



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Science, Innovation and Technology Committee

Oral evidence: Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair of Ofcom, HC 55

Wednesday 20 May 2026

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Members present: Dame Chi Onwurah (Chair); Emily Darlington; Kit Malthouse; Samantha Niblett; Dr Lauren Sullivan; Martin Wrigley; Daniel Zeichner.

Members also present: Liam Byrne, Chair of the Business and Trade Committee; Dame Caroline Dinenage, Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Questions 1-86

Witnesses

I: Sir Ian Cheshire, Government's preferred candidate for the role of chair at Ofcom.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Sir Ian Cheshire.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, and welcome to today's meeting of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee. We are hearing from the Government's preferred candidate as chair of Ofcom—welcome, Sir Ian. This is a crucial time for the regulator, whose remit spans online safety, telecoms and, soon, data centres, as well as postal services and broadcasting—services so important to many of our constituents.

I also welcome our guests to the session: Liam Byrne, Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, and Dame Caroline Dinéage, Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, who will help us cover this very wide remit.

Sir Ian, I will start with the typical interview question: what made you apply for the role of Ofcom chair?

Sir Ian Cheshire: The reason was that I have been involved in Government and business over quite a long period—35 years in various forms. I have previous Government experience, including as the lead non-exec for the Government and on various Government taskforces. I had been chair of Channel 4 and had somewhat assumed that I would get two terms. When I did not get a second term, I was looking to do one more public appointment, if that was possible.

Ofcom really stood out for me among the various other arm's length bodies and regulators because I had been regulated by it twice—once at BT and once at Channel 4—and I had seen what good, effective regulation can do, particularly as we built out fibre. Ofcom was fundamental in reshaping the regulatory framework to allow fibre build-out.

I suppose the extra incentive was the extraordinary arrival of the Online Safety Act and the sense that—although I know many people in this room probably spent 10 years working on it, so I defer to them—relatively recently, it has gone from drafting to being enabled and in action. The question for the regulator now is: how do you regulate something that has not been regulated before, with highly wealthy people on the other side trying to do things differently?

It struck me as one of the biggest national challenges that we had, and it felt like, if I was going to do one more public thing, this would be a brilliant one to be involved with.

Q2 Chair: We were told that you were sounded out before applying by someone at No. 10. Can you tell us who that was and how the role was pitched to you?

Sir Ian Cheshire: It is probably not fair to say who. It was a basic question: "Look, if Ofcom became available, given that you are no longer at Channel 4, would you be interested?" It was not that I had got this on a



plate—very much not—but rather, “Would you put your hat in the ring?” In that sense, it was a normal sounding-out.

- Q3 **Chair:** I should declare an interest: my “proper job” before Parliament, as my constituents describe it, was working for Ofcom. At that time—2004 to 2010—the then chair was very clear that Ofcom should not be regulating the internet because it was too big, too difficult and too controversial. In the time since then, as you referred to, Ofcom has taken on the postal system, the BBC, data centres and the entire Online Safety Act.

Isn't Ofcom too big to be effectively managed and chaired?

Sir Ian Cheshire: In relative terms, it is 1,700 people compared with over 4,000 at the FCA. We are reflecting what Parliament has asked to be regulated. This is not an empire-building exercise to say, “Give us more to regulate.”

The key is: have you got the right people and the right capabilities in the different areas? Somebody working on the regulation of spectrum will not really be seen to be involved in anything to do with the Post Office. The trick is to say that Ofcom is essentially a multi-regulator that sits in the one body. There are some efficiencies in having the corporate function shared—I think that is perfectly sensible. It is all about the quality of individual industry-facing teams.

The newest challenge is obviously online safety, because it is a relatively new area and there are not years—I remember meeting people at Ofcom through BT; it had been regulating BT for 25 years. They really knew every inside element of that.

Getting the right people at the right scale is one of the questions that, if approved, I would be keen to understand a bit more about: have we got the right industry-facing skills, so that we are capable of delivering the regulatory remit that Parliament has decided to give us? Provided that we are clear about each team, the overall size is not so much of an issue.

- Q4 **Chair:** We will come back to some of the detail for a more in-depth assessment of Ofcom's remit, but I want to look at something that struck me very clearly when I was at Ofcom: the political will and engagement.

As I am sure you are aware, the two other finalists for this role were politicians or ex-politicians. You are not a politician; you do not have the political networks that politicians would have. I want to understand what kind of political skills and engagement you have. My experience of working at Ofcom is that, while it is an independent regulator without political back-up and will, it will not be able to take on the big giants of that sector.

How are you going to ensure the political will behind the regulatory decisions that you have to make?

Sir Ian Cheshire: That is a good question. Clearly, it is an independent regulator accountable to Parliament, but the key other relationship is Government.



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Having spent over 10 years in and around Whitehall through non-exec roles, I think I have learned my way around the practicality of how things get done in Government. As you say, Chair, I am not a politician and I would not pretend to be one, but I do understand the key relationships you need to make this body in particular effective.

My experience at Channel 4 was that I was thrown in as I think the *Guardian* described me, “the Tory crony”, when I was appointed, because of privatisation. I already knew quite a lot of people at DCMS, perm secs and others, and focused on building relationships behind the scenes, which were not about public spats or anything like that—essentially, to work on how do we go forward together so that we understand each other.

I think the relationship with Government is critical. My observation at the moment, from not being in Ofcom but having talked and done my homework, is that Ofcom faces a gap in expectations, basically.

The phrase I am hearing when I have been talking to people is that it is perceived as timid and too lawyerly. Speaking as someone with a law degree, I have to be a bit careful about that, but the issue is that there seems to be an expectation that Ofcom can do this level of impact, this quickly, and a sense that Ofcom feels that it is more constrained. The gap in expectations is clearly causing pressure. There is no point pretending otherwise; that is the reality.

My interest will be in trying to bring together the various stakeholders and saying, “Can we be clear on what good looks like for Ofcom? What can it actually achieve and what can’t be achieved?” It is about not being defensive, but being very open, because I think the disappointment comes when you have differing expectations and you have not collectively defined what good looks like.

From its perspective, Ofcom needs to put forward what it really thinks is possible and be challenged. The board has a role to do that. I have already had some conversations with the Secretary of State and have talked to a number of other people, including some of the victims groups. I would be very interested in collectively redefining what we think Ofcom can do so that we are not sitting there in a year’s time, disappointed.

Q5 Chair: Thank you. I think what you are saying is the answer to a question that I was asked to ask you by women’s advocacy groups, by young people concerned about online safety and by many of my constituents: under you, will Ofcom take on the big tech bros?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Yes.

Chair: Excellent. Thank you for that.

Q6 Samantha Niblett: I am glad to hear you say that you will take on big tech—that is music to my ears. We will be watching. At times it has felt like Ofcom has been complacent in its approach to public safety online and that it has slipped into the role of mediator between industry and the consumer instead of actually looking after the consumer. Do you agree? If



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so, what would you do to remedy that? If you do not agree, why not?

Sir Ian Cheshire: At this stage, my direct answer to that question is that I do not know enough because I have virtually not been in the door yet. That is the area that I want to probe and understand because there is clearly a perception that Ofcom has been complacent, slow or both. There are some questions about the practicality of what speed to do what. There are slightly more constraints.

The question for my mind is whether it is a reasonable answer to say that there are constraints and therefore this is the right pace—in which case, I do not think that Ofcom communicated what the appropriate pace is. If expectations are high and the delivery is lower, Ofcom has to take it on the chin and work out how to communicate that and say what the maximum is that it could do.

