Next generation text relay now available
People with hearing or speech impairments can now hold faster, more fluent telephone conversations thanks to a ‘next generation’ text relay service, which is now available.

Text relay enables people with hearing or speech impairments to communicate with others over the telephone. A relay assistant acts as an intermediary to convert speech to text, and vice versa, for the two people in conversation.

In October 2012, Ofcom decided that an improved text relay service must be made available to UK users by all communications providers, allowing them to have more natural conversations and easier access on a wider range of mainstream devices, such as PCs, laptops, tablet computers and smartphones.

The new service was launched in October 2014 and has received positive feedback from users.

Ofcom has published a new consumer guide to text relay to help users make the most of the additional benefits offered by the ‘next generation’ service.

BT investigation
The Ofcom approved next generation relay service, which has been developed by BT, was due to be launched by 18 April 2014.

Disappointingly, the deadline for launch was not met.

Ofcom opened an investigation into BT in respect of its failure to launch its next generation text relay service on time and the investigation is currently ongoing.

Delays in TV subtitling remain an issue for viewers
In October 2014, Ofcom fined Three £250,000 for failing to comply with Ofcom’s rules on handling customer complaints.

The investigation into Three was part of Ofcom’s wider monitoring and enforcement programme to ensure communications providers are dealing with customer complaints appropriately and fairly.

However, pre-recorded subtitles being cued out too quickly caused some issues for viewers. Some of the programmes monitored showed incomprehensible speeds of up to 460 words per minute, far higher than Ofcom’s recommended 160 - 180 words per minute.

By analysing subtitles broadcast over a two-year period, Ofcom is aiming to help broadcasters identify opportunities to improve the experience for viewers. We also plan to use the data to review our guidelines on subtitling.

Ofcom expects to publish its third report on live subtitles in April 2015.

Ofcom takes action against Three on complaints handling

In October 2014, Ofcom fined Three £250,000 for failing to comply with Ofcom’s rules on handling customer complaints.

The investigation found that Three did not handle some customer complaints in a fair and timely manner. This was because some complaints were closed without the company establishing that they were fully resolved.

In some other cases, Three did not log calls from customers as complaints when it should have done. This meant that concerns raised by these particular customers were not treated in line with Three’s formal complaints process.

As a result of these breaches, Three did not make these customers sufficiently aware of their right to refer a complaint to alternative dispute resolution (ADR).

ADR is an important piece of consumer protection. It allows customers to refer complaints that cannot be resolved with their provider to an independent body to reach an impartial judgement.

Access to ADR is free of charge to customers. Paper bills sent to Three customers, however, failed to mention this – a requirement on all communications providers.

During the course of the investigation, Three fully co-operated with Ofcom and has taken steps to ensure it is now compliant with its complaints handling obligations. Three also took steps to remedy its breaches where it could.

Ofcom also noted that, although the investigation identified certain shortcomings in Three’s complaints handling processes, the harm to consumers was mitigated due to the efforts of frontline customer service staff.
New online advice and support for small businesses

Small businesses can now access information and advice to help them make the most of communications services, following the launch of a dedicated online portal from Ofcom.

The site – [www.ofcom.org.uk/adviceforbusinesses](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/adviceforbusinesses) – includes advice specifically tailored for businesses on choosing or switching to a new provider, as well as information on navigating and negotiating contracts, and resolving complaints with a provider.

It clearly sets out Ofcom’s role and the rules communications providers must follow when dealing with business customers, offering advice on landline telephone, broadband, mobile and postal services. A summary of the rights of businesses, both large and small, is also available.

The launch of the business portal coincides with the publication of in-depth research to understand how SMEs use communications services, and the quality of experience they receive. This showed that the majority of SMEs (85%) feel well served overall by the communications market.

One in six (17%), however, did not feel well informed about how communications services could help their organisation survive and grow, while around a third (34%) did not have confidence in identifying which new products and services would be valuable to their business.

Some SMEs have also experienced problems with the provision and reliability of communications services. To further explore these issues, Ofcom is also asking SMEs and communications providers to give their views on current levels of availability, choice and quality of communications services for SMEs.

Subject to responses, which must be received by 2 January 2015, Ofcom will outline any next steps in spring next year.

Tackling silent and abandoned calls

In October 2014, Ofcom fined Ageas Retail Limited, a specialist insurer to the over 50s, for making abandoned calls.

An abandoned phone call occurs when a consumer picks up the receiver, but there is no one on the other end of the line.

The Ofcom investigation into Ageas found that the company made 148 abandoned calls to UK consumers over three separate days during a seven-week period.

