



DuckDuckGo response to the CMA's second consultation on the User Choice conduct requirement for Google's general search services

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The CMA presents its September 2026 proposals as a strengthening of the User Choice Conduct Requirement (CR). In our view, they are the opposite: the CMA's choice screen proposals favour the incumbent and will lock the existing ecosystem in place rather than stimulating growth from a wide range of providers. The result is a choice architecture weaker than the January 2026 proposals and significantly weaker than what Google already operates in the EU. Small but decisive fixes can dramatically change the effect of this choice screen. We set them out below, anchored in the CMA's own stated aim and evidence:

- **The selection rules compound to favour Google.** The CMA allows several apps per corporate group and relies on recent Play Store downloads to measure popularity, which favours large multi-uses apps. Combined with the "5+7" logic to select the twelve listed providers, these hand Google and the largest groups guaranteed, multiple slots and will push independent providers like DuckDuckGo off the screen's fixed slots. Instead, the CMA should select the most popular providers according to their selection rates on the existing UK Android search choice screen or using search market share, limited to one option per company.
- **This must remain a "search" choice screen, even if technology-neutral.** Eligibility and popularity should be grounded on verified data: *search* market share and real search defaults uptake. Play Store download data, when applied to companies with apps that serve multiple use cases in addition to "search", is not a fair or appropriate proxy for search popularity.
- **Regressions on annual re-showing and excluding existing Android devices must be reversed.** One of the most impactful changes: annual reshowning has been watered down to the point of being meaningless because the notification is skippable. Users can dismiss it without ever seeing the alternatives. Choice screens are most effective when they are re-shown regularly. Only showing them on new devices regulates the new phone market, not the search market and misses roughly 30 million existing Android devices. It is unjustified since costs to OEMs can be low, per their own admission. Re-showing the screen to users who already switched away from Google must also be reversed.
- **Switching: real progress.** Deep linking to default search settings on Chrome and Android represent significant progress, which we strongly welcome. Our data show deep linking will materially boost switching, provided Google does not reintroduce anti-competitive friction.

I. Avoid a choice screen that favours Google

Using Play Store downloads as popularity metric, allowing more than 1 app per provider and the 5+7 selection logic entrenches Google.¹

- **Play Store downloads**, proposed for the first six months, **do not measure search usage and favour apps with multiple use-cases** – this is especially true for AI apps, whose recent massive download figures are driven by non-search uses.
- **One app per corporate group**. The CMA rejects this cap and only requires each service of a group to be "sufficiently distinct". In practice, this will favour the largest companies that can afford to maintain more than one app: Google is one of the only two firms operating separate search and AI assistant apps, and it may claim they are "technically distinct". Allowing both risks handing the largest groups extra slots, including several of the five guaranteed spots.
- **The top five appear on every screen; everyone else is randomly drawn for seven slots**. With 15 eligible providers, a provider outside the top five appears on 70% of screens; with 20, on 47%; with 25, on 35%.²
- **Well-known search brands like DuckDuckGo will not appear in the guaranteed five spots** if the CMA uses Playstore downloads to determine popularity. This would heavily impact their selection rate: in France, DuckDuckGo's selection rate increased x3 when it was included in the top 5 after previously being in the random 7.³ We then experienced an additional +30-40% boost following our later inclusion in the better designed, fully randomized DMA choice screen.
- **The "view all" link is no substitute for a slot**. We expect the selections resulting from being placed in the reserve list to be negligible.

We note that the CMA did not retain our [proposal](#) to rely on search market share as popularity metric, instead planning to use effective **selection rate** after the first 6 months. We support this alternative and propose that in the first six months **the CMA uses the selection rate data from the existing UK Android search choice screen** to select popularity, and includes other eligible apps in the randomized section. After six months, selection rates will crystallize and the most popular apps can be allocated fixed slots as intended. Several additional conditions must be met for a fair set-up:

- The denominator should be an app's total choice screen impressions over the period, like the CMA proposes.
- The CMA should not limit itself to 5 fixed slots. This figure was originally used because only five apps appeared "above the fold" on a mobile device screen but is unnecessary

¹ CMA, Consultation: User Choice Conduct Requirement – Google's general search services, 23 September 2026 (v2 Consultation), paragraph 4.82; draft CR paragraph 6.a; interpretative note (IN) 13.

² DuckDuckGo calculation: probability of inclusion = 7 / (number of Eligible Providers – 5).

