

Comms Review Series: De-regulation not popular with Charities and Consumer Groups

Charities and consumer groups were the second most represented category among the **168 responses** to Jeremy Hunt's **open letter**, but they are hardly a cohesive bunch. They can generally be divided into three categories: those that campaign for the right of certain populations such as children or those with disabilities; general consumer advocacy groups; and media focused watchdog organisations. Despite their different interests and causes, as a composite group they were overwhelmingly not in favour of further de-regulation.

Many of the submissions only responded to particular questions depending on their area of interest, but one issue that nearly all commented on was that of rural access to services, particularly broadband, calling for government intervention and investment. A bit of an outlier from the rest, the **Taxpayers Alliance** argue that this should be done through de-regulation, but they also suggest tax incentives for those interested in providing services. Nearly all groups mentioned the need for improved broadband, and in some cases also mobile services, in rural areas, whether as an issue of consumer rights, social cohesion or business development. Even the group **Sense**, which has the specific mandate of advocating the rights of the deafblind, chose rural broadband as the one other issue on which to comment.

Groups representing those with hearing or sight loss, perhaps predictably, are most concerned about access and usability for people with disabilities and are calling for more active regulation in order to improve access. **Sense** wants to see penalties in place and enforced for non-compliance, while both the **Royal National Institute for the Blind** and **Phoneability** suggest that Ofcom should be given more power to monitor and report on accessibility compliance. These groups identify a gap in the lack of accessibility conditions for new communications services such as voice over IP and video on demand services, calling, for example, for similar quotas for subtitling or audio description to be applied to on-demand content.

The more generalist consumer groups also argue for ensuring access for the disabled and other disadvantaged groups and the possibility of treating new services as universal, thereby meriting state intervention of some kind. The attitude reflected in their submissions is generally that it cannot be all about economic growth, but that consumer interests need to be considered as well. **Consumer Focus** and the **Communications Consumer Panel** want stronger consumer protection in general but also make concrete suggestions such as the Panel's idea to standardise complaints handling and to enlarge the mobile footprint rather than just move the existing one to 4G. **Consumer Focus** points out two areas where a slightly more de-regulatory approach should be taken. First, they support the implementation of **Hargreaves** recommendations for revising copyright systems and, second, they want to see the repeal of articles 3-16 of the Digital Economy Act, which instituted harsh sanctions against file-sharers and copyright infringers. **Which?** also argues for a general re-think on copyright and the introduction of multi-territorial licensing.

The **Open Rights Group** (ORG) also comes out strongly in favour of Hargreaves implementation, but most of the other media focused non-governmental organisations or watchdog groups concerned themselves largely with PSB and UK original content. **Voice of the Listener and Viewer** and the **Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom** (CPBF) both advocate for the maintenance of the PSB role and its contribution to UK content. They are joined by two groups that specifically advocate for increased PSB investment in children's programming and the **International Broadcasting Trust**, which wants more requirements for PSBs to fund UK content, particularly about the rest of the world.

One group that goes against the grain is [Listen to the Listener](#), which advocates for a leaner BBC, but still maintains that it could be an important investor in innovative new content. Adhering to the principle of net neutrality, or “mere conduit” status, is also raised by ORG and others as a key factor in encouraging innovation and growth, not just in the creation of content, but also in services and technology.

The future of self-regulatory mechanisms, which has been at the forefront of everyone’s mind since the hacking scandal and throughout the Leveson Inquiry, was not such a hot topic at the time of the submissions. Among these submissions the only groups to mention the issue are the [Media Standards Trust](#) and the CPBF, both of whom advocate a revision of the current system into something that has more teeth. If the consultation had been kicked off a month later, the submissions would probably have much more to say about self-regulation and media standards. For now we will have to wait for the next round to hear from everyone on that.

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