

Voice telephony services for deaf people

An independent report for Ofcom

Foreword

Communications services are important for all citizens, including disabled people who can face particular difficulties when using them. We are firmly committed to ensuring that disabled people can access communications services on an equivalent basis to others, so that they are able to take full advantage of the benefits such services can bring. We therefore proposed in our Access and Inclusion consultation (published in March 2009) to tackle the most critical issues that disabled people face with communications services.

We believe we should start this review by looking at the existing text relay service, which gives hearing impaired people access to the telephone. We know that this service is highly valued by users. However, it relies on technology that is 30 years old. We also know that people with hearing impairments are making increasing use of other telecommunications services, such as email, text messages (SMS) and instant messaging.

It is therefore timely to consider how well the needs of hearing impaired people in the UK are served by the different types of telecommunications services available to them. So, earlier this year, we asked Plum Consulting to conduct an independent study into the telecommunications needs of people with hearing impairments, the extent to which these needs are met by existing telecommunications services and the extent to which new relay services might deliver increased benefits.

We welcome this independent report by Plum Consulting, (http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/telecoms/reports/voice_telep/) which significantly furthers our understanding of these issues.

In particular, the views of the twenty one people interviewed by Plum, set out in the annexes of the report, provide a vivid and valuable insight into what hearing impaired people want from telecommunications services and also underline the point that different levels of impairment give rise to different needs. We are grateful to all those people and organisations who gave their time to Plum Consulting.

We remain committed to helping ensure necessary improvements are made. However, the issues here are complex and not for Ofcom alone. They require a thorough analysis of costs and benefits, and wide-ranging discussions with government, industry and disability stakeholders. We will set out our further thinking later this year.

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