I will also comment, from my regulatory experience elsewhere, that your success can occasionally be measured by how many people you have fined. I worry about that as the measure of effectiveness for a regulator because actually you want to change the impact on the lives of millions of citizens, to expose them to less harm, and to look after children in particular. The measures of that, I think, are not necessarily about getting to a fine: we saw in the broadcasting and telecoms world that good engagement early on with the right framework modifies behaviour ahead of getting to that point.

From the framework to the intervention to the compliance and fines, there is a continuum of impact. We have to set out the stall there to say, “Right, we’re going to do this, this and this.” It is clear that there is a perception of some slowness or complacency and I am very keen to make sure that we do not have that as a lingering concern.

Q7 **Samantha Niblett:** That is really good to hear.

I have something I want to get on your radar. Back in March, a group of 60 Labour MPs signed a letter from the Labour men and boys group that stated that when it comes to online safety Ofcom has a statutory duty to produce the women and girls guidance—which is hopefully helping to protect them online, or at least should be—but there is nothing equivalent for men. Yet men are subject to sextortion, the manosphere, scam artists, county lines, grooming and so on. I would personally like to see proactivity from Ofcom, rather than a reactive approach.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Rather than wait.

Samantha Niblett: Yes. We have seen the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology be a little frustrated with the speed at which Ofcom is enacting the Online Safety Act.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Is there a draft in existence for that that somebody has looked at?

Samantha Niblett: I do not know. All I know is that that letter has come in your general direction. I just want to make sure that it is on your radar.



Sir Ian Cheshire: I have not seen anything. Thank you. Consider it on the radar.

Q8 **Emily Darlington:** The APPG for men and boys met with Melanie Dawes yesterday. She said, essentially, that it was not a priority to create that guidance. She mentioned that the violence against women and girls strategy obviously talks about not just protecting women and girls but how you stop such violence from happening in the first place—which will have an impact—and that Ofcom does not have the resources for another such strategy, so I want to come back to the resourcing question.

Ofcom currently has 1,800 staff. Of those, 450 work on online safety and only 70 to 80 work on compliance and enforcement. Do you think that is a reasonable allocation of resources, given the resources of the tech sector and the pressure from the public, as well as from Government, for a level of change that is required and quick implementation of the Online Safety Act?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I have two observations. First, given that the team was set up relatively recently—in the last 24 months—I would expect that its profile will change over time. In order to formulate, for example, conduct codes and the various frameworks, you probably need certain skillsets to start with.

In my experience, regulators tend to flex up depending on whether they are more compliance-focused or still creating frameworks. I would want to make sure of this, so if I got there, would ask, “Is there anything that we are not doing, because we have that resource compliance, that we would like to do?” I do not get the sense that, either from Government or other sources, there is a reluctance to create more resources for the right outcome.

We should not expect to see a constraint on resources stopping something as fundamental as compliance, but it is going to change slightly as Ofcom and others learn how this works. At the beginning, some things will probably not be as clear as they will be two years from now. I expect this to evolve as we learn and see how the industry co-operates or does not co-operate. We will see whether we need to put more effort into the compliance on the legal end or the intervention end.

Q9 **Emily Darlington:** Can you understand concern from many groups out there, including parents, that 70 to 80 people out of 1,800 people is not particularly prioritising the safety of our citizens online?

Sir Ian Cheshire: The online safety team in its totality is the biggest group in Ofcom, so it is not like it has not been built up. Whether we have all the right people in all the right places is precisely the question that the board and the new chair would have to ask. It is trying to work out, “What does good look like? What do we have to enforce? Have we got the resources to do it?” I would start with, “What is the strategy? What are the measures of success? How are we going to measure success?” and then you can reinforce resources on the back of that, rather than having an absolute resource focus.



Q10 Emily Darlington: Would your priority be to reallocate resource internally within Ofcom or to go the Treasury and ask for the cap to be set higher, as long as you are able to fulfil that from your fines and other income?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Presumably, the conversation—I have not been involved with it, so I cannot give the detail—on resources has been, “Let’s articulate what we need and then go to a Treasury conversation.” We are assuming that this is fee-based funding, so it should not be subject to a Treasury constraint. If I ended up chairing the organisation, I would encourage it to be very demanding of itself about whether it really has the resources. It is not just about the quantity; it is about the right people.

Q11 Emily Darlington: So the Treasury could expect an ask to raise the cap?

Sir Ian Cheshire: A gentle request—you never know.

Q12 Chair: I think the point you are making is that that balance of compliance versus other areas says that Ofcom is a reactive organisation, not a proactive one. Are you telling us that it will be different under you?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I would like to have the conversation with the leadership team about—I am sorry to be boring about this—what good looks like and what we are actually trying to get done when. That does, to my mind, have a strong element of proactivity, because there is a remit that Parliament has handed Ofcom.

The organisation needs to work out what it is going to do at which stage. It will not just be 15 extra lawyers to do compliance. We would need to have a balanced view of that, but it needs to define that success and therefore the resource requirement.

Saying, “This is the strategy, here are the measures, and therefore we need this level of resource,” is the way I would do it. Ofcom is occasionally seen as reactive because it has to wait for complaints or other things to happen, but in other areas it does not have to wait. In creating codes and launching investigations, it has the powers to get on and do things.

Q13 Emily Darlington: I suggest that that is the case and it has been reactive. May I also gently suggest that establishing what good looks like is not a role for Ofcom by itself? What good looks like will be defined by every citizen in the UK who relies on Ofcom to keep people safe online. You may want to consider how you will engage that voice in the debate on what good looks like, rather than just asking the team already there. You will clearly sense a lot of frustration among parliamentarians, because we are carrying the frustration of our constituents in this area.

Q14 Last, I want to talk about new areas coming up in online safety where we are very clearly behind. That includes things like companion chatbots, where there is a challenge for gen-Xers in trying to create laws and guidance for a world that we are not seeing. How will you change things and make sure that the team are looking forward to new tech, so that we do not have the disasters that have occurred in the US involving companion chatbots before we are willing to take action?



Sir Ian Cheshire: At the end of the day, anything to do with new areas of technology that require new regulation and new legislation is ultimately Parliament's call, but Ofcom needs to be future scanning and working out what is coming, even though things move fast. Although chatbots or nudification apps did not exist when the Online Safety Act came in, they were broadly predictable. The question is: can you get ahead of change and identify what is coming next? The rate of change in the technology is so fast, but you know that it will be so fast that you need to be facing forward into it. I absolutely expect us to be the people who are scanning the horizon in order to inform and, if necessary, come back to you to say, "There is something nasty coming down the track. We will deal with it," or, "We need more powers to deal with it."

Q15 **Emily Darlington:** That is the conversation we keep having with Ofcom. The reality is that there are laws in place—it is not just the Online Safety Act—not least, new hate laws. How do you perceive moving forward in terms of the new hate laws around disability, misogyny and LGBT hate crime? Rather than waiting for something to be specifically added to the OSA, how can you push the organisation to say, "These are the laws of the land. Therefore, we should be able to regulate without—"

Sir Ian Cheshire: —an additional law, yes." Again, I simply have not had that conversation with them at this stage. I am aware of the issue. Clearly hate crime—most recently antisemitic hate crime—is a big, live issue that we have to engage with. There is no question about that. The question is about practicality: "What can one do quickly? What can one do that takes more time? Let's set out a set of actions." I am sorry to keep going on, but if that is what the good intervention looks like, how quickly can we get to it? We will have to do it; I just do not know yet, I have not started yet on what we would do and when by next week.

Q16 **Dr Sullivan:** Thank you for coming to see us today, Sir Ian. I want to focus on online safety. First, do you think that under-16s should be able to access social media?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Personally? Obviously, that is a decision for Government and Parliament to make, and I know the consultation is under way. As a parent and grandparent, I am personally very nervous about under-16s on social media, but I would not want to impose that as a political or an Ofcom view.

