

Question 1: Do you have any views on Ofcom's proposal to review the existing TopNetUK scheme, which could help inform this piece of work?:

I believe that the current QoS scheme is not working as well as it was originally envisaged. This is certainly the belief of the majority of CSPs in the scheme. There have been criticisms of the published performance measures in terms of suitability, relevance, comparability, customer need, together with a perception that the average customer doesn't understand nor pays any attention to the measures as they do not give the information they require. All of these are true but do not prove that the scheme is unnecessary or offers no benefits. The fault lies with the initial concept and framework of measures. The Topcomm Forum has tried to manage the pitfalls of the scheme since inception in 2005 by introducing amendments and making new proposals and indeed they share some of the blame for not getting it right first time. This review by Ofcom is an opportunity to get it right using the lessons learned over the last three years. Looking at the existing TopNet Scheme is only one element of the review. Mobile services have however one fundamental difference. The market choice is dominated by the consumer user, since most business users are tied into a company contract and small businesses are by definition essentially consumer users, and therefore it is entirely about price and free minutes. (and of course who is offering the latest phone and gizmo). Network coverage is less of a concern as is time taken to fix. Residential customers almost never consider what happens if the mobile phone fails. All this considered and despite the difference between choices offered to the customer there is still a comparison to be made. This is more important as the market moves towards more and more bundling of services. TV, BB, Fixed Line, Mobile, the performance of any one of these in a package could influence the overall choice of provider

Question 2: To what extent would it be useful for consumers to have access to comparative performance information on broadband speed and broadband quality of service?:

Broadband has fast become the average users first choice for communications in the home, second to multiple choice TV with a fixed line telephone service coming third. Therefore it would seem essential to include Broadband measures in the suite of QoS measures. Speed and accessibility are the main issues and any comparison between providers would be a useful. A true comparable measure would be a bonus.

Question 3: Do you agree with Ofcom's proposed timetable for phase one of our review of quality of service information?:

The proposed timetable seems to be adequate but needs to take into account any potential slippage due to tardy responses to the consultation from CSPs, consumer organisations or indeed any subsequent responses to those from Ofcom.

Question 4: Should Ofcom require industry to publish QoS information?:

I believe that there is a need to publish QoS information. All CSPs should be mandated to provide sufficient information to enable informed choice of provider. This extends to Fixed Line, Broadband and Mobile services. The relevance and suitability of the information provided is currently under review. It is the joint responsibility of Ofcom and the CSPs to ensure that the published information is fit for purpose.

Question 5: Should Ofcom encourage the development of more or more detailed consumer surveys focusing on customer service?:

Customer Service is an important element when comparing providers. It is often the first and probably only opportunity that an average user has to judge the performance of their service provider. Therefore a measure of response times, level of service, response to complaints, billing accuracy etc, is important and when included in QoS gives a useful comparison of the commitment of each provider to its customer base. Surveys are however entirely dependent on the content of the questions asked, to obtain purely objective responses without leading to perhaps unintentional biased responses. All consumers, business and residential alike are getting fed up with surveys, they come in the post, from the phone, internet and even by text. By all means ask the questions but do it right and do it once. Don't keep calling on the same customer for the same reasons.

Question 6: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring industry to collect and publish QoS information, is there any need to amend the existing QoS Direction?:

From the reasons already outlined in the questions above there is obviously a need for change. Firstly there should without a doubt be a Direction but the type of measures, the areas they address and the means of publishing those measures should be carefully considered. Secondly the Direction must include Mobile and Broadband services. With all of the criticisms against the existing QoS scheme it would be improper to continue without an overhaul to address at least some of those issues.

Question 7: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended - how should the information be made available?:

It is clear that the QoS scheme requires performance information to be made available to the public and that this is easiest done via a website. This does carry a cost which is met by the Topcomm Forum. It is equally clear that members of the Forum would not be happy to see those costs increase. The website is independent and needs to remain so to maintain impartiality with no bias to any CSP. The current Topcomm website meets those needs and has done for three years. It has been improved over this period and further enhancements are planned. I don't see any advantage in using a third party website. Ofcom could specify that the Topcomm website be used going forward to ensure continuity and to remove the possibility of providers making ad hoc alternative arrangements. Whichever option is chosen, there needs to be an

improvement in the way the website is publicised. Ofcom should take the lead on this and promote each new publication.

Question 8: Would third parties ? such as price comparison sites ? be interested in collating QoS information?:

It is unlikely that 3rd party price comparison sites would be keen to collate performance information given by industry providers. A better option would be if they were required to provide a link to the site where it is currently available, ie. Topcomm.

