



Universal Service



Promoting access to
electronic communica-
tions for deaf people

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What is Universal Service?

Universal service ensures that everyone has access to a basic telephone service at the same price, no matter where they live.

How is it worked out?

The Universal Service regulation is required by the Universal Services Directive of the European Union. In the UK this is implemented through a Universal Service Order from the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, acting on advice from the regulator, Ofcom. The scope of the Universal Service Order can only be changed if the Universal Service Directive allows it.

Who has to make it work?

The regulator, Ofcom, controls the implementation, but the main burden is laid only on providers who have significant market power (SMP) - in the UK these are BT, and Kingston Communications in Hull. However, Ofcom also requires all providers, fixed and mobile, to take certain measures and does this by means of something called the General Conditions of Entitlement which have replaced the licences that each telecommunication provider used to have.

So what sort of things does Universal Service provide?

Firstly, it ensures that people anywhere in the UK can have a telephone and that calls are

charged the same no matter where you live. However, it obviously costs BT a lot more to provide a service in remote areas of Scotland than it does in central London—this is called geographic averaging. It also ensures that BT runs a special scheme for light users and those on low incomes and that BT provides public call boxes.

What does it provide for deaf users?

Universal service requires BT to fund a text relay service for deaf users. Other measures, such as allowing access to a text relay service and providing special tariffs for textphone users, are laid on all providers (not just BT) by means of the General Conditions. There are also requirements to make payphones accessible to hard of hearing users.

Why does the current arrangement need to be changed?

Firstly, at present only a text relay service is specified. There is a need for other forms of relay service, such as a video relay for sign language users, an SMS relay service for mobile phone users, and a captioned relay service for those with good speech and some residual hearing (similar to Teletec's Captel

service). We also need to ensure that the service is developed to use up-to-date technology such as Internet Protocol. It must also be equally accessible to mobile phone users and users of other new services rather than remaining tied to traditional fixed telephony (fixed telephony is the kind that you have plugged into a socket at home). Users also need more choice in both the kind of equipment that is available to them, and which relay service they choose to use. This would be easier to achieve if there were a Universal Service Fund.

What is a Universal Service Fund?

At present the Universal Service Obligation is laid only on the providers with SMP, i.e. BT and Kingston, which means that they have to pay all the costs associated with delivering the requirements. Because BT fund the current relay service, RNID Typetalk, they also exercise a lot of control over how it is developed and how much money it receives. A Universal Service Fund would be administered centrally and would remove control of provision of relay services from any one provider and allow the development of new forms of relay service. These would operate to quality of service guidelines drawn up by the Chief Executive of Ofcom in consultation with users.

So what is TAG doing?

Ofcom recently consulted on a review of Universal Service to which TAG responded, and has now issued a statement. However, changing the scope of Universal

Service may require a change in the Universal Service Directive, and TAG is also pressing for this to happen.

The EU has issued a statement on the scope of Universal Service and will be consulting further on other aspects

We need to get away from the idea that the Universal Service Obligation is simply a burden laid on the provider with SMP and see it as a means of achieving fair and appropriate access and choice for deaf users when market forces and competition fail to deliver this.

What can you do to help?

TAG may need to ask for help and support in order to achieve the best results for deaf people. If this should be the case, we will do it through UKCoD. If you would like to be kept informed about the progress of this work, you can see regular bulletins on the TAG website—www.tagcomm.org.uk

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