

**Minutes of the 88th meeting of the Advisory Committee for England,
connected meeting at DoubleTree by Hilton Bristol City Centre and via
Teams on 6 June 2024**

Present

Paula Carter	Chair (mins 6 to end)
Aaqil Ahmed	Member
Grant Davis	Member
Caroline Gardner	Member
Edleen John	Member
Mauro Mortali	Member

In attendance

Dekan Apajee	Ofcom Content Board Member for England (via Teams, mins 10 - 13)
Angela Dean	Ofcom Board Member for England
Stephen Darke	Director, England
David Edwards	Meeting Secretary
Jenny Borritt	Communications Consumer Panel Manager (mins 14 – 15)
Bristol-based independent TV production companies (min 21)	
Professor Philip McCann, The Productivity Institute, University of Manchester (via Teams, min 22)	
Other Ofcom colleagues (via Teams)	

<p>Introduction</p> <p>1. Aaqil Ahmed welcomed Members and attendees to the 88th meeting of the Committee, taking place in Bristol and via Teams (the Chair, Paula Carter, was due to arrive shortly). Richard Spencer, normally an observer as Communications Consumer Panel Member for England, had sent apologies.</p>
<p>Declaration of Members’ Interests</p> <p>2. No additional interests were declared.</p>
<p>Minutes of the meeting held on 29 February 2024 and matters arising – Minutes 87(23)</p> <p>3. The minutes of the meeting held on 29 February 2024 were APPROVED for signature by the Chair as an accurate record.</p> <p>4. Members noted today’s intention to engage via Teams with Tracy Brabin, Mayor of West Yorkshire, as today’s first agenda item, and later in the meeting in person with Dan Norris, Mayor of the West of England. By reason of the pre-General Election period those discussions had been postponed.</p> <p>5. At the previous meeting, under an item on English Devolution, a question had been raised about the Scarborough Cyber Cluster. Stephen Darke provided a verbal update on the project, following a phone call with the Combined Authority. In April the Executive had held a Teams session with the Committee to discuss initial findings from Ofcom’s Local Media Review, as well as plans for the upcoming Public Service Media (PSM) Review. It was noted that local media research and the Terms of Reference for the PSM Review would now be published following the General Election.</p>

Ofcom Board update

6. Angela Dean summarised some recent topics considered by the Board (minutes and notes of meetings being available on the Ofcom website), including those with an England dimension. The Board had met three times since the last Committee meeting.
7. At its March 2024 meeting the Board noted the restoration of broadcast services at the Bilsdale TV and radio transmitter in North Yorkshire and ongoing work by Ofcom's Spectrum Group to monitor progress to improve the response of both broadcasters and Arqiva to any future major incidents.
8. In April the Board discussed the Telecom's Access Review 2026. Although at an early stage, it would set regulation to underpin telecoms markets from 2026-31. Development of Ofcom's next Three-Year-Plan 2025-28, including funding scenarios, was also discussed.
9. At its May meeting the Board noted that Ofcom's Networks and Communications Group had successfully persuaded telecoms companies to share poles and ducts in Hull. The meeting also included discussion of Ofcom's regulatory approach to the General Election (announced later the same day as the Board meeting). The Board noted the speed with which Ofcom would need to respond to election-related complaints and that established processes were in place. Concerns could be complaint volumes and issues of mis- and disinformation. Should it be necessary, Ofcom would divert resources as required. In addition, steps had been taken to engage with broadcasters, including a roundtable, and with online platforms. The Board had also noted that Ofcom's relationship with its counterpart in the European Commission had strengthened and an MOU on joint working had been signed.

Content Board update

10. Dekan Apajee reported on recent topics considered by the Content Board (minutes being available on the Ofcom website). Since the last Committee meeting, topics discussed by the Content Board had included local media, Channel 4 relicensing, the scope of Ofcom's PSM Review and Ofcom's research on audience attitudes towards politicians presenting programmes on television and radio.
11. Members noted that the Ofcom Chief Executive, Melanie Dawes, and the Group Director Broadcasting and Media Group, Cristina Nicolotti Squires, had recently given evidence to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry on the future of news. A link to their [evidence](#) could be shared with the Committee.
12. Committee Members discussed briefly the topics of news and current affairs, including (changing) definitions and audience confusion and how best to address the latter.

Consumer Panel update – ACE 7(24)

13. Members had received and noted an update paper reporting on recent Communications Consumer Panel (CCP) activity and current priorities (minutes of meetings being available on the Panel's website). A colleague from the support team flagged that the Panel would have a new chair, Helen Froud, from 1 June, and that a process was in train to recruit five new Panel members (including a new Panel member

for England from December 2024). As with Ofcom, some Panel activity had been paused due to the pre-General Election period.

Public Policy update – ACE 8(24)

14. A range of issues were flagged. In relation to the General Election, Members noted that updated guidance had been shared with colleagues to maintain Ofcom’s independence and impartiality; as part of ‘wash-up’ in Parliament the Media Bill had passed; it was expected that many new MPs would be elected; and the main political party manifestos were yet to be published.

15. A Member expressed concern that the Media Act 2024 did not include specific assurances about religious broadcasting and that it appeared to leave the Public Service Broadcasters to decide for themselves what PSB meant. It was noted, however, that the Act placed an obligation on PSBs to ensure that a sufficient quantity of AV content reflected the lives and concerns of different communities and cultural interests and traditions in the UK; and that Ofcom had a role in determining PSB, with powers to revisit and amend broadcast licences when required.