Question 9: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? what services should be covered?:

Fixed Line services for both residential and business customers should remain part of the amended QoS Direction. Nowadays, customers use more than one method to communicate and there has been a great leap in Broadband Services both in availability and customer demand. It is sensible therefore to provide performance measures for all services, Fixed line Voice, Mobile and Broadband. Customers often purchase these products as a bundle and of course mix and match providers. Performance of any one of the products could be a deciding factor for new customers or those existing customers considering a change. Broadband speed and service levels have become particularly important to end users.

Question 10: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? what type of revenues should the threshold for participation be based on?:

It would seem appropriate to use Relevant Turnover as a threshold as this is already reported to Ofcom and monitoring would therefore be a simple exercise.

Question 11: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? should we exempt providers with less than a certain number of subscribers from the requirements?:

Size of customer base is a significant factor to consider. Those companies with fewer customers can often fall into the 'did not meet threshold' for some of the measures. There should be a minimum requirement, the 50,000 subscriber level suggested may be appropriate but needs to be judged against how many providers fall into this category.

Question 12: How easily could providers assess whether they hit a subscriber threshold?:

We already collect information on numbers of lines and numbers of bills sent out. Calculating the actual number of individual subscribers would be a related task. This is a relatively simple exercise for residential but more complex for business due to large companies having several accounts under different names. Would only be an issue though for those providers who were near to the threshold.

Question 13: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? what should the relevant turnover threshold be?:

There are two factors to consider. One is the percentage of providers captured by the threshold and the other is the numbers of providers who would then be responsible for the co-regulation of the scheme. To avoid disproportionate impact on smaller providers a higher threshold than the current one would be appropriate. To set this too high would allow some of the current participants to drop out of the scheme. To achieve a sensible balance the £40M threshold would seem the best option.

Question 14: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? how could the information requirements be defined and measured?:

Achieving consensus from the industry about definitions and measures has been a difficulty facing the Forum since inception. With additional companies joining the Forum the situation would be aggravated. To allow industry to define parameters without influence from Ofcom would result in a lengthy debate before any agreement was reached. Therefore definitions and metrics should be jointly specified by Ofcom and stakeholders

Question 15: Should Ofcom remove, keep or replace the existing parameter on service provision?:

Service provision times are an essential indication of performance and should be retained for fixed line voice and introduced for broadband. Mobile is a different situation and provision times are irrelevant to customers. Due to differing lead times for fixed voice offered by providers, the current parameter is seen to be non comparable when presented in percentage of orders provided on time. Average time to provide would be a better comparison and give customers a truer indication of performance. However although this works for residential services, some business products are complex and carry much longer lead times for install. Average times would need to apply to a set of common products to be effective and comparable.

Delays attributable to the customer can often be considerable and to include this in the overall provide time would not allow a true indicator of overall actual provision time. However if the industry determines that customer delay is at a similar level for all providers then the result would be comparable.

Indirect provisioning is subject entirely on the performance by a third party provider.

To measure this other than by a separate measure would be counter productive as it would skew the overall result. It would also mean that those providers who rely exclusively on OLOs to provide services would have higher average provide times than those who have their own network.

Question 16: How much would it cost to introduce and maintain a new parameter on service provision?:

There would undoubtedly need to be changes made to existing system reports and perhaps some process changes to ensure that data is captured. This depends on the detail of the new parameter. Average time to provide using fastest 95% for example would be something we could do from existing data. To include/exclude customer delays would involve some rework. System changes to meet new parameters are unlikely to happen so any costs will be restricted to changes in reports and process.

Question 17: As a provider, is data on service provision something you already collect?:

Yes

Question 18: Do you agree with this definition of ?complaint??:

Yes

Question 19: Should Ofcom remove, keep or replace the existing parameter on complaints?:

All providers do, or should, maintain a process for capturing complaints. This includes mobile, fixed line and broadband providers. The existing parameter gives information on how well providers resolve complaints within 28 days. Furthermore those resolved at first point of contact are included and the more of these complaints recorded, the better the performance measured. Therefore the existing parameter needs amendment. The measure should be replaced by average time to resolve. Additionally, an indication of complaint volumes needs to be introduced in terms of number of complaints per 1000 customers. Numbers of complaints resolved in first 24 hours should be measured separately. There should be separate measures for voice, broadband and mobile.

Question 20: How much would it cost to introduce and maintain a new parameter on resolution of complaints (option 3a)?:

New parameters would require changes to existing system reports. The costs would be minimal.

Question 21: How much would it cost to introduce and maintain a new parameter on total number of complaints (option 3b)?:

New parameters would require changes to existing system reports. The costs would be minimal.