Ageas was found to be in breach of legislation relating to ‘persistent misuse of a telephone network or service’, although the degree of seriousness and harm to consumers was at the lower end of the scale.

Taking this into account, Ofcom imposed a fine of £10,000 on Ageas. This also reflects the company’s offer of a £10 shopping voucher to affected consumers and the steps it took to bring itself into compliance.

Review of persistent misuse policy

Ofcom is conducting a review of the policy that is used to determine whether an individual or organisation has persistently misused an electronic communications network or service.

The existing policy identifies silent and abandoned calls as two examples of misuse. It describes steps organisations can take to avoid making them and to reduce consumer harm where they do occur.

The aim of the review is to explore whether there is scope for improving the policy and in October 2014 Ofcom asked stakeholders for initial views on what, if any, changes could be made to:

• help make enforcement more efficient and effective;
• reflect technological developments or other changes in the call centre industry; or
• clarify the policy to make it easier for companies to understand and follow.

The call for inputs is now closed and Ofcom is considering responses carefully. Ofcom plans to consult on any proposals for changes to the policy next year.
Ensuring a nation of connected citizens

In October 2014, Ofcom published a report outlining work to help ensure that everyone in the UK benefits as much as possible from communications services.

The report highlights the progress made over the last 10 years in ensuring communications services have kept pace with the changing needs of UK citizens, as well as developments in technology.

It also assesses the challenges facing Ofcom, Government and industry in ensuring the benefits of the communications market are shared across society and the growing expectations of UK citizens are met.

Information to help consumers when choosing broadband and mobile services

Ofcom regularly publishes information to help consumers choose communications services that best suit their needs.

Fixed broadband speeds

In October 2014, we published research measuring actual residential fixed broadband speeds in the UK.

Key findings from Ofcom’s research showed that, between November 2013 and May 2014:

- the average actual UK fixed broadband speed increased by 5% (0.9Mbit/s) to 18.7Mbit/s;
- the average speed delivered by cable broadband reached 43.3Mbit/s, overtaking the average speed for fibre connections for the first time (42.0Mbit/s);
- take-up of services with a headline speed of 30Mbit/s and above increased from 24% to 28% of connections, while the average speed of these connections remained stable at 47Mbit/s; and
- the extent to which speeds were maintained during peak evening times varied significantly between broadband packages, ranging from 76% to 96% of maximum speeds.

Alongside the research we also published new information to help consumers understand their options when choosing a new fixed broadband service or get the most from their existing broadband.

Mobile broadband speeds

In November 2014, Ofcom published its first research into consumers’ experience of mobile broadband in the UK since the 4G auction in 2013.

The research measured the performance of 4G and 3G services on smartphones from the four main mobile operators – EE, O2, Three and Vodafone – in Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London and Manchester.

The research compared the performance of 4G and 3G services overall and highlighted variations between operators across four key measures:

- **Download speed** – the speed it takes to download data from the web.
- **Upload speed** – how long it takes to upload content such as pictures or videos.
- **Web browsing speed** – the time it takes to load a standard web page.
- **Latency** – the time it takes data to travel to a third-party server and back, which is important to reduce delays when making video calls, for example.

Ofcom will continue to monitor and report on how mobile service quality develops over time. The second phase of this research is under way and we expect to publish in spring 2015.
Campaign to explain major changes for telephone users

Ofcom and the UK telephone industry are working together on a major new consumer information campaign to explain the biggest changes to calls in more than a decade.

The national campaign will launch in early 2015, under the banner UK Calling. It will explain two important changes coming into effect on a single day in summer 2015: clearer call rates for 08, 09 and 118 calls; and Freephone (0800 and 0808) calls becoming free from all mobiles.

An information website – ukcalling.info – has been launched so that people can find out more before the full campaign launches next year.

During 2015, UK Calling information will be provided directly to landline and mobile customers, using channels such as paper and online bills, text messages, customer magazines, social media and information in high street stores. There will also be advertising across national newspapers, radio stations and online.

Ofcom, the communications regulator, is co-ordinating the campaign, supported by the UK’s largest telephone providers: BT, EE, O2, Sky, TalkTalk, Three, Virgin Media and Vodafone. KC, the major operator in Kingston upon Hull, is also involved in the campaign. The changes themselves will apply to all consumer mobile and landline phones in the UK.

CONTACT US

We’d really welcome your views on our Consumer Bulletin. Please e-mail rapinder.newton@ofcom.org.uk or call 020 7783 4897 if you have any views on how we can improve the next issue.