16. Another issue discussed by the Committee was the definition of vulnerable in relation to telecoms consumers and implications for migration from the PSTN to VoIP, one dimension being the ease (or lack of) for consumers to register themselves as vulnerable with their providers. A concern, voiced by a Member, was upselling/ forced migration to fibre broadband when a customer contract terminated.

17. A recent [report](#) of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee inquiry *Supporting Mobile Connectivity* included some criticisms of how mobile coverage was reported, including some recommendations for Ofcom. The latter could be shared with the Committee.

18. It was noted that Ofcom had published a Spring update to Connected Nations in April 2024 and that, when factoring in fixed wireless and fixed line networks, the number of premises unable to get access to decent broadband had dropped from 61,000 to 57,000 premises. If available, data on the split between residential and business premises would be shared with the Committee.

Media Act programme update – ACE 9(24)

19. Members were briefed on Ofcom’s implementation programme for the new Media Act 2024, updated since publication of Ofcom’s Roadmap in February. Members noted that Royal Assent had been received on 24 May, there had been limited debate in ‘wash-up’ and the parliamentary process was not fully complete as secondary legislation remained outstanding. In addition, the Executive would go back to parliamentarians to discuss any concerns they would have raised had debate not been curtailed.

20. There had been debate around out of London PSB quotas and the Committee would be concerned if this translated into out of England quotas. In response, the Executive flagged that there was a limit to the number of sustainable production hubs in the UK. A Member flagged jurisdiction issues in relation to SVoDs, it being noted that Ofcom regulated Amazon Prime and Disney+ but not, currently, Netflix and Apple TV. In discussion reference was made to regulation of voice-activated selection services, such as smart speakers, and de-regulation of local and commercial radio. With respect to

voice activated services, Ofcom would be looking at technology and the market as a whole, rather than focus on specific devices. Changes affecting radio had been broadly welcomed by the sector.

Bristol-based indies

21. Three Bristol-based independent TV production companies had been invited to discuss with the Committee the challenges and opportunities that exist for the production sector in the west of England. Issues and concerns raised included a downturn in commissions and in advertising revenues; what it meant to be Bristol-based; uncertainties around the future volume of indie commissions; freelancers, those working but concern about the number leaving the sector; small indies losing out to larger production companies; drama productions often being London-based; streamer commissions and a fall-off; Channel 4's presence in Bristol and the potential impact of it establishing its own production business; funding available from the West of England Combined Authority for Bristol's creative sector; and the negative impact of delays (sometimes silence) and cancelled projects.

The UK Regional-National Economic Problem

22. Professor Philip McCann had been invited to discuss and inform the Committee's thinking about UK economic/ geographic disparities. He expressed the views that the regional problem was central to the national problem; that countries that were devolved tended to grow more evenly; that centralisation produced imbalance; that the UK was partitioned and internally decoupled; that UK productivity levels were flat and growth zero in many regions, since before 2008; that the problem was primarily due to differential regional impacts of globalisation; that by OECD and EU standards, the UK was an outlier and displayed very high interregional productivity differentials. It was agreed that the presentation would be shared with members.

Media Nations 2024 – ACE 10(24)

23. The Committee was briefed on the scope and some early high-level findings from Ofcom's Media Nations 2024: UK report, in the early stages of drafting and due for publication at the end of July. Members made a number of suggestions on how data could be cut into demographic subsets; noted that around seven in ten UK respondents who had watched a PSB TV channel in the last six months were satisfied with PSBs overall but queried whether that was good or bad; queried how useful the data was to make predictions about the pace of change; and noted that in April Ofcom had published [Audio listening in the UK](#) and which could be shared with Members.

BBC Annual Report – ACE 11(24)

24. Members were given an overview of Ofcom's approach to its BBC Annual Report 2024 publication. This would be an assessment of the BBC's performance against its Mission and Public Purposes and contain sections relevant to the nations and regions, including the BBC's output in England in 2023/24 and reporting, for example, on the impact of increased programme sharing across the BBC's 39 local radio stations in England to allow it to reinvest in online content. There was discussion about criteria to qualify as a regional production (location of spend and talent) and the need to gain a perspective on audiences that the BBC might not be reaching.

<p>Members’ open session</p> <p>25. Returning to a topic surfaced earlier in the meeting, Members discussed news, including audience expectations, the standards expected, content as news, opinion and current affairs and at times a combination of these genres, and value in guiderails or signposting.</p>
<p>Future agendas</p> <p>26. The next Committee meeting was expected to have a networks theme. A Member suggested inclusion of an item on the Shared Rural Network (to boost mobile coverage). Another Member proposed that INCA (the Independent Networks Cooperative Association) be invited to discuss competitive digital infrastructure and agreed to pursue INCA contacts. The Chair proposed an item on the communications policies of the incoming government.</p>
<p>Information items</p> <p>27. Broadcast, Postal and Telecoms data (England) – ACE 12(24): The paper was noted.</p>
<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>28. There was no other business.</p>
<p>Date of the Next Meeting</p> <p>29. The next scheduled Committee meeting would be held on 3 October 2024.</p>