Question 22: If a new parameters on total complaints per thousand customers was introduced (option 3b), should customers taking multiple services count as multiple customers?:

A customer who has broadband, fixed line and mobile services will have different views on dissatisfaction depending on which service is being used. The issue compelling a customer to make a complaint will vary depending on the service. Therefore they should be measured separately and from the point of view of measuring volumes a single customer with three services should count as three customers. However a customer complaining about more than one service at the same time should be logged as only one complaint, as per existing rules.

Question 23: If new parameters were introduced, is there a case for requiring complaints data to be published separately for fixed voice, mobile and broadband services?:

Yes

Question 24: As a provider, is data on complaints something you already collect?:

Yes

Question 25: How could we ensure complaints were being recorded in an accurate and comparable way, and how could we avoid the potential for gaming by providers?:

The current definitions require providers to distinguish between complaints and enquiries. Any expression of dissatisfaction is a catch all which doesn't require interpretation. A measure which records volumes of complaints shouldn't by its introduction change the way providers categorise complaints or how audits of the data is carried out. There will naturally be an incentive to record less complaints whereas previously (by including those resolved at first point of contact) the measure encouraged and rewarded the opposite. To minimise potential gaming, perhaps the percentage of complaints resolved in time should remain alongside the new measure. Any positive effect on one would have a negative affect on the other.

Question 26: Should Ofcom remove or replace the existing parameter on complaints about faults?:

The likelihood of a fault with any service is information customers find useful. The current, faults per 100 lines is exact but not easy to interpret. We used in CPI days to include fault likelihood, ie. One fault per 100 lines equates to one fault per 25 years. As we already collect data for this measure it would not be burdensome to retain it. Similarly we should include data for broadband.

Question 27: If we introduced a new parameter, should it be limited to broadband providers?:

It would be more useful to broadband users to know the likelihood of experiencing a fault since the fault rate is proportionately higher. Nevertheless as the industry already collects the data for fixed voice, there is no need to exclude it. As above, the expectancy of experiencing a fault in terms of once every xx months or years should be easy to understand and allow easy comparison.

Question 28: How much would it cost to introduce and maintain a new parameter on complaints about faults?:

All complaints are currently logged and measured. As part of the logging process complaints relating to faults are coded as such. However under current rules we do not log complaints resulting from an initial fault report. Subsequent complaints made about a fault are logged.

Question 29: As a provider, is data on complaints about faults something you already collect?:

Yes, as stated above we do collect data on complaints about faults, other than for the initial fault report.

Question 30: Should Ofcom remove or replace the existing parameter on how long it takes to repair a fault?:

Fault repair times are an essential performance measure in the same vein as service provision times as outlined in question 15. The existing parameter is however subject to the same criticisms as for provisioning. Therefore an amendment is required to introduce a time based measurement. The proposed 95% fastest and 5% slowest would give a true comparable indication of performance. Broadband should be measured separately.

Question 31: How much would it cost to introduce and maintain a new parameter on how long it takes to repair a fault?:

Amendments to existing system reports would be required. The data to be included in the calculation for a time based measure is already collected. Therefore additional costs to introduce would be restricted to report writing only.

Question 32: As a provider, is data on how long it takes to repair a fault something you already collect?:

Yes

Question 33: Should Ofcom remove or keep the existing parameter on billing accuracy complaints?:

Billing accuracy is something that people are concerned about and would like information on. There is a wide variation across the industry in terms of numbers of billing errors that occur, in some cases significant, in others less so. The current

measure that gives figures of 1.1 or 4.5 or 0.18 are not apparent in their meaning and the average consumer would find difficult to interpret. Even when reported as 1.1 upheld billing complaints per 1000 bills, although comprehensive, is not user friendly. Billing accuracy as currently reported, is difficult for the provider to, (a) interpret how to log when received, (b) to extract from systems and (c) to measure when reports are analysed. If the end result is a number that the customer doesn't understand, then the parameter must be reviewed. For simplicity log all complaints about billing, irrespective of cause and then report the measure as a straightforward ratio of complaints to number of bills issued in the form of 1 : xxx or, the likelihood of an erroneous bill being received once every xx months or years.

Question 34: How much would it cost to providers not currently part of the TopComm Forum to introduce and maintain the existing parameter on billing accuracy complaints?:

Assuming each provider who may join the scheme already has a method for capturing complaints which is a minimum sensible requirement for any customer service industry, the basic data is being collected. If the database has been structured with analysis in mind, types of complaints will be coded to facilitate that analysis. Only two pieces of information are required to produce the measure. However the distinction between upheld and non upheld complaints is a more specific requirement and may need the introduction of a software modification to the database and/or processes to capture accurately. Introduction costs would therefore vary greatly depending on the providers existing complaint logging methods. Maintenance costs once implemented would be minimal and restricted to audit of the data to ensure process rules are being followed.

