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news release

Putting consumers at the heart of communications policy

- Cracking down on nuisance calls
- Ending 'bill shock' nightmares for unsuspecting families
- Protecting children online

A new focus by the Government will today put consumers at the centre of its communications policy. Cracking down on nuisance calls, ending bill shock nightmares and protecting children online are key parts of a new approach that will put consumers' interests first, Culture Secretary Maria Miller announced today.

Connectivity, Content and Consumers: Britain's digital platform for growth reveals the Government's priorities for the media and telecommunications sectors.

The document sets out the legislative changes the Government will make - and the issues we expect industry to address – to ensure the consumer remains the key focus of an industry that has changed at an unprecedented pace over the last decade.

Culture Secretary Maria Miller said:

“The communications industry has undergone change at an unprecedented pace over the last decade.

“In this digital age we must ensure the needs of the consumer are not lost in the dash for progress and the changes we are making will put the British public at the heart of the sector.

“The Government will ensure consumers are protected from potentially harmful content, soaring costs and contracts that don’t meet their needs.”

The nuisance calls crackdown includes changing the law so regulators can share intelligence about firms responsible for nuisance calls.

We will also explore other options for making it easier for regulators to act against companies responsible for nuisance calls. These include lowering the threshold for regulators to issue penalties for nuisance calls; supporting industry efforts to prevent nuisance callers concealing their number and clarifying the process for consumers to give their consent to receive marketing calls.

The Government is clear that if there is not sufficient progress in this area, we will consider further legislation such as licensing call centres.

Additional measures to protect consumers in the *Connectivity, Content and Consumers* paper include:

- Ensuring tough fines can be issued for breaching rules covering premium rate phone numbers;
- Agreeing a tough industry code to end ‘bill shock’ (unexpectedly high mobile bills) particularly when a phone has been stolen;
- Working with industry on tools to help parents protect children from inappropriate content available through internet connected-TVs and consider legislation if progress is not made;

- Closing loopholes that, for example, allow material too extreme for R18 ratings to be sold by UK companies online;
- Legislating to ensure it is straightforward as possible for people to switch between the providers of 'bundled services' which consist of TV, telephone and broadband;
- Helping parents stop their children viewing inappropriate content online; and
- Acting against the appalling images of child abuse available online.

The document also sets out other changes to update the regulations covering the communications industry.

One of the key proposals is ensuring that Public Service Broadcaster channels (the BBC, ITV, C4 and C5) remain easy to find as we move away from standard electronic programme guides that list what's on TV when.

Losing or gaining prominence on a TV guide can have a real impact on viewer numbers. We want the high quality programmes that reflect and define us as a nation to continue to be easy to find and access, and we will consult on how to achieve this.

Other measures in the document include:

- Calling on TV platforms to end the charging of Public Service Broadcasters to feature on those platforms, in recognition of the value audiences place on that content being available;
- A package of industry-led measures to tackle online copyright infringement that includes targeting the ways people make money from sites offering this unlawful material;
- Consulting on whether the competition regime for broadcasting needs to be updated.

The strategy paper also sets out how the Government will create a more flexible system for managing spectrum - the invisible airwaves that transmit data, for example to phones, tablets or other smart devices.

We will enable dynamic spectrum access so that it is much easier to share spectrum among multiple users. We will also encourage underused spectrum to be returned to Ofcom so it can be awarded to new users by allowing the auction proceeds to be shared with the relinquishing users.

The Government has also today published a consultation on media plurality. It seeks views on fundamental questions about how media plurality should be measured, to ensure the media landscape is not dominated by too few organisations.

The consultation seeks views on:

- the types of media that should be assessed;
- the genres it should cover;
- the types of organisation and services to which it should apply;
- the inclusion of the BBC; and,
- the audiences with which it should be concerned.

The consultation takes Lord Justice Leveson's report as its starting point. It will inform the commissioning of a framework for measuring media plurality, which will be used to produce the first market analysis of plurality in the UK.

Notes to Editors:

Connectivity, Content and Consumers: Britain's digital platform for growth is available [here](#).

The review of the regulations covering the UK communications industry began with an [Open Letter](#) and was followed by a [series of seminars and discussion papers](#).

There will be further consultations in the autumn on broadcasting competition, the prominence of PSBs, re-transmission fees between PSBs and TV platforms, and community radio financing. Legislative changes will be made when parliamentary time allows.

The media plurality consultation runs for 12 weeks and the full document is available [here](#).

Lord Justice Leveson's eight recommendations on media plurality were:

- The particular public policy goals of ensuring that citizens are informed and preventing too much influence in any one pair of hands over the political process are most directly served by concentrating on plurality in news and current affairs. This focus should be kept under review.
- Online publication should be included in any market assessment for consideration of plurality.
- Ofcom and the Government should work, with the industry, on the measurement framework, in order to achieve as great a measure of consensus as is possible on the theory of how media plurality should be measured before the measuring system is deployed, with all the likely commercial tensions that will emerge.
- The levels of influence that would give rise to concerns in relation to plurality must be lower, and probably considerably lower, than the levels of concentration that would give rise to competition concerns.
- Ofcom has presented the Inquiry and the Government with a full menu of potential remedies, and it has not been argued or suggested that any of them are inappropriate in principle. Each of them might be appropriate in a given set of circumstances and the relevant regulatory authority should have all of them in its armoury.
- The Government should consider whether periodic plurality reviews or an extension to the public interest test within the markets regime in competition law is most likely to provide a timely warning of, and response to, plurality concerns that develop as the result of organic growth, recognising that the proposal for a regular plurality review is more closely focussed on plurality issues.
- Before making a decision to refer a media merger to the competition authorities on public interest grounds, the Secretary of State should consult relevant parties as to the arguments for and against a referral, and should be required to make public his reasons for reaching a decision one way or the other.

- The Secretary of State should remain responsible for public interest decisions in relation to media mergers. The Secretary of State should be required either to accept the advice provided by the independent regulators, or to explain why that advice has been rejected. At the same time, whichever way the Secretary of State decides the matter, the nature and extent of any submissions or lobbying to which the Secretary of State and his officials and advisors had been subject should be recorded and published.

The Prime Minister recently made a speech setting about cracking down on online pornography and making the internet safer for children. The text of the speech is [here](#).

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