

# Chat On The Line

'We used to have cricket scores and recipes before privatisation. Now we have this.' As chairwoman of Liverpool city council's trading and licensing committee, Hannah Folan has fronted a consumer backlash that has forced British Telecom (BT) to withdraw its cash-generating Talkabout service.

In response to a Liverpool Trading Standards Office report on abuses of the 14- to 18-year olds' chatline facility, Oftel, the Telecom watchdog quango, insisted on amendments which in BT's view made the service unviable. These included itemised bills and an opting-in requirement to replace the casual pay-as-you-speak arrangement, costing between 11 and 41p for three minutes. Oftel felt that most parents would prefer to give consent before the arrival of inflated phone bills.

Telecom representatives are very twitchy about charges that privatisation has led to a drop in service quality, epitomised by tele-exploitation services of which the worst was the widely-criticised Talkabout. They argue keenly, rather, that BT had captured a market opportunity. From Oftel the story is rather different. New 'chatline' services will be expected to comply with the same standards demanded of BT 'within a month'.

Oftel's initial report was inspired by a torrent of consumer concern triggered by the Liverpool Trading Standards report. The main problems appear to have been foul language and exchanging of private phone numbers. Allegations of prostitution and drug-dealing, which appeared in the press, were never substantiated. While the racist and sexist abuse on the lines was down to routine juvenile foulmouthing, the nuisance value of a phone number given to a stranger can easily be imagined. Likewise, the very profitability of the service had produced its own casualties as many parents and employers of bored junior labour will confirm by their engorged phone bills. •

*Chris Jones*