

ACNI response to Ofcom's Draft Annual Plan 2011 - 2012

The Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland welcomes Ofcom's continuing commitment in its Draft Annual Plan 2011-2012 to helping communications markets work for consumers across the UK and providing appropriate assurance to viewers and listeners on standards over the coming year.

The Committee recognises Ofcom's need to cut back on expenditure and to focus on core areas of work. However, the Committee has been impressed over the years by Ofcom's record in carrying out research, a feature of its work which the Committee regards as one of Ofcom's outstanding achievements from the time of its inception and it hopes that the need to review expenditure will not adversely affect Ofcom's ability to operate on the basis of sound evidence and a proper understanding of the markets it regulates. The Committee has been particularly impressed at the commitment to undertaking research in the devolved nations, not least Northern Ireland, and believes it would be very regrettable if this were an area which might suffer in future. Perhaps increasing the amount of joint research with other regulatory and advisory bodies might help to alleviate this.

The Committee welcomes the commitment to providing consumers with more and better information and to making switching easier as long as the information is accessible to ordinary consumers. Ofcom has made very great strides in improving conditions for citizens and consumers and the Committee would like to see it take more credit amongst the public at large by ensuring that the public is more fully aware of Ofcom's role in achieving these improvements.

There are some continuing areas of concern for the Committee in relation to the particular circumstances in Northern Ireland and the Committee would welcome Ofcom including some mention of these in its Annual Plan – namely about poor mobile coverage (2G and 3G) in Northern Ireland, the cost of mobile roaming along the border, often made necessary by the poor level of coverage, particularly 3G coverage, within Northern Ireland, the need for spectrum awards to take this into account by setting targets for Northern Ireland, and other parts of the UK similarly affected, and a recognition that in our economy, which is heavily dependent on small and very small businesses, access to mobile voice and data communication is of high importance.

There needs to be an ongoing concern to be aware of communications issues in the Republic which may impact on citizens and stakeholders in Northern Ireland. Digital switchover and the issues which may arise for Digital UK and the corresponding implementation of switchover in the Republic are likely to be highlighted during 2011-2012.

The Committee recognises that there is a limit to what Ofcom can do in relation to some of these concerns and that other players have a role too, not least the operators themselves as well as government, both centrally and at the devolved level, but we do believe that it is important to capture the concerns of those in the devolved nations as well as those of the UK as a whole.

The Committee recognises and welcomes the outstanding work that Ofcom has undertaken in its two Public Service Broadcasting Reviews which recognised the hugely important role PSB plays in reflecting and sustaining the distinctive political, economic and cultural identities and indigenous languages of the nations and regions of the UK and would ask that Ofcom continue to keep the maintenance of high quality broadcasting which is responsive to the needs and aspirations of citizens in all the parts of the UK at the forefront of its thinking regarding the regulation of content.