A new and improved text relay service must now be made available to people with hearing and speech impairments by all landline and mobile telephone providers, following a recent decision by Ofcom.

Text relay enables people with these impairments to communicate with others through telephone or textphone equipment.

Ofcom’s decision means all phone users will have access to a ‘next generation’ text relay service which enables faster, more fluent conversation over a variety of devices.

Ofcom launched a review of text relay after its research found that, while the service was valued by its users for helping them communicate and increasing their independence, many thought it could be improved.

Under the current relay system, an assistant acts as an intermediary to convert speech to text and vice versa for the two parties.

The research found that callers were frustrated by the current inability to interrupt, hold ‘real time’ conversations or express and detect emotion. The speed of conversation is generally slow, as callers must take turns to speak or type.

Following consultation, Ofcom has decided that landline and mobile providers must offer a next generation text relay service, to all customers who require it, within the next 18 months.

The new service will offer significant improvements, including:

• parallel two-way speech, which makes use of an internet connection to allow users to interject, instead of having to wait until the end of a message. Conversation flows much more quickly and naturally as a result; and
• a wider range of equipment for accessing the service, including easier use of text relay on the move via mobile phones.

As well as mandating these improvements to text relay, Ofcom will be working with industry and disability representatives to explore the impact of speech recognition technology on the accuracy and speeds of current and future relay services.

Ofcom is also working with government and disability groups to develop the provision of video relay services by communications providers, organisations and businesses.
Ofcom has recently published results from the most comprehensive research ever undertaken by the regulator into the needs of UK postal users.

Over 4,000 residential consumers and 1,100 businesses voiced their views about the UK’s universal postal service which requires Royal Mail to deliver to every address in the UK six days a week at affordable and uniform prices.

Consumers and businesses were asked to give opinions on the current postal service; how they use it and their needs from it.

The research represents a key part of the evidence that Ofcom is gathering to decide whether users’ reasonable needs are met by the current postal service. Under the terms of the Postal Services Act, this review must be concluded by 31 March 2013. Ofcom is inviting views on the findings from its research.

Main findings
Consumers are relying less on the postal service and increasingly substituting post with the internet, email, telephone and text.

The research suggests that the average number of items sent by residential consumers each week has more than halved since 2006 (from 3.5 to 1.5 items), while over a fifth of consumers (22%) expect to send even less mail in three years’ time.

Most residential consumers and businesses agree, however, that there are some things they will always need to send by post, including personal communications such as greeting cards and parcels and packets.

Needs of consumers
Consumers’ core needs from the postal service included simplicity, trust, speed, affordability and a service that fits in with modern day life.

Ofcom’s research shows that, in general, the postal service largely satisfies these core needs. In addition, nine out of 10 residential and business consumers consider the current level of service to be acceptable.

Consumers want easier and more flexible ways to receive parcels and packets. Suggested improvements to Royal Mail’s basic parcel delivery service included changes to delivery office opening hours, improved tracking services, and the ability to select a delivery time-slot.

Consumers’ opinions on speed of delivery
The majority of consumers use First Class (the current next-day delivery service), over Second Class. Fifty-nine per cent of residential consumers use First Class all or most of the time, while 66% of mail sent by businesses is via the First Class service.

However, few in comparison (9% of residential consumers), say they need to deal with all or most of their post on the same day it arrives. This pattern is reflected to some extent by business users, with 15% saying they need to deal with all or most of their post on the day it arrives.

NEXT STEPS...
Stakeholders are invited to respond to the Review of postal users’ needs consultation by 18 December 2012.
Broadband speeds

One of Ofcom’s priorities in our Annual Plan 2012/13 is to work to ensure that consumers have accurate information on the fixed and mobile broadband speeds available when they make their choice of broadband supplier.

We have continued with our work to ensure that consumers have access to information on broadband speeds and, in August, published the latest edition of our research on fixed broadband speeds. This allows consumers to see how speeds can vary across different providers, technologies and time periods.

Our research found that UK fixed-line residential broadband speeds continued to increase during the first half of 2012. In May 2012, the average actual UK speed was 9.0Mbit/s, which is 2½ times faster than the average speed of 3.6Mbit/s recorded in November 2008 when Ofcom first began its speeds research.