Q17 **Dr Sullivan:** There is wide acceptance that it is a very worrying space, but what tools in Ofcom's toolbox could help make the space safer for under-16s?

Sir Ian Cheshire: As I understand it, the consultation going on at the moment ranges across everything, from a complete ban to versions of constraints. Ultimately—handing it back to you guys—it is for Parliament to decide what the appropriate level is. What Ofcom should do is help in that debate, saying, "Here are practical interventions that would work," as opposed to some that might sound emotionally desirable but will not work. When we say, "Ban social media," what do we actually mean? We have to prepare the regulatory toolkit for whatever Parliament decides it wants to



do. The organisation should absolutely be part of that conversation and getting ready for it.

Q18 Dr Sullivan: Do you feel that the online space is just not safe? I have spoken about this to many young people. They see so many good things on social media, such as the friendships, the groups and that sort of stuff—rightly or wrongly, this is how they communicate—but there are young people who say it needs to be banned or restricted for the younger ages. The question is about the harms that are here now; Ofcom has those powers now, I suppose.

Sir Ian Cheshire: There is a spectrum of risk. Some things that are going on are clearly totally unacceptable and truly awful, such as suicide forums—really heartbreaking stuff. To my mind, it is clear that we have to, so far as we can, put them out of touch so that they cannot be accessed by anybody in the UK. You also have the other extreme end of the spectrum: there is a duty on free speech in the Online Safety Act, and some brilliant things do happen in the digital space.

We have to take a slightly more nuanced view on where we set the line for intervention, having regard to the fact that you cannot go around switching off websites at random just because you do not particularly like them. We need a pragmatic set of actions. With such things as pornography, suicide forums and some of the nudification apps, there is a clear need to get to action. I am less convinced that there is a one-size-fits-all answer for the whole of the digital space; we should be having the conversation as it evolves.

Parliament has chosen to legislate on online safety; therefore, we should be acting on it. That is subject to the joys of VPNs and the other technical problems we have, but there is no reason not to go after the key harms that are there. As soon as they are visible, there is no reason why we cannot to do something about them.

Q19 Dr Sullivan: Two questions arise from that. First, will you be meeting with survivor groups as part of your gathering of information? An example is content on eating habits: on the face of it, the content is about how you prepare a healthy meal—but oh, now it is about how you can look good. That is how you can go down these rabbit holes. Secondly, would you be interested in making the platforms publishers, so that they have more of a role in and responsibility for what they are showing?

Sir Ian Cheshire: To answer your first question, I have already met one of the survivor groups, because I wanted to understand what their view of Ofcom was before I potentially got involved. I have always believed—this comes from 40 years of shopkeeping—that you start by asking the customers, the citizens, for their views.

This typically has two bits: the real, lived experience, the emotion and why it is as it is, and the data—how many examples of X or Y we actually have. If we look at the emotion, the lived reality and the data, we can get a picture of what the reality is for the majority of our citizens. We might have one or two anecdotes, but we need to have both ends of the picture.



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I am very keen to spend time with such groups and will arrange to do so. I genuinely want to reach out to say that we are very plugged into the reality of their experience. There are some genuinely awful stories that we need to deal with. I am not yet sure how to tackle your second question, but it has been logged.

Q20 Dr Sullivan: That's fair. I guess this is about driving behaviour change and compliance in the big tech companies, which have a lot of money behind them.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Just a bit, yes.

Q21 Dr Sullivan: There is a huge vested interest, so going from a platform to a publisher space would probably be very challenging for them.

Sir Ian Cheshire: I don't want to sound like I am ducking the question, but the realities of moving from platform to publisher are quite major.

Dr Sullivan: Yes.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Having been on the broadcast end of this and seen the responsibilities of a public service broadcaster, which we at Channel 4 took extremely seriously, they do not exist in quite a lot of the digital space, and have not from inception. Having come up as an e-commerce director 30 years ago, I have seen the space evolve and change, and the original versions of the platforms were very different from what they are today. We have to think hard about this; I am a bit nervous about presenting a pat solution that I don't have at the moment.

Q22 Dr Sullivan: Fair enough. If that route may not be open to you, how do you then drive that behaviour change to make tech companies a bit more human.

Sir Ian Cheshire: There are early signs of some engagement by the big six platforms, from what I understand, in terms, and not all the platforms are in the same place in terms of levels of engagement. Speaking from some experience in the telecoms sector, we saw more or less compliance in some areas, but particularly when the industry got together and said, "This is the level playing field, and we are going to actually join in on this."

I would like to start with persuading them that they need to change, and then being able to present a stick if they do not change, because the quickest way to affect millions of people is to get the big platforms to change their behaviour. Just in arithmetic numbers of risk areas, that is where the potential lies, as opposed to the small but risky, which we deal with differently. I would really want to go into bat.

What we are essentially doing is protecting the British public from stuff that we, as a democracy, decide we do not want people to be exposed to. That is entirely reasonable of us. The fact that these guys are hugely wealthy, very motivated and, from what I can tell, already suing Ofcom on a number of fronts means we just have to deal with them, but Ofcom has established in its other areas a reputation of being a good, internationally well-respected regulator. I do not see why we cannot deal with this new



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area, even though it is a radically different kind of regulation from that applied to the traditional industry.

Q23 Dr Sullivan: I hope that you wouldn't spend too long waiting for them to come together, because I feel like they have self-regulation or self-control at the moment and it's not there.

Sir Ian Cheshire: I will take that on board and then—

Dr Sullivan: And then get the big stick out.

Sir Ian Cheshire: As soon as I find where the big stick is, I shall.

Dr Sullivan: We will definitely give it to you, if you need it.

Q24 Chair: That is a key point—the Committee has, in its recommendations previously, said that platform companies need to take more responsibility. We have been waiting. This country has spent two decades trying self-regulation, and it has not succeeded. You gave the example of telecoms companies coming together, and I am very familiar with that example. We will look at some of the telecoms issues around Ofcom, but the difference between telecoms and the platform companies is that they are all headquartered outside the United Kingdom, so persuading them presents different challenges.

One of our Committee's critiques of the Online Safety Act is that it is based on services and technologies. It ends up being a game of whack-a-mole—we will do this, we will do that and we will do the other—but it is not principles-based. What are your views on principles-based regulation, and do you have principles that you would like to establish, whether by force or by persuasion?

Sir Ian Cheshire: There are two elements in play here. First, what is the legislative framework Parliament has given us? If it hasn't got principles-based regulation in it, there is a debate to be had on that, and I would like to understand that more. The reality is that most of us approach regulation in human terms, through principles about what we are trying to achieve and how are we trying to do it.

The answer is that, in terms of values and principles, I would want to be very clear about where we intervene for maximum effect and for the right reason. But I do not think at this point that the challenge of, for example, turning things off—as opposed to saying, "We'd like to turn it off; can we turn it off?"—forces you down more of the services and technology approach. I think it is a core question at the heart of how Ofcom shows up in this area.

The early conversation I have had has left me with a clear answer that I need to go deeper into the subject—I literally have one contact on that question—because, from the outside in, I probably would have approached it differently.