Question 35: As a provider, is data on billing accuracy complaints something you already collect?:

Yes

Question 36: Should Ofcom introduce a new parameter on the time it takes to answer a consumer's call?:

Yes. Time to answer is the single biggest comment when people talk about customer service. Therefore a consumer needs to see a comparison across the industry. Given this information and noting that Provider A takes 5 seconds to answer and Provider B takes 5 minutes, could well indicate to the customer how much value the provider places on customer care.

Question 37: How much would it cost to introduce and maintain a new parameter on the time it takes to answer a consumer's call?:

No costs at all. This information is collected on a daily basis and is made readily available. All providers would measure their own call centre performance as a matter of routine. The only proviso is at what point is the time to answer measured from. Is it from receipt of ring tone to automatic answer, or from ring tone to speaking to a human?

Question 38: As a provider, do you already have in place systems that capture the time it takes for your customer service agents to answer a customer's call?:

Yes

Question 39: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? should providers be required to publish QoS information on bundles?:

There is a need to continue to provide QoS information on fixed line voice and broadband for all parameters, particularly for service provision and service repair. Mobiles less so as already discussed. So the proposal that some parameters would exclude fixed voice is irrelevant for this discussion. It is possible to provide and publish information on bundles as well as individual services. If the figures were presented carefully there should be no confusion to the consumer. In any event all components of bundles are provided on the same day (usually) and often attract the same lead times as the individual components, this is in the economic interests of the provider. It does become complicated though where components have different lead times and the whole bundle therefore has to be measured against the longest lead time.

Question 40: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? who should QoS information be provided for? Should this include large business consumers?:

The QoS measures should be provided for both residential and business customers. Business includes SMEs and Corporates. Large businesses do have individual bespoke services, fault repair times, provisioning SLAs, together with their own service managers account managers and performance reports. These are all negotiated at point of sale and vary from customer to customer. From this there is clearly an argument for excluding large business from the measures. The measures themselves do not suffer nor are unduly influenced, by including large businesses. The only exception perhaps being for service provisioning. If we are to introduce time based measures, the inclusion of large businesses will be a factor as the lead times on many bespoke services are high in comparison to those in a product portfolio. However, just because there is not deemed to be a need to include them, does not necessarily mean they should be automatically excluded. It could be quite difficult for providers to separate this information from their management systems and more importantly how a large business may be defined needs to be decided. Whatever criteria are decided upon could be difficult or impossible to implement. The costs of including large business in the measures are non-existent. The data is the same. The costs of excluding could be comparatively high.

Question 41: What evidence do you have that small and large businesses would / would not benefit from QoS information?:

Many small businesses have similar requirements and have similar products to residential customers so therefore have similar needs in terms of relevant QoS information. Medium business customers also make enquiries about our performance in provision times and fault repair. This category, more than any other will make decisions on choice of provider on grounds other than price alone. Large customers are often indifferent to current performance because they can negotiate preferential service at a price. Nevertheless, they do make objective comparisons and we have had prospective customers who ask us for our latest performance figures.

Question 42: Would information on one or more particular services be more or less valuable for different sizes of businesses?:

The size of the business undoubtedly dictates the type of information they find useful in deciding on choice of supplier. To some price may be the only factor, to others restoration times may be of prime interest. Often though it is a combination of all types of information that will be looked at. Since some major accounts have different needs from others and indeed may have the same needs as a residential customer, for example where perhaps price is the only motivator, to say which piece of information is more relevant than another is difficult to define. Better to provide as much information as possible available to all categories of customers and let them decide which they find most relevant.

Question 43: Could reporting information for small and large businesses together be misleading?:

Potentially yes, but not if it is made clear that the information published is based on standard products and standard lead times. This would then apply to all SMEs. Any large business would be aware that bespoke services can be made available and are negotiable. If the information includes a level of performance for all businesses large and small, it would apply to all providers and therefore would be comparable and be relevant.

