

**Minutes of the 95th meeting of
the Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland
held hybrid (at Landmark House, Belfast and via Microsoft Teams)
on Thursday 13th March 2025**

Present

Colm Murphy	ACNI Chair
Aodhan O'Donnell	ACNI Member
Jackie Neill	ACNI Member
Michael Wilson	ACNI Member
Karen Baxter	Ofcom Board Member for Northern Ireland (via Teams)
Carrie Matchett	Communications Consumer Panel member for Northern Ireland (items 10 & 11 only)

In attendance

Jonathan Rose	Northern Ireland Director
Bimpe Archer	Regulatory Affairs Manager
James Stinson	Regulatory Affairs Manager
Judith Carville	Regulatory Affairs Manager

NextGen NED observer

Other Ofcom colleagues (via Teams)

Apologies

Paul Wickens	ACNI Member
Maria McCann	Content Board Member for Northern Ireland
Jane Hillis	Regulatory Affairs Advisor

Item 1: Welcome, apologies and declaration of Members' Interests

1. The Northern Ireland Director welcomed Colm Murphy as the Committee's new Chair and congratulated him on his recent appointment by the Ofcom Board.
2. The new Chair paid tribute to his predecessor, Carrie Matchett, and congratulated her on her appointment as the Northern Ireland member of the Communications Consumer Panel.
3. The Committee welcomed the NextGen NED observer to their first Advisory Committee meeting of their term.
4. Apologies were received from Paul Wickens, Maria McCann and Jane Hillis.
5. Michael Wilson declared a new broadcasting interest which was agreed to have no current impact on his committee role.

Item 2: Minutes of the 94th meeting held on 5th December 2024 and Actions

6. The Minutes of the 94th meeting were approved, subject to an amendment to record the Committee's decision not to submit a consultation response regarding talkSPORT's reduction of AM coverage.
7. Members noted two ongoing actions relating to forward planning for 2025/26. Members agreed to compile and circulate the Broadcasting and Connectivity sub-groups' lists of priority Ofcom consultations, along with expected Online Safety work. This would form the basis of the Committee's provisional workplan for the year, for approval.
8. All other actions were agreed as completed.
9. The Committee agreed to invite Department for the Economy officials to a future meeting.

Item 3: Board update from Northern Ireland member

10. The Board member congratulated the Chair on his appointment.
11. She summarised the main topics of discussion at the most recent Ofcom Board meeting, most notably Ofcom's three-year business plan and upcoming milestones for Online Safety regulation.
12. The Board member reflected on the impact of Storm Éowyn on telecoms customers in Northern Ireland and the lessons being learned about how to increase networks' future resilience. The Committee asked to be kept apprised of this work in light of the serious impact felt by local consumers.

[NI Board member left the meeting]

Item 4: Broadcasting update

13. Ofcom colleagues outlined the ongoing regulation of the BBC and the upcoming consultation on the Public Service Media Review (PSMR).
14. The Committee considered both items in turn and provided the following comments and advice.
15. The Committee queried the user friendliness of the Northern Ireland page in Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC and made the following suggestions for this page and the broader report:
 - Data would be better presented in context, comparing with other nations and showing trends over time.
 - Some interpretation of lower iPlayer reach in Northern Ireland would be helpful, given higher fibre broadband coverage.

- More granularity should be provided around categories of BBC commissioning – first run, second run, network, local etc.
- Some commentary would be helpful around the BBC’s digital transformation – how this is landing with audiences and how it stacks up with its Public Purposes.
- Useful to have some commentary / measurement of what has and hasn’t happened? What was delivered against promises? This should be seen in the context of commitments made by the BBC around changes to output and how these would better deliver for audiences.
- The Committee wanted to see a reference to what BBC NI has done in the last year, especially the “BBC Comes to Town” initiative.
- The Committee said Ofcom should be wary of referencing award winning programming as this was often the work of Indies and not the BBC.

16. The Committee encouraged Ofcom to do what it can to measure the impact of changes made to news and current affairs output on BBC Radio Foyle.

17. On the Public Service Media (PSM) Review, the committee made the following comments:

- The Committee recognised that the algorithms of Big Tech companies are challenging for PSBs and are also providing a financial challenge more broadly for public service media.
- The value of spectrum had broken down and the new gatekeepers (tech companies) were extracting value from PSM content while content makers are being left with the crumbs. Any PSM review that doesn’t come up with market intervention, isn’t coming up with the answers.
- The Committee was sceptical of the notion of a ‘kite mark’, commenting that audiences will watch what they want to. The emphasis should be on the need for news organisations to be properly funded and ensuring they have prominence in the digital space.
- The Committee stressed the importance of prioritisation. There are so many different and significant challenges that it would be impossible to put out all the fires at once. The team stressed this would be part of the process and that news would be a priority.
- The Committee commented that PSBs cross promote to digital platforms very badly and that stepping stones were needed to help audiences migrate to digital.

