

As a consumer, I am not that interested in numbers and I suspect that the vast majority of the UK is the same. Hence Ofcom has an uphill task in communicating any changes to the general public, let alone ensuring the public sufficiently understand the messages to be able to make informed choices.

Therefore I firmly believe that any changes introduced should be crystal clear, easy to understand and kept to a minimum so that they have a chance to become firmly established and used.

At first I was pleased with the numbering ranges suggested by Ofcom in this review. I particularly like the 03 countrywide number idea as it is extremely simple, easy to remember and I like the idea that it will be included in my inclusive call package. However I have some fundamental concerns.

Ofcom itself refers to how people now use their mobiles to store all their phone numbers, instead of the traditional phone book on the hall table. Consumers increasingly use fixed lines and mobiles interchangeably and I believe that any attempt to establish a clear public perception of numbering/call charges needs to address this. My particular concern has not been fully addressed by these proposals – that is mobile charges to call all number ranges especially the so called “freephone” numbers. I recently investigated the costs charged by different providers and found the information hard to find and confusing. I needed to contact the mobile providers directly as the information on their websites was insufficient – hardly conducive to “media literacy”. I was horrified at the vast differences in rates that can be charged. Surely this should be a top priority if Ofcom wants to ensure that it protects “the meaning that numbers provide to consumers”. I assume consumers may find the same problems with the 09 range – but this is a range I don’t use so cannot comment.

Until Ofcom addresses the price structure for mobile calls in the same model, I believe that any new numbering structure is doomed to fail and will only worsen the existing confusion. Ofcom itself acknowledges the dominant use of mobiles in other consultations – yet only says that it will consider mobile charges in passing in this document. I believe this fails to protect the mobile consumer even though the issues of transparency and scams must be equally if not bigger in the mobile market. I find this strange and disappointing.

As an aside, I am not sure that it is Ofcom’s role to charge premiums for issuing certain numbers. Does this commercialise what should be seen as an independent regulator?