



Ofcom Call for Inputs

Improving access to electronic communications services for disabled people

Response from the Mobile Broadband Group

The Mobile Broadband Group (MBG), whose members are EE, Telefonica UK, Three and Vodafone, welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to Ofcom's call for input for 'Improving access to electronic communications services for disabled people.'

The response focuses on the two sections of general application to the communications sector:

- Bills and contracts in accessible formats
- Information about products and services

Bills and contracts in accessible formats

(i) What do communications providers currently do in order to comply with General Condition 15.9?

Bills are made available in a variety of formats to meet the needs of the blind and visually impaired: principally bills in Braille or large type, audio and, in some cases, on coloured paper for dyslexic customers. To an increasing extent, bills are made available on-line, where the font size is adjustable or the customer can print out at their own convenience, using their own Braille printer. All the online billing systems are W3C compliant. The online billing option also allows customer more easily to share the information with parties who support them – by simply sharing a password. The method of accessing the bill is thus more within the customer's control and less operator process-reliant (where there may be data protection and security hurdles).

On-line mobile online bills are available in, or can generally be converted to, PDF documents as well. This is a feature worth noting, as PDF documents are compatible with screen readers used by customers with visual impairments.

(ii) Do fixed and mobile broadband service providers currently offer bills and contracts in accessible formats? If not, does this cause particular problems for disabled users?

As above

(iii) What is the experience of disabled people in terms of the ability to read and understand bills and contracts from communications providers?

The Mobile operators offer a range of contact methods – in store, on-line, by phone, all of which can be used to make inquiries about bills and contracts. All customers use these facilities and we are not aware that those with disabilities are particularly over or under represented among those that make complaints or contact, although anecdotal evidence, unsurprisingly, suggests that text methods of contact are favoured by hard of hearing customers

(iv) What evidence is there of the effect of disabled peoples' experience with regard to billing and contract formats on their access to relevant communications services?

The mobile sector is characterised by very high rates of penetration, including customers with disabilities. The operators have no direct evidence that difficulties with contracts or billing are impeding adoption by those that want a mobile device.

Mobile operators and equipment manufacturers also market a huge choice of packages and devices to meet a broad range of needs. About 40% of customers currently opt for a pre-paid option so that they have no difficulties about overspending their budget.

(v) Are there any groups of disabled people that are not adequately served by General Condition 15.9 and how might this be addressed?

Ofcom mentions customers with learning difficulties as a group of customers that could be served with an Easy Read format of contracts and bills.

The MBG would be interested to understand the potential implications of such a development. We are in the technology industry and therefore some technological terms, such as Megabyte, are to some extent unavoidable. That said, as technology companies, we are quite used to explaining to our customers in non-technology terms what we are supplying them. It is our strong belief that the core terms of mobile operator contract packages do use very straightforward terms: fixed, minutes, £, price per minute, price per text message etc.. Other terms in our contracts are, in any event, assessable for fairness under general consumer law, whoever the customer is.

Mobile operators are open to engagement on this subject. However, we need to fully understand how customers could benefit. Providing information in different formats adds to compliance costs. We are particularly concerned about providing contracts in abridged or paraphrased terms. We do not want to cause confusion in the market by contracting for the same service while using different terminology and language to describe it, particularly when there is a raft of sectoral and general consumer law to protect customers from misleading and unfair terms. We are doubtful that Easy Read format would deliver genuine

customer benefits or that it would be proportionate to impose the measures only on the electronic communications sector.

(vi) Which accessible formats should be expressly included in GC15.9?

Braille and paper

(vii) For fixed and mobile telephony providers, how many disabled customers currently request bills and contracts to be provided in accessible formats?

For the mobile operators, the number of bills in accessible formats requested each month is in the range of 5,000-6,000.

(viii) What are the costs of providing contracts and bills in accessible formats for fixed voices services and what might be the additional costs of providing broadband contracts and bills in accessible formats?

The cost of sending out physical bills in Braille is understandably some multiple of the paper equivalent. However, the marginal cost of adding different service lines for voice, data, texting, value added services etc. is not significant.

(ix) How are the costs on (viii) affected by the bundling of voice and broadband services and providers' ability to give customers single contracts and bills covering both?

As above

A duty on Communications Providers to regularly inform disabled subscribers of details of products and services suitable for them.

(i) What measures do fixed and mobile Communications Providers take at present to inform disabled customers of the products and services suitable for them?

Every operator devotes an area of its web site to supplying all relevant information about available services for customers with one or more disabilities. This information is available to customers at home and when visiting a store.

In addition, the mobile operators in the UK have teamed up with the Mobile Manufacturers Forum to promote the GARI database, a comprehensive source of information about all the features on mobile devices that address the specific requirements of disabled customers: volume control, compatibility with induction loops, adjustable font sizes etc.