³ While some of the lower observed selection rate was due to the lower ranking (which won't be reproduced under the CMA proposal), appearing a fraction of the time had a logical impact on selections.

with the fixed scroll obligation. Therefore, the CMA should **opt for a higher number of fixed slots** to avoid these being captured by large providers only (for example 8+4 or 6+6).

- The eligibility criteria need to reflect a proper search experience, as explained in the next section.

II. Keep it consistent as a search choice screen

Apply the eligibility criteria as written. We welcome the additional clarity on the various search use cases, in line with the four key strands explored in the CMA-commissioned user research,⁴ and the CMA's intention to "keep this list under review". We believe, however, that they lack anchors in actual search usage, especially when it comes to navigational queries.

Navigational queries are the clearest test of a general search service and must be strictly interpreted. For example, a search for "the guardian" in the UK, should return the Guardian news website among the top URLs. Many of the popular AI chatbots with a web search function currently do not support this in a straightforward manner.

The CMA could use the following input as evidence that a service is actually used as a search engine that addresses the navigational queries use case:

- **Does a service appear in the UK search engines top 12 of a referral-based search market share service, like [Cloudflare Radar's](#)?** If yes, the service should be eligible, as it measures a service's *actual* use for navigational queries (when users click on the links presented to them), therefore filtering out non-search services. It does not exclude AI search per se - OpenAI and Perplexity do appear in the UK top 10.
- **As a complementary check,** uptake of a service's search extension on Chrome and Firefox is a revealed-preference signal that users want it as their default search service. A consumer survey which does look at the post-choice behaviour can also serve as a useful reference.

Mixing categories on one screen will confuse users. The CMA's own evidence supports a distinction: the [Accent consumer survey](#) found only 5% of users use AI most often to find a specific website and 3% to find a product to buy; even among AI users, only 13% and 7%.⁵ We note that the observations from the [Thinks consumer survey](#) stops at the moment of choice. The report does not look at how people actually use the service they picked or whether the results meet their expectations. It says nothing about navigational queries after a choice. There is one narrow exception, a seven-day trial done by 20 participants, but even there the report records no findings on result satisfaction for these services.

Competition among AI assistants needs its own tools. The SMS Final Decision found defaults are also a barrier to entry and expansion for AI assistants. That calls for interoperability

⁴ Accent, *Mobile Consumer Survey: Search Questions – Final Report*, prepared for the CMA, June 2025, pp. 5–6

⁵ Accent, *Mobile Consumer Survey: Search Questions, Final Report*, June 2025, page 6.

measures and a separate assistant choice screen – the reason why we supported the inclusion of Gemini within the Google SMS designation.

III. Reverse the regressions on cadence and coverage

A skippable notification is not an annual choice screen. The non-skippable annual redisplay of January 2026 becomes a "skippable and visually limited" notification, based on some users in the CMA's qualitative research preferring to delay or skip.⁶ Live evidence points the other way:

- When Apple re-showed its iOS browser choice screen in the EU, the second showing generated an immediate install uplift comparable to the first.⁷
- 69% of surveyed users wanted to see the screen again after one exposure, 71% after two. This is choice appetite, not fatigue.
- The cost argument does not hold: the CMA estimates a non-skippable screen costs users a little over 5p of time per showing.⁸ Additionally, surfacing the choice screen at the event of a major software update means it doesn't interrupt a task that would justify making it skippable.

Evidence points to the value for the CMA in **restoring a non-skippable annual choice screen** on all Relevant Devices and Relevant Browsers. **At the very least**, the CMA could adopt a non-interrupting persistent notification that cannot be dismissed without making a choice, as Google implemented on existing Android devices in the EU, with an equivalent on Chrome.

Existing Android devices are dropped entirely. On Android, choice screens, redisplay and test-drive now apply to new devices only.⁹

- **Scale:** on the CMA's own figures, the around 30 million Android devices already in use get no choice moment, while redisplay on Android would reach only [2.5-5] million devices in year three.¹⁰
- **Inconsistency:** this is exactly the defect the CMA identified in Google's "UK Choice Package", users prompted at most once.¹¹ Existing users get even less.
- **Weak technical rationale:** OEMs told the CMA Google could implement redisplay through Google-managed components at limited OEM cost,¹² and Google already showed choice screens to existing Android devices in the EU, so much of the cost is sunk.

⁶ v2 Consultation, paragraph 4.49.

⁷ DuckDuckGo response to the January 2026 consultation, Annex 3.