Q25 Emily Darlington: This Committee did an extensive report on misinformation and disinformation and its impact on the riots. Since then,



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we have done many other reports and had many conversations about the impact of deepfakes and disinformation. We have the Rycroft review, which talks about the strategic threat from Russia and Iran. Internally, I proposed amendments to the Representation of the People Bill regarding the impact of disinformation and misinformation on democracy, including AI chatbots and others. Yet we have seen very little action on mis and disinformation. Do you think it is something that Ofcom should take more seriously? How do you assess the risk of mis and disinformation to democracy? We had Martin Lewis on the "Today" programme this morning, talking about mis and disinformation in terms of mis-selling and scams. What is your assessment of Ofcom's role in that and how well are they doing at protecting the UK public?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I have seen Ofcom's initial piece on this, which, again, I am not familiar with because I have not yet worked inside the organisation. They have set up a board committee on misinformation and disinformation, specifically with Lord Allan, who, as I understand it, has been asked by the board to lead the organisation's thoughts on that. What I was not clear on, and I'm afraid I am not clear on it today but I will take it away and have a look, is what legislative powers we have on misinformation and disinformation. I was under the impression that some of those clauses had been taken out of the Online Safety Act and that the situation was not entirely clear.

None the less, this issue is absolutely fundamental. When I was on the board at Barclays, what worried me the most was online scams. Online fraud is a really serious epidemic. Frankly, it has replaced a lot of other types of crime because it is probably easier to do and more lucrative. It is a topic I would be extremely interested in. I do not yet have a view that, "This is what Ofcom can do in this space or another space," but it is part of the to-do list.

Q26 **Liam Byrne:** Have you read the Rycroft review?

Sir Ian Cheshire: No, I have not started it yet. I have been referred to it. I will.

Q27 **Liam Byrne:** It concludes by saying we do not know enough about the role of dark money in media organisations in the UK. That is an issue that will show up when the election reform Bill comes to the House. What will Ofcom do to help us understand the role of dark money in media organisations in the country?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Has it been asked to do it? I thought the report was—

Q28 **Liam Byrne:** The Rycroft review says that we don't know and we need to find out more, so that would put you on the task.

Sir Ian Cheshire: That was my question. Is Ofcom on task to actually find that out?

Q29 **Liam Byrne:** Well, do you think it is part of your responsibility?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I don't know yet, honestly.



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Q30 Martin Wrigley: I am going to pick up on a couple of things that you have been talking about: what good looks like, asking the customer, which I think is vital, and big sticks.

I was on the Bill Committee for the Online Safety Act, and Ofcom actually rejected powers that were offered to them in that Bill, particularly in terms of small-volume but harmful services. They were rejected and not put through to Ofcom's regulation. Do you think Ofcom have been too timid?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I was not aware that they had rejected it. Did they say why at the time? Was there a reason?

Martin Wrigley: We were not given that in the Bill Committee.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Well, as I said before, the big platforms carry mass reach. Millions of citizens have to worry about them, but the small but risky ability to move quickly against very bad actors is a critical part of Ofcom's legislative remit. The early indications from trying to do that with the suicide forum suggest that it is not straightforward. Therefore, I would argue that it probably needs redoubling down on to work out what we could do that would be quicker.

I think there are gaps, again, in expectations about how quickly some of these things can just be, as people say, turned off. We have to keep asking ourselves what is practically doable as rapidly as practically possible. Then, the organisation needs to not be defensive about what else we could do and whether we could be more aggressive. The perception is clearly there that Ofcom is timid and not moving fast enough, so we will need to deal with that.

Q31 Martin Wrigley: Coming back to gaps brings me on to No.3 or 4 in your list of priorities: mobile coverage. I am a Devon MP—

Sir Ian Cheshire: Oh dear!

Martin Wrigley: Do you think that Ofcom's measure of mobile coverage is acceptable?

Sir Ian Cheshire: As a former director of BT, we spent an awful lot of time on mobile coverage quality, notspots and various other issues, obviously including last-mile broadband in rural areas. It is a difficult set of measures because, in my experience—I received mail on this, although not quite as much, probably, as a parliamentary mailbag does—the personal experience of people in this place is very different.

I was encouraged to see the "Map Your Mobile" piece as an attempt to actually get the reality. I live some of the time on the Isle of Wight, and I can assure you that my mobile signal disappears in a 100-yard area close to the sea. So I absolutely get the lived reality of it.

Again, the challenge for Ofcom is to say, "Right, what is a decent measure and what is a real measure, and how do you keep evolving it?" As we get better in coverage, the absolute coverage measure is one thing, but quality becomes much more important, particularly as we rely more on



wireless. When we say, "What does good look like?", mobile quality is one of the measures I would be really pushing on.

- Q32 **Martin Wrigley:** "Map Your Mobile" is certainly an advance over the approach of, "You could get coverage from any one of the four main networks—outside, standing on the top of a hill."

Sir Ian Cheshire: On a ladder, yes.

- Q33 **Martin Wrigley:** Then, when you add that into the broadband coverage—there is no broadband coverage and Ofcom says, "You can get a 4G signal here," but you can't anywhere in those villages—there is something going very wrong with what good looks like in the measurement of telecoms provision, certainly in Devon and probably in many other places too.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Certainly from prior experience, large bits of Scotland and Wales have had a similar set of issues historically. That is partly geographical.

Again, there are signs of initiatives, such as satellite-based services and various other things one could do, but, in going from the "mass coverage" level to the quality and granularity of that type of data, it is just important to keep going and keep raising the target. I completely take on board that challenge.

- Q34 **Martin Wrigley:** And Government services keep on moving to, for example, the NHS app—

Sir Ian Cheshire: Yes.

Martin Wrigley: Which is great—until you don't have coverage and you don't have broadband.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Yes, there is nothing better than sitting there with an "NHS in your hand" that doesn't exist. I am very familiar with that. I do think that that is ultimately about rolling out standards in the network and standards on spectrum and technology. There is some economics in that—the last 2% to 3% of coverage is very expensive and very difficult—but, within that, there are still things that are being improved. The regulatory push in the future on mobile may not be about some of the things that have been regulated in the past; it is going to be more about quality.

Martin Wrigley: Might that include national roaming?

Sir Ian Cheshire: That is a topic I am familiar with from the past. It has quite a few complicated moving parts, but it is the right question to ask, yes.

- Q35 **Martin Wrigley:** Security and resilience are also on your list. We keep talking about hardening Government systems, but we are not talking about hardening our comms networks. Yet we know that we are under attack all the time from hostile players.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Yes.



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Martin Wrigley: You are going to have an awful lot of things at the top of your priority list. How are you going to avoid being taken by all of the shiny, shiny things that are the latest thing in the *Daily Mail*?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Good. That is also a topic I am aware of. One of the more impressive things I did early in my time on the BT board was to see the operations centre, which was precisely the comms defence piece for BT. The sense of being in a major arms race was very palpable in terms of, "We have sorted out this; we are now seeing this." It is a dynamic agenda that does not stop.

In overall priority terms, going back to the point about Ofcom being a multi-regulator, I would say, "The online safety team are not going to worry about comms resilience and security, but there is a team that do worry about it. Have they got the right set of priorities?" It is about saying, for telecoms, "What is the list, and have they got the right capabilities, resources and budget?"

Based on what we have seen in the cyber world in the last 18 months—and wearing a plc hat—businesses are absolutely focused on this area. That will be one of the areas that is higher up the list.

Q36 **Martin Wrigley:** My residents in Devon will be very keen to see mobile coverage actually improving. We literally have villages where you can get no signal and no broadband.

Sir Ian Cheshire: I am familiar with the challenges of rolling out to some parts of the country. It is a topic that feels a little like groundhog day from when we first started rolling out fibre through Openreach and BT. It is an iterative process, though, so I am afraid there is a bit of this where you just have to keep going and finally get rid of those notspots.

Martin Wrigley: And please keep your eye on what good really does look like.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Yes, and the reality of what good looks like—not the claim. I take that point.