Our research now includes some new ‘superfast’ packages, including Virgin Media’s ‘up to’ 60Mbit/s service and BT’s Infinity 2 ‘up to’ 76Mbit/s service, the launches of which have contributed to the rise in average speeds. The continuing trend of increasing speeds recorded in the research confirms that consumers are migrating to faster services.

New guidelines for schemes ruling on consumer complaints

Ofcom has recently introduced new measures to help ensure that consumers have an improved experience when having fixed line and mobile phone and broadband complaints dealt with.

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) schemes act as an independent middleman between communications service providers and their customers when a complaint cannot be resolved.

Under the measures, the two Ofcom-approved schemes, Ombudsman Services: Communications (OS) and the Communications and Internet Services Adjudication Service (CISAS), must follow a set of common principles when considering consumer complaints.

These ‘decision making principles’ will help safeguard against any potential inconsistencies in the way the schemes deal with and resolve consumer complaints, resulting in better outcomes for consumers. The schemes must also adopt common compensation guidelines, designed to help them reach consistent and fair decisions when awarding compensation.

The introduction of these measures marks the conclusion of a wide review of ADR schemes by Ofcom, which has a duty to ensure that consumers can access free alternative dispute resolution services. The review looked at whether the schemes still met the approval criteria, which cover a range of factors such as accessibility, fairness and effectiveness, among others.

Ofcom found that both schemes continue to resolve disputes effectively and meet most of the criteria to warrant ‘approved’ status. However, the review found that the schemes delivered inconsistent outcomes for a small minority of consumers. The new measures will address these inconsistencies.

Ofcom recognised that, during the course of the review, both schemes introduced a number of improvements. Notably, the schemes and their processes are now more accessible and efficient, with more consumers than ever before using them.

Ofcom will work with the ADR schemes to ensure that the new decision making principles are working well in practice, and will keep them under review.
New Consumer Guide on nuisance calls and messages

In October, Ofcom published an in-depth guide for consumers on how to protect themselves against nuisance calls and messages and how to make a complaint.

The guide has been written in collaboration with the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO), the Office of Fair Trading (OFT), the Ministry of Justice and the Telephone Preference Service (TPS). It has also been endorsed by consumer groups including Citizens Advice, Consumer Focus, the Communications Consumer Panel and the National Consumer Federation. Ofcom’s aims for this guide are to:

1. explain the different types of nuisance calls and messages consumers might receive, why they occur, and the law which covers them;
2. advise consumers on what action they can take to protect themselves from nuisance calls and messages, as well as who they should complain to; and
3. set out clearly which regulator is responsible for each type of nuisance call and message.

The guide in full is available to download from the Ofcom website, and individual guides on the different types of calls and messages are also available.

Addressing consumer concerns over mid-contract price rises

In October, Ofcom announced plans to consult on how to protect consumers from unexpected price rises within fixed contracts for landline, broadband and mobile services.

Ofcom launched a review earlier this year into the fairness of certain contract terms. This has identified a number of issues concerning the effectiveness of the current rules with which communications providers have to comply, and the potential for consumer harm.

The consultation, which Ofcom aims to publish by the end of the year, will consider whether price variation terms in fixed-term contracts are appropriate. It will look at related issues including the transparency of price variation terms, and the information provided to consumers at the point of sale.

Royal Mail’s ‘Delivery to Neighbour’ Scheme

In September, Ofcom published a statement giving our approval for Royal Mail to roll out its ‘delivery to neighbour’ scheme across the UK.

This will allow Royal Mail to leave certain mail items with a neighbour in the event that consumers are not at home to receive them, although an addressee may choose to opt out of the scheme. The new scheme will reduce the need for consumers to collect items from Royal Mail delivery offices or Post Offices, or for items to be redelivered when addressees are not at home to receive them first time.

Our decision follows consideration of consultation responses and the positive results from trials of the scheme, covering 748,000 addresses in six areas across the UK.

Our decision brings Royal Mail in line with other UK postal operators who are already able to leave items with neighbours as part of their standard delivery practice.

Contact Us

We’d really welcome your views on our Consumer Bulletin. Please e-mail jonathan.ruff@ofcom.org.uk or call 020 7981 3478 if you have any views on how we can improve the next issue.