Question 44: How could Ofcom distinguish between small and large businesses?:

This is the major problem. In the past size has been based on numbers of employees. This though is flawed, since we have small companies in terms of employees who generate large revenues and large corporates with relatively small annual spends. Judging size on employee base is difficult to determine and impossible to police. At what point does a small to medium business become a large one and how do you know when this happens? Revenue is a simpler indicator but the same customer may have a large spend with one provider and a smaller spend with another. Overall value of the company may be relevant for this exercise but its value to an individual provider may not be relevant when deciding to include in its top tier of companies. Which threshold to use is another difficulty. Anything above say £1M annual spend could be right for one provider and remove its top 50 customers but may only remove

one or indeed none from another. Two suggestions; one is to exclude the top 10% of all revenue earners from the measures. This would still be a large mesh sieve but would be the same for all providers. However some of these customers may be in receipt of standard products and could therefore be measured in the same way as other SMEs. The other suggestion is therefore to decree not in terms of small and large but on the basis of standard and bespoke. Any company who buys a bespoke service and enjoys a level of service outside the standard could be excluded from the measures. This will inevitably include companies which are not regarded as large in size or spend but the remainder will fit within the scope of business products that the performance measures are intended to encompass.

Question 45: How easy would a threshold based on the Communications Act definition be to implement and how much would it cost?:

To use the Communications Act definition of numbers of employees as a threshold would not work for the reasons set out above. It would be impractical since the customer would have to provide the information on a monthly basis. The provider would then have to frequently change which customers are in or out of scope. This is an impossible task and one which could not be enforced or monitored accurately. No legislation could force a customer to communicate regularly with a service provider in this way. The costs of doing this perpetually would be considerable.

Question 46: How easy would a threshold based on a business customer's annual communications spend be to implement and how much would it cost?:

This would be much easier to monitor since all of the required information would be held within the customer's data. Exactly how this data could then be applied to the customer's information on provisioning and fault restoration systems is another matter. Each system would need access to large look up tables which themselves would have to be maintained from billing engines and then split into different products. Overall quite a task, impossible for some and costly to implement in terms of changes to existing reporting and in some cases the systems themselves.

Question 47: How easy would a threshold based on whether a business had a bespoke service level agreement in place with its provider be to implement and how much would it cost?:

This is on the face of it a simpler threshold to implement since it would only require a flag on the customer management system to denote bespoke services or standard. Exactly how that flag could be incorporated is perhaps not so simple. I'm not sure that all current customers could be classified in this way depending on how the data is stored by each provider. Nevertheless it is one worth exploring. The costs of identifying such customers and providing a system flag in a manner fit for QoS would vary enormously from provider to provider.

Question 48: As a provider, do you internally audit information on quality of service? What data do you audit and how much does this cost?:

Yes. Internal audits are carried out each reporting period, ie. Quarterly. Data for all of the published measures are audited each period. The data is obtained via system reports running on all major customer management systems. This involves data for service provisioning, service restoration, complaint handling, billing numbers and line counts. In addition to audits of system data, system reports are audited to ensure they are extracting the correct data from the systems, processes are audited to ensure they follow compliant procedures to allow accurate input of information to systems and people using those procedures are interviewed to ensure they are maintaining compliant practice.

The number of man days spent includes on site auditing activities with further time for travelling. In addition feedback reports, setting up audits, running system reports, sampling data, providing management summaries and other related activities accounts for additional off site time. Added to this is the preparation and submission of the full audit report, response to the comparability review, preparing internal board reports, monthly progress tables and collating and circulating the published figures.

The costs are therefore in accordance with the Ofcom estimate c £30,000 per annum. As stated though, our company employs full time internal auditors who carry out regular audits as part of the ISO:9001 registration. QoS audits are in addition to this and if not a requirement of the direction would not be carried out on such a regular basis.

Question 49: If a member of the TopComm scheme, did you internally audit information on quality of service prior to the imposition of the scheme and what, if any, additional auditing costs did you incur as a result of the scheme?:

Yes. Under the requirements for CPI the company provided compliant measures throughout until it was replaced by QoS. Audits were carried out by an external auditor but he was accompanied at all times by an experienced internal auditor. During the transition phase from CPI to QoS the external auditor was required to cover all areas of compliance and was used on a consultancy basis to assist with system requirements and process changes. The costs therefore increased during this initial set up during 2005. Following the pilot trial, the decision was made to undertake all audits internally and the services of the external auditor were terminated. This resulted in an overall cost saving following full implementation of QoS. The amount of time spent on site auditing and data sampling for QoS has not changed and therefore the internal costs remain the same. The data audited both before the QoS scheme and after has similarly remained the same. There have been benefits in consolidating a number of legacy systems within the business and this has resulted in fewer systems and reduced audit costs but this is due to internal developments and not as a result of the introduction of QoS

Question 50: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? should Ofcom determine the verification process or leave it to providers?:

One of the failings of the current scheme has been a general lack of consistent agreement between providers on how, when and where audit should be carried out. Some audit all activities for each measure for each quarter. Some audit once every publishing period and do not include all activities. The only way to ensure compliance and therefore accurate performance measures is to audit on a regular basis. As data is collected quarterly, audits should also be done quarterly. The scope should be sufficient to ensure data is as accurate as possible. To avoid misinterpretation of this key requirement and prevent some companies auditing an absolute minimum of their functional areas, Ofcom should mandate the audit rules and insist that proof of activities carried out during audit are recorded in detail with the six monthly audit report. Leaving decisions that affect this crucial part of the process to the providers themselves will not help successful co-regulation going forward and indeed, as has been proved over the last three years, has been an obstacle to it.