Q37 **Chair:** To pick up on a couple of points, the inverse of rolling out is switching off, and you have the 2G switch-off. Are you confident that the lessons have been learned from the previous failure to protect vulnerable people that we saw in the switch-off of the PSTN?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Speaking personally, one of the most uncomfortable subjects I experienced on the BT board was the vulnerable parties in the switch-off and all the issues around health pagers and other aspects.

Chair: People died.

Sir Ian Cheshire: It is genuinely an issue that I have lived and sweated about. I generally found it a struggle because, for some groups, it was technically really hard to do. Trying to ensure that the organisation pushed itself to the absolute limit left me with a very strong impression that we need to look after the really vulnerable.



That involves thinking differently and not assuming that everyone can just switch on some sort of new digital alternative. With that, I am under absolutely no illusions that that switch-off will have challenges and problems. We must be prepared to intervene and be as demanding as we can to push so that no one is left behind, because it has generally proved harder in the past than people estimated before they started switching stuff off.

Q38 **Chair:** So you would expect Ofcom to intervene?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I expect Ofcom to be all over this and very clear. Just to be clear, Chair, it is one of those areas where your personal experience comes to bear. That is one where I saw the issues before.

Q39 **Chair:** You have talked a lot about the stakeholders that you engage. This is a three-day-a-week job, and you are going to retain your chairship of Landsec, which is one of the country's largest landowners, and you are also chair of a large medical treatment company. How are you going to ensure that you are really engaging with the wide range of small businesses and organisations that depend on Ofcom, and not just spending your time with BT, big tech bros and so on?

Sir Ian Cheshire: That is again a very fair question. One of the things I have done over the years is also to be personally involved in a couple of small businesses; I am not purely some sort of big corporate plc person. I have also worked quite a lot over the years with people like the FSB, chambers of commerce and others.

In certain areas, even with something as big as Landsec, we engage with a huge SME supply chain, so I am very conscious that it is not a question of just speaking to the big three people and that being it. Again, I hope there is a structured way of organising that as I potentially get into an induction process and understand who the main players are.

One question I asked of a couple of people, including representatives of some of the victims groups, is: who should I go to see? I am very happy to be pointed at anyone who anybody in the Committee feels would be most useful.

Q40 **Chair:** In the past we have had difficulty in getting transparency about who Ofcom is meeting with and when. Can we expect greater transparency under your chairship?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Good—I was not aware of that. Was anything particular behind that or was it just not disclosing dialogue?

Chair: We and others wanted to know how many times Ofcom had met with the big tech companies, for example.

Sir Ian Cheshire: I suppose I can imagine someone inside the organisation being nervous about disclosing that because it would deter from some of the conversations, but I had not heard of that as an issue, so let me take it on board.



Q41 Daniel Zeichner: Good morning. I would like to move you on to a different area, around data centres. Under the legislation coming through there are going to be new responsibilities. Have you given any thought to the challenges that will face the organisation from that and how you would address them?

Sir Ian Cheshire: At this stage I have had literally one initial briefing on the data centre issue, so I am not going to pretend that I am expert at all, but that issue is clearly vital for our national infrastructure. Our entire comms system will ultimately depend on the data centres, their resilience and their security.

It also sounds like a sufficiently specialist topic that my first reaction is: please can I meet the person who thinks that they are the specialist in that area in Ofcom? I have not yet done that. When I saw that legislation, I thought, "Ofcom has a lot of things to do, and we also have data centres?" It was a bit like joining the DWP board and finding that we were responsible for nuclear health and safety, which was terrifying.

I have logged it as an area; it is clearly very important but I have just not started that journey yet. I can see that that is going to be a specialist form of regulatory oversight that we will need to get right. It is clearly important.

Q42 Daniel Zeichner: I understand that you have long retail experience, and retailers have been on the frontline in relation to data centres. What conclusions have you drawn from that experience about how it could be done?

Sir Ian Cheshire: As well as those two experiences, I have spoken extensively to my friends at M&S, the Co-op and others about their experiences. The reality is that we are now fully dependent on those pieces of digital infrastructure in a way that was not true 30 years ago. Ironically, as Land Securities is a landlord I could probably run that business on vellum and a quill because we just have to collect the rents, but anything involving supply chains is so intertwined with suppliers, digital systems and us.

The things that I have come away with include knowing that you have to plan for a much higher degree of security than you did 10 years ago, but with the rather grim reality that it is probably hard to stop people getting into the data centres. The question is: how do you recover and protect once the initial intrusion is there? The data centre also has to be physically secure. It has to have the right power configuration. There are so many other things attached to it now.

Most of the companies that I have spoken to over the last three years are very clear-eyed about how their businesses now depend on data centres and about how to appropriately invest in their security. It is an issue that is probably only going to become more important, particularly as AI plays a bigger role.

Q43 Daniel Zeichner: Last year, as Food Minister, I was acutely aware of that



issue, and the risks we face. My concern is with how, as a regulator, you manage the balance between national security and commercial confidentiality. How far will you push?

Sir Ian Cheshire: It is possible to reconcile those two. Of the two, national security, which includes national food resilience, clearly wins—to my mind. Most of the experience that I have heard about from the people who have suffered was that the industry can regroup and work together to get to the right answer. We therefore should be prioritising security. That is certainly my preference.

Q44 **Daniel Zeichner:** The point I am getting at is that every major organisation has reputational reasons for saying, “It’s fine.” How will you make sure that Ofcom, if you are chairing it, has the teeth to really find out if it is fine?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Clearly, very few people will volunteer to say, “I’ve got a problem. Can you help?” There are enough common architectural and risk issues in how you think about data centres and their resilience and security that you can ask some fairly probing questions and get evidence on that.

I encourage any of the players potentially being scrutinised that honesty really is the best policy in this area. Those who have been through the painful hack have, from their experience, significantly changed their views on talking about how to handle this. The industry should be pretty open to that.

Q45 **Daniel Zeichner:** I think there have been different approaches, frankly, but I hope to share your optimism.

Sir Ian Cheshire: If there are particular things that you could point out to me, I would be very grateful.

Q46 **Dame Caroline Dinéage:** It is lovely to see you again, Sir Ian. Can I talk to you about media, with my DCMS hat on? I have quite a few questions, so I will rattle through, if that is okay.

You may have seen or heard about the “Panorama” documentary this week on “Married at First Sight”. That once again cast a spotlight on the broadcast code, which Ofcom changed back in 2021 to improve the duty of care. In the light of that, and other recent controversies such as Ofcom’s U-turn on the GB News investigation, in your view is the broadcast code, as it stands, robust enough?

Sir Ian Cheshire: It was redone in ’21, so five years ago. It is always open for Ofcom to have another look at it. In the two particular instances you mentioned, obviously I welcome the fact that Channel 4 is taking the allegations seriously on “Married at First Sight” with a legal review. Lorraine Heggessey is a fantastic TV exec to lead it. Looking at the code again makes a lot of sense.

The GB News episode is still a question of whether Ofcom thinks it is regulating the programme not the channel, which is a reflection of the way



the code is drafted. A debate about the broadcast code will always happen when we have issues like this. My initial view would be that if it was reviewed five years ago, you could think about it every five or 10 years, so this may be the time to ask ourselves again.

- Q47 **Dame Caroline Dinéage:** Do you think it is a question of not only whether the code needs reviewing but whether Ofcom is rigorous enough at enforcing the code?

Sir Ian Cheshire: The rigour of enforcement goes back to the earlier point about different perceptions on how rigorous, thorough and speedy Ofcom is in all its aspects of regulation. As an organisation, Ofcom should be willing to be challenged on whether it is being rigorous enough. If I am honest, what I am slightly concerned about coming into this is expectations that it can do X and the reality is that it probably cannot do X; it can do Y. I want to be super clear about whether that is true or whether the organisation is being too defensive, too loyal or too something else, but let's have that conversation openly. A new chair has a period in which it can ask those questions and probe and assess it.

