

THE DIGITAL MARKETS, COMPETITION AND CONSUMERS ACT: A NEW UK DIGITAL MARKETS REGULATORY REGIME AND REFORMS TO THE COMPETITION AND CONSUMER PROTECTION ENFORCEMENT REGIMES

The UK Parliament has enacted the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act (the **Act**). The legislation will introduce a new regulatory regime for digital markets to be enforced by the Digital Markets Unit (**DMU**) in the Competition and Markets Authority (**CMA**), as well as giving the CMA new powers to impose large fines for breaches of consumer protection laws and making certain changes to competition laws.

WHAT WILL THE ACT DO?

The Act, which received Royal Assent on 24 May 2024, implements three broad categories of reform:

- introducing an ex-ante regulatory regime for businesses that are active in digital markets and have "Strategic Market Status" (**SMS**), to be enforced by the DMU;
- effecting various changes to UK competition laws regarding the behavioural antitrust prohibitions on anticompetitive agreements and abuse of dominance, merger control and market investigations, as well as new restrictions on foreign ownership of UK newspapers; and
- reforming consumer protection laws by giving the CMA powers to impose civil penalties for their breach of up to 10% of a business' group worldwide turnover, without having to seek a court order first and by creating certain new prohibitions to regulate subscription traps, consumer saving schemes fake reviews and ticket touts.

While the legislation has taken over a year to pass due to disagreement between the UK's two legislative bodies over its content, it was eventually hurried through as a result of the UK Government's decision to hold a general election on 4 July 2024. The opposition Labour party has stated that, if elected, it will not repeal the Act, but would seek to strengthen its consumer rights provisions.

THE DIGITAL MARKETS UNIT

The DMU's new powers are intended to equip it to act swiftly in response to rapidly-evolving digital sectors, with the core purpose of addressing both the

Key issues

Digital markets

- How will the DMU assess whether businesses have Strategic Market Status?
- How will the DMU's conduct requirements be designed and enforced?
- What are the DMU's powers to implement pro-competitive interventions to address the root causes of market power?
- Which mergers involving SMS firms will have to be notified to the CMA?

Competition regime proposals

- What are the new jurisdictional thresholds for merger reviews?
- What procedural reforms have been made to the merger and markets regimes?
- How will the new prohibition on foreign State ownership of UK newspapers work?
- What new investigation and remedy powers does the CMA have?

Consumer regime proposals

- How has the enforcement of consumer protection laws been reformed and what are the new penalties for breaches?

sources of market power and the economic harms that result from the exercise of that market power. The DMU has been preparing for over three years for its new powers and is expected to issue a consultation on its implementation of the new regime imminently so that it can begin its operations as soon as possible after the relevant provisions of the Act are brought into force, after the general election.

The DMU will implement and enforce codes of conduct for businesses, or parts of businesses, that it designates as having SMS. The Act also confers on the DMU powers to impose so-called pro-competitive interventions (**PCI**) on SMS businesses to tackle the underlying sources of market power and promote competition. The CMA will charge a levy on SMS firms to fund the DMU's activities.

How is Strategic Market Status assessed?

SMS designation will not be subject to formal market definition for an assessment of market power. Instead, the DMU will consider firms' provision of 'digital activities', being services provided by means of the internet, electronic communications services or digital content (in each case including those services that are provided free of charge). If carried out in combination (by reference to the nature of the activity, brand names or both), two or more activities can be treated as a single activity.

SMS designation is made in respect of a digital activity linked to the UK and applies to the whole corporate group, not just the part of the group that carries out the relevant activities. A 'UK link' entails: (i) carrying on a business relating to digital activity in the UK; (ii) operating a digital activity that is likely to have an immediate, substantial and foreseeable effect on trade in the UK; or (iii) having a significant number of UK users.

SMS designation is subject to a turnover threshold of £25 billion of worldwide or £1 billion of UK turnover and requires a finding of both: (i) substantial and entrenched market power (based on a forward-looking assessment of a period of at least five years); and (ii) a position of strategic significance in respect of the digital activity. The assessment of a position of strategic significance will consider the undertaking's size or scale in respect of the digital activity, the number of other undertakings using the digital activity, whether the undertaking's position in respect of the digital activity would allow it to extend its market power to a range of other activities and/or the extent to which the undertaking's position allows it to determine or substantially influence the ways in which other undertakings conduct themselves.

The CMA may only designate an undertaking as having SMS after an investigation. Such investigations take up to nine months (or twelve, if there are "special reasons") and are subject to various consultation and transparency requirements. SMS designations must be reviewed by the CMA at least once every five years.

