages of planning and implementation and the aim was for every nation and region outside London to benefit from increased spend and representation. Channel 4 had recently opened its new national HQ in Leeds and hoped to have 200 staff located there by the end of the year. It had committed to a target of 50% out-of-London programming by 2023 and was working with independent production companies across the UK to ensure that it met this target. In Northern Ireland in 2019 Channel 4 spent £4.3m. A number of key themes were discussed.

37. **Portrayal:** The Committee asked what steps Channel 4 was taking to enhance portrayal of NI on screen, noting Ofcom research which suggested that broadcasters could do more to reflect life in the Nations. It **NOTED** that Channel 4's focus remained on increasing spend with Northern Ireland producers rather than introducing portrayal targets. The Committee would continue to be interested in increases in commissioning from Northern Ireland and how this contributed to improved representation of Northern Ireland and its diverse communities on screen.

38. **Commissioning:** The Committee took particular interest in steps to increase commissions in NI, from a low base. It welcomed the presence of a commissioner based between Belfast and Glasgow. The Committee was updated on Channel 4 activities and ambitions in NI. The Committee **NOTED** it had no commissioning targets specific to NI, and wished to ensure that NI benefited proportionately, particularly in light of the focus on the new centres in Leeds, Glasgow and Bristol. Members had previously highlighted the potential for a partnership between Channel 4 and NI Screen, noting the success of the BBC / NI Screen partnership. They were pleased to hear that Channel 4 had initiated discussions with NI Screen.

39. **Alpha Fund:** The Committee asked whether the fund might have more impact if it focused a larger amount of money on a smaller number of independent production companies. It **NOTED** that a new funding programme was being developed. Channel 4 representatives explained that its Alpha Fund invested a total of £310,000 with Northern Ireland-based independent production companies to help develop people and skills.

40. **Digital Broadcasting Unit:** The Committee asked what impact the unit could be expected to have in NI. It was assured that the unit would have reach in NI as it developed new content with new production companies, with the potential to migrate onto the main channel.

41. The Committee thanked Channel 4 representatives for attending the meeting and discussing issues of particular importance to the industry and audiences in NI. Members **NOTED** that this was one of the ways in which Channel 4 made itself accountable in NI. The Committee invited Channel 4 to return to an ACNI meeting within twelve months, when it would look forward to an update on its impact in NI, particularly in relation to the themes discussed.

Papers for noting

42. USO engagement: Ofcom would share the final version of its leaflet and consumer letters from BT promoting the USO. The Committee asked about BT's readiness for the USO and expressed concerns that consumer expectations would exceed what was available under the terms of the USO. The Committee highlighted the importance of Ofcom's further work on universality and asked to be kept informed of progress.

43. Content Board paper: The last Content Board meeting had included discussion of clips of PSB shows on social media and how this complicated broadcasting standards rules and regulations.

Any Other Business

44. There was no other business.

Date of the Next Meeting

45. The next scheduled Committee meeting would be held on 1 June 2020.