Accuracy audits can be carried out by a suitably qualified internal auditor or by an independent qualified external auditor. This could be one auditor or one audit body for every provider or a different one for each depending on their personal preference.

There is still a need for some review of the accuracy audits to ensure that all of the measures produced are comparable. The current process uses an independent auditor to carry out a comparability review to satisfy himself and the rest of the providers that each submission is comparable and also as far as can be determined, accurate. The comparability auditor's role is a pivotal one and is the subject of much controversy. There has been much debate about the role not being concerned with accuracy. This is unavoidable as accuracy and comparability are firmly linked. It is because of the doubt about the accuracy of some provider's data, voiced by the independent auditor and other providers, that requires firm rules should be put in place. The independent auditor should be a mandatory requirement, appointed by Ofcom, funded by Ofcom and the industry, and be instructed to carry out sufficient checks on provider's data and audit reports, including on site audits of his own, in order to arrive at a conclusion beyond reasonable doubt that the submitted figures are compliant and accurate. The auditor should be allowed access to all provider's premises to determine the nature of any compliance issues and at least once every publishing period in any case. No provider has the right to deny such access.

The continuing success of the QoS scheme depends on Ofcom setting the basic auditing requirements at the outset within their new Direction. This will remove ambiguity and provide a stable co-regulated platform which can concentrate on maintaining, improving and enhancing the scheme as a whole without relying on debate and achieving consensus for every minor amendment or issue that arises.

Question 51: Should any verification process include either an internal or independent audit, or both?:

As outlined above, the current process using both internal and an independent audit is the preferred option.

Question 52: If we considered it was appropriate for data to be audited internally, should internal auditors be required to possess a recognised qualification?:

Absolutely.

Question 53: What would be an appropriate qualification for internal auditors?:

Auditors must be familiar with audit techniques, have a knowledge of ISO:9001 and be an IRCA registered qualified auditor; having passed an approved training course and test. A minimum of two years auditing experience is an additional requirement.

Question 54: Should internal auditors have to pass a test on the regime and, if so, who should administer it?:

Yes, all auditors should pass a test on QoS requirements before they are allowed to undertake audit activities. The test should be administered by Ofcom or by the Independent auditor.

Question 55: If we considered it was appropriate for data to be audited internally, how often should internal audits take place?:

Internal audits should be undertaken every reporting period, ie. Quarterly. Some providers argue that this is an unnecessary overhead. This is not the case for those who use their own internal auditors but could be for those who pay for external audit services. However the benefits of doing quarterly audits ensure that any areas of non compliance are captured quickly and corrective action can be applied before the situation becomes irrecoverable. If audits are only done six monthly, any issue arising would mean six months worth of data is suspect. An additional requirement is that all key functions and sites are audited at every occasion unless two previous audits have found zero defects.

Question 56: If we considered it was appropriate for data to be audited independently, how often should independent audits take place?:

The same as for internal audits as described above. Though a mandate to use independent auditors for accuracy would result in all providers being subject to increased costs. The independent Comparability auditor currently audits every publishing period, six monthly. This has led to comparability issues and some concerns on accuracy. Comparability audits should be conducted for every accuracy audit carried out and that means quarterly for those providers who routinely audit on a quarterly basis. Some providers who only do accuracy audits six monthly would escape this requirement, hence the need for a mandate to audit every reporting period. Costs need not be a factor as the current Independent Comparability Auditor has

requested that quarterly audits should be the norm and has indicated he would do this within his current remit.

Question 57: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? how frequently should data be submitted for publication?:

Opponents to the QoS scheme say that six monthly publication is sufficient. However this is not in the best interests of providing up to date information to the public. Currently performance figures appear on the web site four months after the end of the period being reported on. This means that the early data is already 10 months old. Data should be submitted for publication every three months.