⁸ v2 Consultation, paragraph 5.21.

⁹ v2 Consultation, paragraphs 4.54, 4.72(a) and 5.31; draft CR paragraph 2.c.

¹⁰ DuckDuckGo calculation from v2 Consultation, footnotes 162 and 164.

¹¹ v2 Consultation, paragraph 4.52.

¹² v2 Consultation, paragraphs 4.48(b) and 5.30.

Users who switched away from Google should not be re-shown the screen. The CMA now defines Relevant Browsers and Devices by Google's out-of-the-box default, so users who actively chose an alternative get the same screens as Google users, as Google requested.¹³

- **This works against the regime's aim.** The SMS Final Decision found defaults are a barrier to entry because rivals have limited ability to compete for default positions, and that consumers are likely to use the default they have chosen.¹⁴ A default won from Google is precisely the outcome sought.
- **The six-month exemption creates a new gap.** Being provider-neutral, a switch back to Google could also suppress the next notification.¹⁵ It should only apply to deliberate switches away from Google.

IV. Implement the significant progress towards easy switching

We strongly welcome:

- deep-linking from providers' websites in Chrome and from their Android apps to the relevant default setting;
- the Device-Level Default Setting propagating to Chrome and the search widget on all Relevant Devices;
- the removal of Google's ability to cap in-app prompting (Android);
- default-status detection through the Search Default Setting API (Chrome).

Removing friction works:

- When Chrome's switchback prompt no longer applied to our one-click simple search extension, it outperformed manual set-as-default instructions by **+30.9% in switching success rate**, with no increase in churn.
- Deep links extend this logic to every DuckDuckGo website visit in Chrome and to our Android app and widget, a much larger funnel (and therefore impact) than the homepage extension promotion.
- On Android, we expect opt-in rates several times higher than those of our current widget prompt, closer to the c. 40% seen for the browser default prompt.

To make this work in practice:

- **Impact is capped by narrow access points.** Deep links lead to settings that only cover Chrome and the search widget; access points locked to Google remain out of reach (see section VI).
- **Rule out switchback prompts after a deep-linked change.** Retaining the prohibition on prompts steering users back to Google is right, but it must not be undercut by new "confirmation" prompts. Google says it is introducing an updated, "fully neutral"

¹³ v2 Consultation, paragraph 4.46.

¹⁴ SMS Final Decision, paragraphs 5.185 and 5.186.

¹⁵ Draft CR paragraph 3; IN 10.

confirmation dialogue on Chrome.¹⁶ Whatever its design, no prompt is needed where an extension clearly states that it changes the default search engine: our data show no churn increase without one.

V. Reporting / Transparency

Participating companies would get, under the CMA's proposal, very little transparency – making it virtually impossible to reliably measure the impact of design changes, marketing and external events:

- **Cadence:** the six-monthly reporting proposed in January 2026 becomes six-monthly in year one, then annual, as Google requested.¹⁷ With the first redisplay notifications not due before year three, the CMA would see evidence on its most contested measures years after the fact. Reporting should happen much more often to allow for appropriate measurements – preferably daily.
- **Recipients:** reports still go to the CMA only. Eligible Providers cannot plan campaigns or improve their offer without their own data while Google has ongoing access to this data to support its own planning. Google should share with each Eligible Provider, at a minimum, its selection rates and display positions, at the same daily cadence.

VI. Other unaddressed points from our January 2026 response

- **Never place Google in the top positions.** Ranking Google lower is the single most impactful design change, increasing selection of alternatives by up to +89%.¹⁸ Full randomisation still places Google in the top five on around 42% of a 12-slots choice screen.
- **Place the chosen app on the dock or home screen** in place of Google's. On iOS, this markedly improved retention and searches per app.¹⁹
- **Access points.** We welcome the commitment to monitor other access points,²⁰ but the CR should include an explicit review at the 12-month compliance stage on extending it to locked access points such as Circle to Search and the web component of on-device search.
- **Google must not remain the real underlying default.** Uninstalling the chosen app should re-trigger the choice screen rather than silently revert to Google Search.

¹⁶ v2 Consultation, paragraph 4.103.

¹⁷ v2 Consultation, paragraph 4.109.

¹⁸ DuckDuckGo response to the January 2026 consultation, Annexes 1.1 and 2.

¹⁹ DuckDuckGo response to the January 2026 consultation, Annex 3.

²⁰ v2 Consultation, paragraph 4.41.