

**Minutes of the 76th meeting of
the Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland
on Monday 1 June 2020
Meeting held virtually via Microsoft Teams**

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)
Angelina Fusco	Content Board Member for Northern Ireland
Rick Hill	Consumer Panel Chair and Member for Northern Ireland
Jonathan Rose	Director, Northern Ireland
Rebecca Lennon	Regulatory Affairs Advisor, Northern Ireland
Sinéad Lee	Regulatory Affairs Manager, Northern Ireland
James Stinson	Regulatory Affairs Manager, Northern Ireland
Other Ofcom colleagues	

Agenda items
<p>Introduction</p> <p>1. The Chair welcomed members and attendees to the meeting. This was the first formal ACNI meeting to be held online due to the Covid-19 Pandemic.</p>
<p>Declaration of Members' Interests</p> <p>2. No interests were declared by Members or attendees.</p>
<p>Minutes of the meeting held on 10th March 2020 and matters arising – Minutes 75(20)</p> <p>3. The minutes of the 75th meeting, held on 10 March 2020, were APPROVED for signature by the Chair as an accurate record. Actions from the previous meeting were discussed.</p> <p>4. It was NOTED from the actions that a subgroup was to be formed to discuss Ofcom's work on PSTN Migration to VOIP. This subject was also on the agenda of the June meeting of the NI Telecoms Stakeholder Forum, to which ACNI members were invited.</p> <p>5. A member asked about the cost of international calls and whether these had increased since the EU 'Roam Like at Home' regulations had been introduced.</p>

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6. Subgroups of members were **AGREED** to lead the Committee's input to Ofcom's work on the PSB Review and the Review of Postal Users' Needs.

Interim Committee Business since last formal meeting

7. Recruitment: The Chair thanked Members who had agreed 6-month extensions to their contracts to allow recruitment at a later date due to the current Covid-19 Pandemic.

8. Ofcom NI Update Meeting: ACNI met Ofcom NI colleagues remotely on 6 May to receive an update and overview of how Covid-19 had affected Ofcom's work and the sectors that Ofcom regulates. It was **NOTED** that all Ofcom NI events have been suspended.

9. Wholesale Fixed Telecoms Market Review 2021-26: The Subgroup submitted ACNI's response to the Access Review consultation on 15 May.

10. Consumer Hub Meeting: The Chair had attended the NI Consumer Hub meeting run by the Consumer Communications Panel (via phone).

11. 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

12. The Committee discussed the agenda items and papers, focusing particularly on the Postal sector and Royal Mail's temporary reduction in letter delivery days.

Ofcom Board update

13. The Committee was briefed on recent Board meetings and **NOTED** the changes in Ofcom's Senior Management team. The Committee heard how Ofcom was dealing with Covid-19 as an organisation, and the new 'One Ofcom' strategy.

14. Members discussed Online Harms and the local political interest in this subject.

Strategic Implications of Covid-19

15. Members were briefed on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the communications sector, and the likely on-going impact on consumers, businesses and public policy in Ofcom's sectors.

16. The Committee expressed concern about the sustainability of smaller telecoms providers, and the potential for future investment to gravitate towards larger providers. Members **NOTED** that Brexit could bring additional impacts – for example surcharges on parcels coming from GB.

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17. Members also expressed concern that the nature of the BBC's public service role could change, and nations and regions content could decline as a result of the BBC's financial pressures. Members **NOTED** recent RAJAR figures for local radio listening and that it clearly showed the continued value of local commercial stations to consumers in Northern Ireland. Members expressed concern about the potential for smaller stations to struggle financially due to falling advertising revenues during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

18. The Committee **NOTED** the increased need for universal broadband and mobile coverage, with changing patterns in work and education. They also **NOTED** the important role that media literacy plays for those who have access to online services but who may not have the home support to use them.

19. Members **AGREED** to form a subgroup to provide further advice to Ofcom on how the Covid-19 Pandemic will impact specifically on Northern Ireland.