Question 58: How long a period would be required between the end of the data collection period and the publication of information?:

The current time delay between end of period data collection and publication is four months. This does not give the public up to date information and could be improved by streamlining the process. We allow one month after the collection period to give providers time to finish audits and collate the data. We then allow a further month for reports to be compiled and submitted. Comparability then takes an additional month, which is perhaps a minimum given that 17 individual provider's reports have to be audited. Comparability feedback, rework and subsequent upload of final data completes the exercise a month after that. It should be possible to tighten timescales so that submission is six weeks after the end of the reporting period and comparability activities is completed six weeks after that. This reduces the overall time delay to three months. However with a requirement that data is submitted every three months instead of six, publication is possible by the end of the second month after the period end.

Question 59: What would be an appropriate sample size in order to ensure that information is robust?:

We currently audit 100% of our key sites every quarter, ie. every reporting period. Due to the possible effects on data accuracy arising from any areas of non compliance, this is the best option to maintain a consistent level of accuracy. It is not possible to be confident with performance figures in any period unless the process is fully audited. With centralised activities, for provisioning and faults this is not an onerous task, complaint handling processes may require a number of sites to be audited depending on the location of customer facing teams. As a minimum the recommendation is that 50% of key sites are sampled every quarter with 100% covered each reporting period.

Question 60: As a provider please could you provide information on - the number of stages involved in each QoS event set out in section 5, the number of sites (locations) associated with each QoS event, the

percentage of QoS events located at each site, and the number/percentage of sites based overseas:

Supply time for initial connection. ? An eight stage process involving receipt of order from customer, order entry, confirmation of installation date, service delivery, order completion, order closing, billing trigger, sending out first bill.

No of sites involved in this event is four. Each of the four sites deals with 60% of all QoS events.

Fault Rate per access line ? This includes the logging of all faults received and calculating fault rate from system line count data.

No of sites involved in this event is two. Each site deals with 60% of all QoS events.

Fault Repair time ? The process stages are, receipt of initial fault, logging fault, 1st line diagnosis, 2nd line diagnosis, dispatch, receipt of fault by engineer, fault location, service restoration, confirmation of restore, logging of fault resolution, closure of fault record.

No of sites involved in this event is two. Each site deals with 60% of all QoS events.

End User Complaints ? Process stages are initial receipt of complaint from end user, logging of complaint, resolution at FPOC if possible, allocation to complaints team, resolution of complaint, customer informed of outcome, complaint closure.

No of sites involved in this event is six. Each site deals with 60% of all QoS events.

Bill Correctness Complaints ? Process stages are as for End User Complaints with the addition of the Customer relations team who apply any credits to customer accounts.

No of sites involved in this event is six. Each site deals with 60% of all QoS events.

Overseas sites ? None of the sites for ntl:Telewest Business are located overseas.

Question 61: How many site visits do you consider appropriate and why?:

For the reasons outlined in the answer to question 59, all sites are visited during every quarterly audit. This provides the most robust method of determining and maintaining QoS compliance and accuracy.

Question 62: If we considered it was appropriate to audit the data internally what measures should an internal auditor take to verify the QoS information?:

Any internal audit needs to encompass all aspects of the production of a performance measure to ensure that it is accurate and compliant. Verification of this therefore requires that the audit activities check;

- ? processes are in place that are effective and consistent,
- ? people who know what the processes are and follow them,
- ? systems data that is stored accurately and
- ? reports that extract the data in accordance with QoS parameters.

In order to achieve this all four areas outlined need to be checked at each audit

Question 63: If we considered it was appropriate to audit the data independently, what measures should an independent auditor take to verify QoS information?:

The independent auditor needs to be satisfied that the data is comparable and be as certain as can be that the data is accurate. The latter is an essential ingredient but is difficult to achieve under the current regime. The auditor should therefore judge each set of submissions on its merits as is done currently but then be allowed to conduct any further checks, on site if necessary, to determine the extent of any issue or doubt that may be raised, that impacts accuracy. If required the measures taken by the auditor could include an on site audit to check on all or some of the areas outlined in the answer to question 62.

Question 64: To what extent should Ofcom specify how audits should be carried out?:

As audits, both for accuracy and comparability have been the subject of much debate within the Forum with no consensus reached on the preferred methodology, it would be a benefit to the scheme as a whole if Ofcom removed the uncertainty and the need for further debate by defining exactly how, where and when both types of audit should be carried out. This will allow co-regulation to continue and enhance compliance by comparing provider's audit activities against a set of clear rules.

Question 65: If we considered it was appropriate to audit the data internally and independently, should we amend the existing Direction to make the verification process more robust?:

Yes the Direction should be amended along the lines suggested. The verification process is crucial in giving all providers the confidence that every other provider is submitting accurate data and that the playing field is in fact level.