Conduct requirements for SMS firms

The DMU has powers to impose conduct requirements on SMS firms, consisting of high-level objectives and principles that specify the behaviour expected of businesses with respect to their SMS-designated activity. The requirements must be proportionate for the purposes of meeting standards of fair-dealing, open choices and trust and transparency. In line with these objectives, the DMU will have powers to impose on firms conduct requirements

to treat users fairly and interact with them on reasonable terms, allow them to choose freely and easily between services and digital content, and provide information needed to make informed choices. Such conduct requirements can also include obligations not to discriminate, self-preference, bundle, leverage, impose use restrictions, use data unfairly, restrict the use of third-party products, or restrict interoperability with third-party offerings.

The DMU has powers to issue enforcement orders and interim enforcement orders to address breaches of imposed conduct requirements, following an investigation. Firms will be able to assert that a countervailing benefits exemption applies to their conduct, if they can demonstrate that the conduct is an indispensable and proportionate way to achieve benefits to users of the digital activity that outweigh any competitive harms, and the conduct does not eliminate or prevent effective competition.

Potential for wide-ranging pro-competitive interventions

The DMU also has powers to impose a wide range of PCIs where it considers that a factor or combination of factors relating to a relevant digital activity is having an adverse effect on competition, and where the PCI would be likely to mitigate or prevent that adverse effect. These PCIs will be similar to the remedies available to the CMA under the market investigation regime.

The DMU can trial, review, modify and terminate remedies (including voluntary, enforceable undertakings) and to direct firms with SMS to take specific actions to comply with a PCI order. It can impose PCIs anywhere within an SMS firm, including outside the designated activity, provided the concern relates to the designated activity.

PCIs can be imposed following PCI investigations, which also have a period of 9-12 months (with a further four months within which any PCI order must be issued) and are subject to consultation and transparency requirements.

Powers of investigation

In support of its functions, the DMU has powers of investigation that are broadly comparable to those that the CMA has for antitrust infringements, but in some respects go further, e.g., powers to compel SMS firms to cooperate with and pay for a report prepared by an appointed third party expert and powers to require SMS firms to demonstrate or test a business system or process under the DMU's supervision.

Consequences of a breach

As is the case for antitrust infringements, breaches of conduct requirements and failures to comply with PCI orders can result in fines of up to 10% of group worldwide turnover, third party "follow on" claims for damages and the disqualification of directors that have been involved in a breach, and the CMA will be able to accept commitments from SMS undertakings to address its concerns. The Act also contains a novel "final order mechanism" that may be used by the CMA to set the terms of trade between an SMS business and one or more third parties, where it considers that an SMS business' existing terms are not fair and reasonable.

Standard of review on appeal

Appeals against decisions under the new regime will be to the Competition Appeal Tribunal. When introduced, the draft legislation provided that all such

The new merger filing requirements for SMS firms

Filing will be mandatory if:

- The SMS firm acquires shares or voting rights in a target that cause its total shares or voting rights to exceed a threshold of 15%, 25% or 50% and the consideration paid for that total interest exceeds £25 million; and
- The target carries on activities in the UK or supplies to UK customers.

For transactions involving the creation of a joint venture vehicle that will have activities or sales in the UK, filing will be required if:

- the transaction results in the SMS firm having more than 15% of the shares or voting rights in the joint venture; and
- the total value of all capital and assets contributed to the JV by the SMS firm and consideration for the transaction paid by the SMS firm exceeds £25 million.

appeals would be subject to a judicial review standard of appeal, aimed at ensuring that "appropriate deference is given to the DMU's position as an expert regulator". However, it was subsequently amended to allow for appeals against decisions imposing penalties for breaches of conduct requirements and PCI orders to be decided on the more rigorous "merits" standard, allowing the CAT to substitute its judgment for that of the DMU in the event of an adverse ruling, or to vary the amount of any penalty. Consequently, while SMS businesses will find it difficult to appeal decisions relating to the content of the obligations that are imposed on them, it will be easier to appeal against decisions that they have breached such obligations and to appeal against the amount of penalties imposed for such breaches.

Revised merger review framework for SMS firms

The Act introduces a requirement on SMS firms to report certain mergers to the CMA before they take place (see box on previous page "*the new merger filing requirements for SMS firms*"). Firms must wait five working days after the CMA accepts the notification as sufficient before completing the merger. The CMA will then decide whether to investigate the merger under the regular UK merger control regime under the Enterprise Act 2002.

REFORMS TO THE COMPETITION REGIME

New and revised merger control thresholds

Filing will continue to be voluntary under the UK merger control regime, allowing parties to assess and allocate the risk that the CMA decides to investigate their merger and impose remedies. However, revised jurisdictional thresholds will, when brought into force, apply to reduce the burden on small businesses as well as to empower the CMA to review mergers that may harm competition even if they do not involve current, direct competitors (see box to the right). In particular, the CMA will have jurisdiction to investigate any merger involving a business with a UK turnover in excess of £350 million and a UK share of supply of 33% or more, provided another party (usually the target) has some sales or activities in the UK, no matter how small.