Item 5: Interim Committee business and Issues since last meeting

18. The Committee noted its response to Ofcom’s Plan of Work 2025/26 consultation, submitted at the end of January, following the stakeholder event held at Parliament Buildings.
19. The Connectivity sub-group lead noted the Committee’s response to Ofcom’s review of Alternative Dispute Resolution in telecoms, submitted at the beginning of March. They also flagged the upcoming consultation on the Postal USO which closes on 10 April.
20. The Broadcasting sub-group had an informative meeting earlier in the week with Ofcom’s Radio policy leads.
21. The sub-group lead flagged two upcoming consultations to which the Committee intends to respond. First, changes to local radio news under the Media Act; and changes to BBC Radio Foyle’s news output under the BBC’s Operating Licence.

Item 6: Committee discussion on remaining Agenda items

22. The Committee noted a joint session to be held later in the meeting (via video) with the Communications Consumer Panel for two shared agenda items: the Panel's update and the Postal USO.

Item 7: Content Board update from Northern Ireland member

23. In the absence of the Content Board member, the Chair requested a short note be shared with the Committee covering the main topics of discussion at the most recent Content Board meeting.

Item 8: Online Safety Report

24. Bimpe Archer introduced her paper and highlighted a number of recent political and civic society engagements, most notably in relation to Ofcom's guidance on the protection of women and girls online and work to develop a Media Literacy strategy for Northern Ireland.
25. The Committee congratulated Bimpe and colleagues on the extent and impact of the engagement.

Item 9: Northern Ireland Director's Report

26. The Committee returned to the subject of the impact of Storm Éowyn telecoms consumers, noting the update in the Director's Report.
27. Members acknowledged the extent to which telecoms networks were dependent on the electricity network's resilience and recognised the significant work involved to repair an unprecedented number of outages.
28. However, members expressed concern at the extent and longevity of the telecoms outages and the difficulties people faced trying to communicate with their provider.
29. The Committee encouraged Ofcom to continue its work to learn as many lessons as possible from Storm Éowyn, especially in relation to outage reporting, battery back-up, customer communications, compensation, and the shared experiences in the Republic of Ireland.
30. The Committee requested Storm Éowyn be added as an agenda item at the next meeting.

Item 10: Communications Consumer Panel update

31. Given time constraints of the joint session with the Communications Consumer Panel, the Committee agreed to note the Panel's update paper as read without discussion.

Item 11: Postal USO

32. The Postal USO team introduced their paper to the Communications Consumer Panel and the Advisory Committee members and took questions on the proposed changes to the USO which are currently out for consultation.
33. The Advisory Committee members offered the following comments and advice:
- Changes to headline targets for deliveries would likely affect rural areas most and that Northern Ireland would likely be disproportionately affected. The team said this is something they would keep an eye on.
 - Aside from Ofcom's published research, the Committee asked Ofcom to drill down further into Northern Ireland specific research. The Committee queried whether NI sample sizes were robust enough.

- The Committee noted that many users had lost faith in delivery times. Given the challenges facing Royal Mail, the Committee queried whether the proposed changes go far enough and whether it was future proofed.
- The Committee warned that there was likely going to be confusion over delivery days and it was better to concentrate on delivery targets.

Item 12: Public Policy Update

34. The Public Policy Director introduced her paper. She noted Ofcom's recent MPs' engagement event at Westminster and the UK Government's ongoing focus on regulatory support for economic growth.
35. Members asked whether the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology's Digital Inclusion Action Plan, published in February, applied to Northern Ireland. The Committee noted that the NI Digital Assist Steering Group – of which Ofcom is a member – is engaging with the Action Plan. The plan commits DSIT to working in partnership with the devolved governments and is open to public comments until April.
36. A member cited their experience of social tariffs being mis-sold by a telecom's salesperson. The NI team agreed to report this complaint.

Item 13: Any Other Business

37. A member asked for an update on the status of local TV station NVTV's broadcasting licence.
38. A member asked about the robustness of Ofcom's postal USO research sample in Northern Ireland

Date and Time of Next Meeting

39. The next scheduled Committee meeting will be held on Thursday 12th June 2025.

Approved:



Date: 12.06.2025