Question 66: Would there be scope to reduce the cost of site visits if providers used the same independent auditor?:

For comparable audits the independent auditor is required to be the same. For accuracy where providers use an independent external auditor, there may be scope to negotiate a reduction in fees if more than one provider was sited in or near the same location. Most audit bodies though charge on a daily basis and as the number of audit days per provider would not change, the resultant savings may not be substantial. It would however remove the need for a separate comparability auditor as all providers would be audited in exactly the same way.

Question 67: What would be the cost of an internal auditor visiting all sites over a period of a year?:

If all sites were audited only once each per year, this would reduce the number of site visits for us by 75%. This would however seriously impact the integrity of the data and due to the few sites involved in the key activities would mean that the validity of the data for most of the QoS parameters was checked fully only on an annual basis.

The costs of the required audit days per year including travel costs without any other associated activity would be perhaps £10k per annum.

Question 68: If we considered it was appropriate to audit the data independently, how should any independent auditor(s) be appointed?:

There are a number of registered audit bodies in the UK who can carry out QoS audits. They are traditionally the same bodies used during the days of the CPI scheme. They are all fully independent so it would be the choice of each provider to select the one they felt to be the most suitable. Ideally Ofcom should appoint the independent auditor. However employing independent auditors for internal audits would increase our costs considerably.

Question 69: If we considered it was appropriate to audit the data independently, should providers all appoint the same independent auditor?:

If this is to determine the accuracy of the data, it would benefit the scheme if all providers were audited by the same auditor or audit body. This would then obviate the need for a comparability auditor since all audits would be conducted in the same way. If different independent auditors were employed, a comparability auditor would still be essential.

If to determine comparability, these audits can only be carried out by the same auditor.

Employing independent auditors for internal audits would increase our costs considerably.

Question 70: If they published QoS information, should providers publish trend data?:

Trend data published between the formal publication dates is a useful idea but it would have to be taken into account that depending on the required amount of audit activities that end up being mandated, the majority of trend data could be unaudited, unverified and therefore inaccurate.

Question 71: How could the information be made accessible to all consumers, in particular disabled consumers and consumers without Internet access?:

The independent website is the easiest and cheapest method of publishing the information. For those without internet access, an alternative is to provide written material giving the same information. During CPI days leaflets were distributed to libraries but this comes at a cost and the distribution itself can be variable as the presence of the leaflets also needs to be communicated.

An alternative is to publish the results each period in daily newspapers or periodicals. The number of such media chosen should be kept to a minimum, perhaps the one newspaper with the highest distribution. The Metro currently has a high circulation among daily commuters. Who bears the costs of such publication is another question to be decided. It should be borne fairly by all participants in the scheme including Ofcom. The announcement of each publication does however need to be made to promote use of the website and inform the public that the latest results are available. This perhaps can only be done via newspaper advertisements and should be led by Ofcom.

One other option to consider is for each provider to insert a flyer into customer's bills at publication time, giving either an announcement of the publication of results with the website address, or a summary of the results, or both. The costs would then be borne by each provider and would be proportionate to the number of bills each provider sends out and the number of customers they have. In any event the additional costs involved during a scheduled bill run would be minimal. A Braille version of the flyer could be made available on request in a similar way to the bill itself.

Question 72: Should providers be required to provide a link to the specified website on their websites? Where should the link appear and what should it say?:

All providers should actively promote awareness of the QoS information. A link on each provider's own website is easy and cost effective. A simple banner saying 'Click here to compare our performance with our competitors' would be sufficient. However this is not a current requirement and most if not all providers would resist such a link being applied.

Question 73: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? what should be done to promote awareness of the scheme and improve usage of the information?:

As above it is the responsibility of all providers, together with Ofcom, to promote awareness of the scheme. This is emotive because it can be costly and is not advantageous to those providers who perform lower than their competitors. However it should be seen as an incentive to improve performance and climb the league table. Awareness should be carried out in the same way that announcements about latest publications are made.

All providers at some time or other advertise their services in the press or on TV. It could be mandated that all such adverts carry a footer which says that comparable performance information is available on www.Topcomm.org.uk

Question 74: If we considered it was appropriate to continue requiring providers to publish QoS information ? and that the existing QoS Direction should be amended ? is ?TopComm? the right name under which to publish the information or should alternatives be considered?:

TopComm was chosen by the Forum following a number of suggestions submitted. I see no reason to change the name at this point. Furthermore it was originally suggested by a representative of the Forum who sadly has since died. I think retaining the name is a legacy to him and to the help he gave to the Forum during his time as a member.

Additional comments:

All answers to questions have been made with consultation, however some answers have not been subjected to specific feedback and although they have been drafted with the general opinions of the management team in regard to QoS, they are therefore a personal view.