- Q48 **Dame Caroline Dinéage:** The accusations about Ofcom that we continually hear in the Culture, Media and Sport Committee are around speed, pace and grip: whether it is able, whether it is willing and whether it has the stomach to use the powers that it has at its disposal. What is your sense on that?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I will repeat what I said before. I have clearly heard about this difference—this gap. I do not think the gap is a deliberate attempt by well-meaning people in Ofcom to disappoint parliamentarians or the public, but if the perception is that it is not moving fast enough or being bold enough, that is the area I want to dig into to say, "What is the reality? What can we do, if anything, about it?" If a regulator is being perceived as not doing enough, that is a problem.

- Q49 **Dame Caroline Dinéage:** It is not just reputation or perception; there are practical implications here. When you appeared in front of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee—

Sir Ian Cheshire: I remember it well.

Dame Caroline Dinéage:—almost this time last year, in April, you said that Channel 4 is a "national treasure" that "needs protection". Yesterday one of the witnesses on the work that we are doing on the BBC charter review described the pressures facing PSBs as "existential". What will you do as chair of Ofcom—what will be the noticeable change—to make sure that our public service broadcasters are protected?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I would say two things. Courtesy of the Channel 4 experience and spending time with the BBC and others, and having been before your Committee, I have seen the challenge to public service broadcasting much more clearly than I would have had I not played a role in that. I am much more persuaded that it needs more protection. There are questions like prominence. What does prominence mean? It is one



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thing on a big smart TV EPG versus on a phone in a different area. I would be looking for how you proactively defend the public good that is British public service broadcasting. That is probably not a single magic bullet. I think there is a series of interventions, but my default assumption is that I would want to be very active in promoting that.

Q50 Dame Caroline Dinéage: Even the BBC says, as in its evidence in response to the Government Green Paper on the BBC charter review, that Ofcom's approval processes are way too slow. Do you think it is right?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I honestly do not know, because I have not seen quite a lot of the detail, but given that that is the perception that seems to be circulating, it gives me reason to ask the question and try to dig into it. I will absolutely take that on board.

Q51 Dame Caroline Dinéage: You mentioned prominence. From Channel 4, you will understand better than most the vital importance of this issue. Do you think we will see a different approach from Ofcom, with more urgency, given your background?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Every chair brings something different to the party, but PSBs are such a crucial part of what I learned about that I would hope that that would be the impact. Whether or not one chair can have an impact, we will see.

Q52 Dame Caroline Dinéage: Do you think that the Government should extend legislation on prominence to include the video-sharing platforms like YouTube?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I lobbied for that at Channel 4, so I probably ought to say yes.

Q53 Dame Caroline Dinéage: Yes, you've got to have a bit of continuity. The print is virtually not even dry on the Media Act, but do you share my sense that it is already out of date and that it needs to be picked up and moved forward again?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I genuinely worry, though I would not underestimate the importance of what the Media Act achieved. For anyone involved with it, that was a great step forward, but it illustrates the problem that in the world of technology, the landscape is changing so fast. Some of the competitive industry structures are changing. We have to keep asking ourselves whether it is still covering all the things we want it to.

Q54 Dame Caroline Dinéage: When YouTube appeared in front of our Committee, we had difficulty defining it. It is like smoke. It says it is not a social media company or a broadcaster; it is a video-sharing platform, which is a unique entity in and of itself. That means that it is not covered by things like the BBFC when it comes to parental controls. What do you think Ofcom's role in this should be, in protecting children? That is bearing in mind that this is where the eyeballs are now, as more people are watching YouTube than the BBC.



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Sir Ian Cheshire: YouTube is the biggest single challenge. Ofcom, as a regulator, can only regulate with what it has been given to regulate, but it can, to the earlier points about being proactive and asking, identify where the issues are coming. If need be, it can check what it thinks its own powers are, and maybe the team could ask, "Have we actually got enough things we could do with the existing powers?" It could be that to regulate effectively something like YouTube, you need a different toolkit. I honestly would not be able to give you the answer to that today, but I can undertake to ask the question.

Q55 Dame Caroline Dinéage: What is your overarching sense and instinct here? Is it that we should reclassify it as a social media company or as a broadcaster, given that there is a lot of programming going out on it, or should we create an entirely new set of legislation around video-sharing platforms?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Intellectually—this is without being tested—I have seen it as slightly different. I think the latter is my instinct, because it has so many different moving parts. You now have a lot of standard publishers using YouTube as a route to market, including Channel 4. It still has a huge amount of social media version, so I think it is a different beast.

Q56 Dame Caroline Dinéage: Do you think Ofcom has a greater role to play to ensure that there are standardised and high-quality parental controls across video-sharing platforms?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Yes. The logic of saying that Ofcom is here to protect children means that we should be protecting them wherever they are watching. As I understand it, there are some various gaps in capability in certain areas, including online advertising. Whether we solve that ourselves or through legislation, we should be actively talking about that. The principle would be that we should want to regulate something like that.

Dame Caroline Dinéage: Thank you. That was a lot of questions, but we got through it quite quickly.

Chair: Thank you very much, Dame Caroline, and thank you for the responses, which emphasised the broad nature of Ofcom's interests and the breadth of the challenges when it comes to new potential broadcasters. Now I will hand over to Liam.

Q57 Liam Byrne: Thank you very much, Chair. I am going to follow on from Dame Caroline's questions on the broadcasting code, before moving on to Royal Mail. Do you watch, or have you watched, GB News?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Yes.

Q58 Liam Byrne: Have you looked at *The New World* investigation into its editing?

Sir Ian Cheshire: The Alan Rusbridger piece? I had an email from Alan on the day of announcement.

Q59 Liam Byrne: So you will know that 20 journalists reviewed 15 hours of its



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output and scored compliance at about 1.5 out of 5. On that evidence, do you think Ofcom has a problem in policing section 5 of the broadcasting code?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I have two immediate comments. First, my understanding—and I will test this if I end up as chair—is that the approach for Ofcom has been to regulate the programme, not the channel. The recent investigation of the Beverley Turner interview was a programme intervention, not a whole-channel intervention. I have been told that, so I will go away and have a think about it, because the approach used by Alan and others—journalists scoring over a series of content—is not, as I understand it, the way Ofcom regulates. But if it is, and Ofcom has not done that, I will take that on board. We also have to balance this issue with free speech, so it is a measured approach, but I am very open to being challenged about it. I intend to meet up with Alan in due course.

Q60 **Liam Byrne:** Very few other regulators take a transaction-by-transaction approach. Many of them look at the structure. Here we have a channel that has as broadcasters the leader of a political party and seven sitting MPs all from one political persuasion. Andrew Neil, who was GB News's founding chairman, says he is baffled as to why Ofcom allows this. Do you think you can persist at Ofcom with a programme-by-programme approach to regulation, when there are clearly some structural issues?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Again, I would go back to how the regulation has been framed. Is that something that is up to Ofcom to decide to regulate it that way, as opposed to programme-by-programme? I have not seen the evidence yet that says it could be done differently, but I am very happy to take it on board. The GB News question has been raised with me by a number of people, so I am not running away from it.

Q61 **Liam Byrne:** You will know that there is now a very heightened debate here about democratic integrity and how we protect the integrity of our democracy from dark money in particular. The owners of GB News are obviously masking their investments through some really opaque accounts. Do you think Parliament now has to look at media funding in the round if we are to safeguard our democratic integrity in the future?

Sir Ian Cheshire: It is a big open question—where is money coming from, and to do what?