Public Policy Update

20. An Ofcom colleague updated the Committee on key public policy developments since the last meeting.

21. The Committee **NOTED** the upcoming announcement of the Community Radio Funding, as well as Ofcom's ongoing research on people's access to news and information during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

22. Members also had a brief discussion on the UK Government's stance on Huawei equipment and the potential impact on the rollout of 5G as well as backhaul for fixed telecoms.

Director's Report

23. The NI Director highlighted a number of items from the report. These included: the interest in short-term RSLs for drive-in church services and movies; recent meetings with NI Screen and local indie TV producers; and the NI Shared Rural Network (SRN) working-group which an Ofcom colleague attends in an observational capacity.

24. A member welcomed indies' ability to pitch remotely to broadcasters during the Covid period, and also the quick commissioning decisions that had been taken. But they also expressed concern about the long-term challenges to network production of competing remotely and with reduced connectivity to GB.

25. On the potential rollout of mobile coverage as part of the SRN, members **NOTED** that any review of planning legislation in NI should be a positive step towards improved mobile coverage.

26. Members also **NOTED** that the Covid-19 Pandemic had not appeared to impact the progress of Project Stratum, and **NOTED** the Department of the Economy's press release on the valuable work of telecoms engineers during the Pandemic.

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Consumer Communications Panel update

27. Members **NOTED** the CCP report, with the following items highlighted.

28. A second series of the CCP's National Consumer Hub meetings had taken place and common themes had emerged from the roundtable discussions. Early in lockdown there had been issues with contacting communications providers, which then progressed to switching and several technical issues. This had now improved and was getting closer to business as usual.

29. Discussions also flagged that the change to work and schooling meant the Broadband USO's minimum download speed of 10Mbps was now not fast enough and needed to be revised.

30. CCP had also led Industry Forum meetings with Telecoms and Postal providers, focusing on vulnerable consumers and the measures in place to support them during the Covid-19 period.

31. The CCP expected to publish a research report shortly on consumers' experience of scams, and it will examine how Covid-19 could have increased scamming.

Content Board update

32. Members **NOTED** the Content Board paper. They discussed the importance of network TV news taking national differences into account when reporting Covid-19 news in order to avoid misleading viewers.

Media Nations

33. Ofcom colleagues briefed the Committee on key findings from this year's upcoming Media Nations UK and NI reports, which would include additional research and narrative on the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

34. A member asked whether the research would look at how many people in NI got their news from Republic of Ireland media? An Ofcom colleague explained that the Media Nations report would include viewing figures for ROI TV channels, and Ofcom's ongoing research on news and information during the Covid-19 period would also include RTÉ as a news source.

35. Discussing the inclusion of information on both the Irish Language and Ulster Scots Broadcast Funds, a member asked about their long-term funding footing.

Postal User Needs

36. Ofcom colleagues outlined the context of the current Review, including Royal Mail's recent trading update and the temporary reduction of letter delivery days as a result of Covid-19.

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37. Members discussed Ofcom research that would inform the review. They noted the potential for higher levels of dependence on the USO among vulnerable groups and asked for research findings to be broken down across the Nations and for rural, older and disabled users.

38. Members encouraged Ofcom to continue to engage with the NI Consumer Council and to consider the postal differences that exist in NI, for example, parcel surcharging, and the potential implications both of Brexit and the reduction of delivery days on post between NI and GB.

39. The Committee **AGREED** to form a subgroup to take this work forward with Ofcom.

Any Other Business

40. Members **AGREED** that the virtual meeting format worked well and they would continue this way of working for subgroup meetings.

41. A member asked for an update on 'Caller Line Identification' and whether the instances of 'withheld number' had been reduced; and what impact using a withheld number might have on the Department for Health's outbound calls as part of its Covid-19 contact tracing service.

Date of the Next Meeting

42. The next scheduled Committee meeting would be held on 9 September 2020.