Retail staff are trained about mobile device features, so they are able to assist customers to choose devices that would be suitable for them, including disabled customers.

(ii) What barriers (if any) do disabled people currently face when trying to purchase communications products and services and with what effects?

The question is primarily for others to comment on but, as noted elsewhere, ownership of mobile phones is mostly very similar to ownership in the population at large.

(iii) What additional costs would fixed and mobile Communications Providers anticipate incurring in order to comply with such a provision?

The MBG is not entirely clear about the premise of the question. In paragraph 3.59, Ofcom states that the requirement will be to publish *'information on the products and services that they offer that are suitable for disabled people.*

In paragraph 3.67 the question is more broadly framed as an obligation *'to inform their disabled users of details of the products and services designed for them'.*

The MBG would have a significant objection to the latter, general obligation. Communications providers cannot be expected to be information sources about the whole market.

Mobile operators provide comprehensive information on web sites about their own services that are targeted at disabled customers. In addition, in store advice is available from sales representatives.

http://www.three.co.uk/Privacy_Cookies/Accessibility

<http://www.vodafone.co.uk/accessibility-services/index.htm>

<http://explore.ee.co.uk/digital-living/digital-for-all>

<http://www.o2.co.uk/accessforall>

As mentioned, mobile operators welcome the initiative by the Mobile Manufacturers Forum to create the GARI database, which is intended to provide a comprehensive guide to all the features on devices that can be particularly useful to customers with disabilities.

The MBG has assisted NGOs in the UK in collating comments about improvements that they would like to see in the GARI database. Some have argued that the GARI database is too comprehensive. However, there are a multitude of features and there are a multitude of devices from which to choose. Unless the customer's choice is to be restricted, it is hard to see how the GARI database can be anything but comprehensive.

(iv) What would be the qualitative and quantitative benefits of such a provision for disabled people?

It is hard to argue that regulatory intervention would make any difference at all. Ofcom research reveals that in the age group 15-54, ownership of a mobile among those with disabilities is actually **equal to or greater** than those without disabilities.¹

Only those over 65, with a visual impairment, are significantly less likely than others over 65 to have a mobile (65% v 81%).

Ofcom will have to have a much greater understanding of why this 16% differential exists and whether or not it is the sort of issue that is conducive to regulatory remedy. This will need careful understanding and research.

Published Ofcom research does not indicate whether satisfaction levels are any lower for disabled customers but the current situation does not appear to be a significant barrier to ownership.

(v) Are there other organisations that could usefully play a role in providing disabled people with information on the products and services suitable for them? How might such organisations and fixed and mobile Communication Providers work together to ensure disabled people have access to this information?

The MBG is regularly surprised at how little the NGOs do to inform or signpost their stakeholder groups to sources of information about technology, instead of relying on the communications providers. It seems that much more effort is expended on pointing out is what not provided by the communications industry than what is. Rather than focusing on perceived shortcomings, NGOs' time would be better spent informing their target users about the advances that are being made in this field – not only with networks and devices but also with Apps. Practical guidance, across the market and from impartial sources would more likely to be helpful than more regulated information mandated on each communications provider.

Such information could include:

- handsets with bigger buttons and larger screens with the ability to change the text size and background to suit customers
- Voice dialling, 'Siri' software application using voice recognition; High Definition Voice which offers crystal clear, superior sound quality which is available on HD Voice handsets;

¹ Ofcom Consumer Experience 2012: Table 76.

It's also essential to note the rise in smart phones and smart phone Apps specifically designed to assist users (e.g. equal eyes - <http://www.2ndsight.si/>) . There is a whole new, separate and distinct market for accessibility Apps that is growing and competing with each other for custom. It is not necessarily appropriate for mobile operators to intervene or distort competition in that emerging market or carry any risks of inadvertently showing preference for one app developer over another.

Mobile operators do, nonetheless, take steps to support the developer community. For example Vodafone Foundation do so through their 'Smart Awards' and Telefónica by way of Wayra UK, but it is for the market itself to advertise their products and services in their own way.

Operators have very limited scope, though, to market directly to those with disabilities. There is no specific database of customers who are disabled – some customers don't want to declare themselves as such to us – other than those who are self-declared disabled e.g. those who receive alternative formatted billing. Even if these customers were to be targeted, operators would need to reconcile with their marketing preferences set up when they opened an account, which incurs another level of cost and bureaucracy only to reach customers who are already likely to be using those services.

It seems the greater benefit would be to promote accessible features to *potential* customers – those with disabilities who haven't realised the benefits of specialised mobile Apps and services. But getting information to those customers is probably best managed through the relevant NGOs and support organisations that have access to them. We are happy to engage regularly with these groups (via E-Accessibility Working Groups) to ensure they have access to the information they need to share it with their target audience.