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Dear [provider],

Helping consumers stay connected

I am writing in light of the restrictions and lockdown in place across different parts of the country in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Telecoms services remain a lifeline for many across the nation as lives and livelihoods continue to be impacted by the pandemic and the associated lockdowns or restrictions. Staying connected has helped people make important adjustments to the way they live their lives, allowing them to contact friends and family, work from home and access support and advice, including medical or other professional help.

We welcome your continued action in committing to support customers who find it difficult to pay their bill as a result of Covid-19, ensuring that they are treated fairly and appropriately supported.

One of Ofcom's priorities is to ensure customers, especially vulnerable customers, are treated fairly. General Condition C5 sets out the requirement for providers to meet the needs, and for the fair and appropriate treatment, of consumers whose circumstances may make them vulnerable. Consumers who are in arrears are likely to be in financially vulnerable circumstances.

Our Vulnerability Guide sets out the measures that providers can adopt to help ensure they treat vulnerable people fairly and give them the help, support and services they need. On debt, we explain that we expect providers to take extra measures to ensure that customers in debt are treated fairly. Examples of how providers do this include:

- Using a range of communication channels when contacting a customer about their debt before taking any follow-up action, including enforcement or debt recovery.
- Allowing a customer some time to get help, support and advice on how to manage their debts without the threat of enforcement action or disconnection during the same period.
- Considering offering payment holidays or deferrals; freezing additional fees and charges where a customer is experiencing problem debt, particularly while the customer is seeking debt help and advice.
- Offering tariff advice, whether that is switching to a cheaper tariff or social tariff.

- Discuss and agree a realistic and reasonable payment plan which is flexible and repayable over a period of time. The plan should be based on the customer's ability to pay and providers should help the customer understand any additional costs involved.
- Preventing customers from being disconnected as this is a serious step that should only be used as a last resort.

In my letter of 26 June, I asked you to go further in some areas, by putting in place additional support for a limited period that goes beyond the measures now included in the final vulnerability guide. These measures include:

- That providers should be proactive at engaging as a matter of priority with consumers that are struggling to pay their bills.
- Where a customer is actively engaging with and seeking support, providers should not impose any service restrictions and should waive any late payment penalty charges or early termination charge, limit debt collection activity and remove the threat of disconnection.
- Providers should only commence debt collection activities after a sufficient period of time to allow consumers to get help and only disconnect consumers as a last resort and after a sufficient period of time. We suggested a sufficient period of time could, for example, be after a period of 3 months.

In recent months the pandemic has intensified, along with the financial pressures many individuals and families will feel as a result. Taken together, we consider that the vulnerability guide and the additional measures contained in my June letter clearly set out what we consider to be fair and appropriate treatment of consumers who may be vulnerable during this latest period of lockdown and further restrictions.

Given the current situation, we ask that you revisit your debt and disconnection practices against both the vulnerability guide and the additional measures set out above to ensure that sufficient support is being offered to customers who may be struggling to pay their bills. We recognise and welcome the efforts that providers have already made to support customers during this challenging period. We will continue to monitor the issue of debt and disconnection closely as the situation develops, reviewing our expectations of providers if necessary.

Yours sincerely,

Lindsey Fussell