Q62 **Liam Byrne:** But the chair of Ofcom should have an opinion on this, presumably?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I won't today, because again I have not done the homework to look at it. But if you are asking if I, as a citizen, would be worried about it, the answer is yes. If it is something that is on Ofcom's agenda that it could contribute to, I will look at it.

Q63 **Liam Byrne:** Do you think a station can employ such a number of MPs as frontmen and women for a channel and still maintain the obligations required under section 5 of the broadcasting code?



Sir Ian Cheshire: The distinction, as I understand it—again, I am prepared to be challenged and look at this again—is that sitting politicians presenting the news is not acceptable, but presenting current affairs is. The problem I see with that construct at the moment is content being snipped out of that and put on to social media, where the arrangements are different, which creates a different context for that content. There is a question about whether this actually hangs together as a coherent piece of regulation, and if it is something we should address. But I am equally mindful about the free speech piece, so it is not simply black and white.

Q64 **Liam Byrne:** How will you set about getting to the bottom of this question and perhaps coming back to Parliament with some views?

Sir Ian Cheshire: It is literally the second question on my induction plan, so I will have a series of conversations internally and externally with stakeholders to make sure that I have understood what the current framing is before we start suggesting whether there are further interventions, so it is very high on the list, after online safety.

Q65 **Liam Byrne:** You will not resist coming forward to this Committee or other Committees with your views once you have had a think.

Sir Ian Cheshire: No, absolutely. Again, it sounds a bit like the new boy excuse, but I think that it is quite important to have some data and some sort of insight before I start formulating positions and firm conclusions. I am not ducking the question; I would be thrilled to come back and be repeatedly interrogated on what we are doing, but I would need to have formulated it with some proper internal and external investigation.

Q66 **Liam Byrne:** Moving on briefly to Royal Mail, there has obviously been a collapse in the standard of service provided by Royal Mail to the country. Ofcom's regulatory approach to fixing this has clearly been inadequate, because the service has gone from bad to worse. Our Committee discovered that Ofcom does not do snap inspections of delivery offices to understand whether parcels are being prioritised over post, and Ofcom was not prepared to disclose to my Committee the number of letters that Royal Mail was delivering late. Do you think that Ofcom needs to take a more rigorous approach to ensuring that Royal Mail actually delivers to the standard the nation expects?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Again, the definition of what good Ofcom regulation looks like in this area is the challenge I would take on board from what you have said. There is no doubt that the Post Office has a massive structural problem with the erosion in letter volumes—

Liam Byrne: Royal Mail.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Sorry—Royal Mail. I am inclined to say that there are structural shifts because of what is happening with the volume of letters. There are then quality-of-service obligations that should not be affected by this and should be contracted with Royal Mail. I have generally not yet seen the detail of how those are measured in terms of the quality—for example, if letters are delivered or not—but it will be my expectation that



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we have pretty robust quality measures and that they are published, so I would go in with that assumption.

Q67 Liam Byrne: We found some very serious shortcomings in the approach that Ofcom has taken. Will you undertake to look at the way Ofcom is enforcing its role in ensuring that Royal Mail improves its service?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Absolutely. In the same way that if I want to go into any other areas and understand if we are not being seen to be meeting those levels of quality, we should absolutely take on board that challenge on Royal Mail. I am very happy to take that on board.

I would also say that the lived experience is quite different. I happen to have the unique privilege of south London having a brilliant postie called José, who is literally the neighbourhood community worker, and his quality of service is phenomenal, while friends seven doors away have disaster. There is quite a lot of variety of experience in this. Clear measurement, clear quality standards and understanding should not be impossible, so I will take that on board.

Q68 Kit Malthouse: Before I move on to the main thrust of my question, there are a couple of housekeeping issues. You said that you had met with survivors' groups before appointment, and I think you also said that you had an email from Alan Rusbridger on the day of this report. Is it possible to understand the full population of people you have met prior to the appointment? For example, have you met senior executives of any social media companies to try to understand the context? I am trying to build a picture of what contacts you have had in the run-up to the appointment, because we know from our own work that all these big companies are quite vigorous in their approach to lobbying. If you have had lobbying in one form or another, it would be helpful to know.

Sir Ian Cheshire: No—none. I quite deliberately—

Q69 Kit Malthouse: So just survivors and victims, and Alan Rusbridger.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Alan was incoming. I reached out to the Molly Rose Foundation because I wanted to understand its perspective. I decided that I was not going to do everyone, but I wanted to hear from Andy, who is one of the leading voices, and I deliberately did not want to talk to any big tech until I had been through this process and understood it. The rest of the briefings have been some Ofcom and DSIT briefings, and some No. 10.

Q70 Kit Malthouse: Okay. Obviously, you will continue to sit on various corporate boards. Are you clear about whether any of your co-directors are involved in any of the regulated businesses, or businesses that might fall under your purview? The public want to know that there won't be any informal, over coffee at the directors' meeting, "You'll never guess what they are trying to do to us." Are you clear about the possibility of that secondary conflict?

Sir Ian Cheshire: We did go through this conflict thing. I am racking my brains about my fellow directors and whether anyone is in that position. I don't think there is anybody who has anything directly regulated.



Obviously, I still know the Channel 4 board and the BT board. The only possible area of conflict is actually the other way around. I chair the Institute for Government think-tank and we comment on regulators. I will have to work out how to be in the room or not be in the room at the right time. I did genuinely ask myself and others to think about whether there are areas where I could be perceived to have a conflict. I cannot see one at the moment, but I would put my hand up pretty sharpish if I felt I was in danger of that.

Q71 Kit Malthouse: Obviously, given your frankly stellar business career, you will be moving in friendship circles or whatever it might be with people who are involved in the financing and the rest of it. How would you handle those informal contacts where people might stray over the line?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I am super conscious of both the honour of doing this role and the importance of being seen to be completely impartial. I find it quite easy to say no to any sort of issue like that because, if you are chair of Ofcom, that is what you do and you prioritise it. As yet, I have not seen anything on the radar that would cause that problem. I think particularly the relationship with the tech industry is the one I am fairly cautious about.

Q72 Kit Malthouse: Thanks very much. You used quite an interesting word in your reply: you said you were conscious of being impartial. A frustration that we have felt on the Committee is that, like so many regulators, Ofcom, as my colleague Samantha said, has slipped into the role of referee between the public and the industry and that it is there to mediate between the two somehow. A couple of things that you said during the interviews concerned me slightly in case we have a continuation of that. I think you said right at the start that when you were at BT, Ofcom had been helpful to BT in the roll-out of what was then presumably—less so now—a broadband monopoly. Are we going to see a change in that posture?

Sir Ian Cheshire: It is an interesting observation. I had not heard that characterisation of Ofcom before. Just for the avoidance of doubt, when I mentioned the BT experience, the thing that happened felt like the previous incarnation of Ofcom as a regulator—this is an aside. A large chunk of the Ofcom experience that I was told about at BT was, “Keep the bills down”, which is understandable. If that is your regulatory objective, that is your regulatory objective, but it had the unfortunate effect of not generating enough investment in fibre broadband and the sums did not add up. I was there in the boardroom at BT when we had the fair return conversation with Ofcom, which I think was a great strategic balance of, “We are not going to promise you riches untold, but you will get enough money so that you can put £15 billion, potentially, into broadband, and cut the dividend and make a significant return.”

There was a strategic importance in getting fibre, and it has gone from 8% to 78%. I think a big chunk of that would not have happened without the Ofcom regulatory framework. That is not an excuse for helping the industry, but it is saying that strategically, in the same way that Ofcom



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now has a growth obligation, it has to think about the broader picture. As long as the picture is clear, transparent and not favouring one party over another, I think that in the case of fibre, Ofcom unlocked that massive investment, which I am not sure would have happened otherwise. That is the type of intervention I would like to see. On being a referee versus being impartial, obviously you have to engage with an industry to make changes in it—that is reasonable—but you also have to have a clear locus, an independence and an ability to enforce. Getting things done requires sticks, encouragement and engagement—there is a spectrum for that.

