

Telecoms, TV and Media Execs Join Regulators to Discuss Consumer Access Rights in Brussels

Rural broadband, mobile phone contracts and calls to emergency services were on the agenda in Brussels this week. East Anglian MEP Vicky Ford brought together Executives from telecoms and media companies including BBC, BT, Vodafone, Sky, Telia and Deutsch Telekom, as well as the UK regulator, Ofcom, and representatives from European consumer groups to discuss new pan-European proposals on communications.

The group discussed the so called 'universal service obligation' which gives individuals the right to a phone service and the plans to extend this to include internet services.

Mrs Ford said, "As someone who lives in a small village I know what a struggle it can be to access modern communications when the internet service is poor, and what a difference it makes when the high speed line finally arrives. A universal service obligation will be extremely beneficial for rural areas but there are also important questions about how it is funded."

Experts at the Brussels meeting considered alternative funding mechanisms including public and private elements and contribution sharing between operators and content providers and how these could reflect different levels of service quality.

The informal roundtable also discussed the issue of consumer contracts which consumer groups say can be confusing. Questions of whether to introduce standard terms for easier comparison, maximum contract periods and rights for consumers to cancel contracts were also raised.

The group also looked at the issues relating to so-called 'over-the-top' communications services such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Skype which are not currently covered by laws on security and data privacy in the same way as traditional voice and text services.

Mrs Ford explained "These new models are very popular and easy to use. We need to make sure that the legal framework is up-to-date whilst not overburdening companies like this with masses of extra red-tape."

Before entering politics Mrs Ford was involved in raising finance for infrastructure including many of the telecoms networks that consumers across the UK and Europe continue to use today.

Mrs Ford added, "It was extremely helpful to have Ofcom with us as many of the issues that we were discussing will continue to apply in the UK after Brexit. Communications technology is advancing at an extremely rapid rate and there is a strong interest from the UK to continue to work with other countries on developing policy."