Q73 Kit Malthouse: Would you say that Ofcom has to balance its role as the champion of the consumer against maintaining the health of whatever business is it dealing with?

Sir Ian Cheshire: It is not so much that it has a responsibility for maintaining the health of the business, but it has to think about the industry and its impact on the national economy. The topic of data centres, for example, strikes me as nationally vital: telecoms and making sure that we have fit-for-purpose broadband and mobile are absolutely requirements. Whether Vodafone makes more money than EE is nothing to do with Ofcom; that is not the point.

Q74 Kit Malthouse: There is an interesting point there. A lot of MPs have the perception that in these negotiations with industry, the regulators basically always get fleeced and that, weirdly, the sums that go into the negotiation and are approved are not actually those that appear and, notwithstanding the fact that they get a regulated income—demanded with menaces from the British public—somehow that return on capital exceeds what was put into the negotiation. It is that imbalance of approach that concerns a lot of people.

Sir Ian Cheshire: All I can say is that, from my experience in telecoms, that was not the case. The UK has some of the lowest European mobile rates, so I do not think the public are being fleeced there. If you compare it with US broadband rates, it is very cheap. I would always be worried about that accusation potentially being made and sensitive to that perception, but in my experience of regulation, with both Channel 4 and BT, it was pretty straight down the line. I did not feel that anyone was colluding or was being fleeced.

Q75 Kit Malthouse: Obviously, social media companies spend hundreds of millions, if not billions, on regulatory capture. We have had them in front of this Committee, where they have made all sorts of arguments about how wonderful they are that do not stand up to the reality of the operations in society. One of our frustrations with both Ofcom, when we have had it in front of us, and the ICO has been the complacency and sluggishness about what is a fast-moving landscape that is causing so much damage to our children's mental health and to society generally. At the same time, as, from an economic point of view, so much is in the territory of one particular country, Ofcom is just playing catch-up with something running well beyond its capability and spending lots of time in complicated conversations with their lobbyists without making any



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progress. Will that be an area of focus for you? How will you get a bit of gumption and push into what Ofcom is doing?

Samantha Niblett: What it does, not what it says.

Kit Malthouse: I must confess that, although your approach today is very professional and charming, it feels a bit incrementalist and slow, in a landscape that is changing every single day.

Sir Ian Cheshire: I have two points. I have not actually started yet, so that would be good.

Q76 **Kit Malthouse:** Yes, but as a communicator, are your boxing gloves on?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I am very happy to talk about sticks and boxing gloves, as I am not shy and retiring about getting things done, but you have to work out pragmatically where you can really deliver. I do not want to get caught up in a public posture of saying, "I'll go in, bish bash bosh, and everything will get sorted out." I really do want to make a change. I am not applying for this job because I want just to drift through it; that is not the end aim.

Q77 **Kit Malthouse:** That is reassuring. You also said that Ofcom is seen as a good regulator.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Internationally, it is very well respected. In other areas of regulation—and this is where the online safety world has maybe changed it—it is seen as a good—

Q78 **Kit Malthouse:** By whom?

Sir Ian Cheshire: By the industry—

Q79 **Kit Malthouse:** That is what makes me nervous, because I want an industry that says, "We can't bear Ofcom. They are a total nightmare. They are in our hair the whole time."

Sir Ian Cheshire: I would gently push back on that by saying that, similarly, instead of measuring the success of a regulator by the number of fines or court actions, we ought to be focusing on the outcome for the citizens we are trying to protect and how we get the best total national outcome.

Q80 **Kit Malthouse:** You do not think it is a good regulator because people think it is a pushover?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I do not think it thinks it is a pushover, nor does the industry. I can assure you from my experience of being regulated—and I am sure various people in the room have also been regulated—it is not sunshine and roses. It is reasonably clear cut, and the BT experience was hard yards. That was not a cosy cuddle.

I take the challenge. The point of this is to have a positive impact. It is not just to have everything two degrees to the right.

Q81 **Kit Malthouse:** I understand that. The final thing I would leave you with



is that I understand there are areas such as Royal Mail that are important, along with Channel 4, broadcasting and all the rest of it. However, there are millions of parents out there who are in a fight every single day and are looking to Ofcom to be their sword and shield against companies that are larger than nations and seem to dictate the terms of our economy and society with little or no check.

I think that has been our frustration on the Committee: we do not feel that sense that you are there with us, frankly, standing between these kids and those companies.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Challenge accepted.

Q82 **Chair:** Thank you, Kit. I think that was very well put. We are coming to the final few minutes now. You said that this is going to be your last public sector appointment. What do you want your legacy at Ofcom to be?

Sir Ian Cheshire: At the end of the four-year term, I would like to say that we have made a fundamental difference, particularly in the online safety space. That is my focus.

Q83 **Chair:** Okay. You have mentioned a number of times that you want to establish what "good" looks like and then drive regulation through that. What do you expect to achieve in your first year, and how quickly can we see you establish what "good" is across the different areas that you regulate?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I see establishing what "good" looks like as my first-year job, but also understanding what it looks like. Again, if I can come back to talk to the Committee and others to ensure we are clear and are actually talking about the same thing, so that we do not get some of this mismatch.

Ofcom needs to own that and take responsibility for establishing that clarity and that level of measurement. I am very interested in how we articulate that, because there is a difference between measuring the number of houses you can pass with fibre, which is easy, and measuring online safety, which is really quite tricky. I am not sure I want to over-promise today, but that is the year one priority.

Q84 **Chair:** Do you have specific metrics to assess your performance that you can share with the Committee now?

Sir Ian Cheshire: Not yet, but I would undertake to do that.

Q85 **Chair:** By when?

Sir Ian Cheshire: By the end of year one.

Q86 **Chair:** The end of year one.

We appreciate very much the time you have spent with us and your engagement with our questions. I return to what I think was my first question: Ofcom has taken on responsibility for BBC regulation, Royal Mail, data centres and online safety, as well as regulation of telecommunications and general broadcast media. Those are all sectors



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where technology is absolutely transforming, whether determining Royal Mail's market or driving the harms caused by chatbots that advise young people to commit suicide. Technology is transforming all of that. You do not seem very worried, and I do not get a sense of urgency. Shouldn't you be worried?

Sir Ian Cheshire: I would not use the word "worried", but engaged. One of the advantages of the multiple areas that Ofcom works in is that you can see across the technology changes. Understanding how the total technological landscape is changing is vital.

It is also true to say that most of this is coming out of technology innovation in the US. It is not a UK phenomenon, so we are dealing with something that we are not controlling. In terms of "worried", I am very concerned about online safety. As I said, if I had to focus on one thing, that is my lead priority. Technological change will be one factor in the solution, but it is not the only one.

We must be very clear that we are trying to regulate and have impact over five and 10 years, rather than constantly catching up with last month's initiative. To do that, we have to have a leadership mindset that says, "We can see where this is heading." But we cannot be scared of this; we must engage with it and be very persistent and dogged about ensuring that we are protecting citizens in the way we want to and having the right outcomes.

Chair: Thank you for that response. I will say, in my opinion—and in the opinion of the Committee, as set out in our recommendations—that, in the whirlwind of technological change, you must have clear principles that you can communicate to both Government and, more importantly, the public, as well as stakeholders, so that we know what Ofcom is seeking to achieve. Thank you so much for the time you have spent with us.

Sir Ian Cheshire: Not at all. Thank you very much for your time. I hope to see you again.