The Act also introduces certain changes with a view to making merger reviews more efficient, including:

- enabling parties to request a "fast track" reference to Phase 2 review without the requirement for the CMA to assess whether the merger could result in a substantial lessening of competition – where it accepts such a request, the CMA will be able to extend the Phase 2 process by an additional 3 weeks; and
- providing new possibilities for notifying parties to agree with the CMA to stop the clock in Phase 2, e.g., to allow for early consideration of remedies or to align timing with merger reviews in other jurisdictions.

New restrictions on foreign State ownership of UK newspapers

The Act requires the Government to intervene in any acquisition of influence by a "foreign power" over any newspaper with a UK turnover of more than £2 million. Unlike the generally applicable merger control rules, the level of influence need not be material. Rather any holding of any shares, voting rights, limited partnership interests, board seats or other forms of influence (no matter how small) will satisfy the test, even if held indirectly (e.g., if held in a

The new merger thresholds

- The target must have UK turnover of more than £100 million (*increased from £70 million*); or
- The creation or enhancement of at least a 25% share of the supply of particular goods or services in the UK, or a substantial part of the UK (*no change*); or
- Any party to the merger (including the acquirer) has at least a 33% share of supply, and UK turnover of more than £350 million, provided at least one other party to the merger has a UK nexus, i.e. it is a UK business or body, carries on activities in the UK or has sales to UK customers (*new threshold*).
- However, irrespective of the above thresholds, no CMA jurisdiction if the UK turnover of each of the merging entities is less than £10m (*new safe harbour for small mergers*).

minority investor in the acquirer). The Government had intended to pass secondary legislation that would allow foreign State-owned investors to: (i) hold directly up to 5% of the shares of a UK newspaper business, or (ii) hold indirectly up to 10% of the owner of a UK newspaper business, provided turnover from the newspaper accounts for no more than 20% of the owner's global turnover. However, that secondary legislation will now fall to be determined and passed after the general election.

Stronger CMA powers in market inquiries

A number of changes will strengthen the CMA's powers and increase flexibility in the markets regime. In particular, the Act:

- allows the CMA to narrow the scope of Phase 2 market investigations by reference to particular features of a market;
- provides the CMA with the power to accept binding commitments at any stage in the process to fully or partly address any identified competition concerns;
- clarifies that the CMA can launch a market investigation even if it has previously decided not to, provided either two years have passed or there has been a material change of circumstances; and
- reforms the CMA's toolbox of remedies, including powers to require businesses to participate in trials to test its consumer-facing remedies and to modify any imposed remedies that it considers are not operating effectively. The latter power is exercisable only after two years from the date when remedies were imposed and before ten years have passed.

Antitrust investigations and litigation: wider jurisdiction, powers of investigation and exemplary damages

The Act expands the territorial scope of the UK competition regime to include agreements and conduct which have, or are likely to have, direct, substantial, and foreseeable effects within the UK, even if not "implemented" in the UK (similar to EU and US antitrust rules).

It also:

- lowers the standard of review for appeals against CMA decisions to impose interim measures;
- allows the CMA to interview third parties with no connection to those under investigation and to compel the disclosure of documents that are not on dawn-raided premises but are accessible from those premises;
- creates legal duties for businesses to preserve documents that may be relevant to a CMA antitrust investigation that they know or suspect is, or is likely to be, carried out;
- empowers the CMA to address binding information requests to businesses outside the UK that have a sufficient UK connection, which includes carrying on business in the UK through oversight of a subsidiary;
- provides that the CMA can enter into written agreements for assistance by offenders in a criminal investigation that may be taken into account by courts in sentencing, or specify evidence that the CMA will not use against the offender; and

- enables UK courts to award exemplary damages (*i.e.*, damages in excess of a claimant's proven losses) in respect of particularly egregious antitrust infringements. This will not apply to collective claims.

Higher fines for procedural infringements and non-compliance with remedies

The Act significantly increases the civil fines that can be imposed on businesses for failure to comply with the CMA's information gathering powers in merger, market and antitrust investigations. The maximum fixed fine will increase from £30,000 to 1% of annual worldwide group turnover, and daily fines for ongoing non-compliance will increase from £15,000 to 5% of daily group worldwide turnover. The CMA will also have new powers to impose fines of up to 5% of annual worldwide turnover for breaches of commitments given in antitrust cases, or breaches of remedies imposed in market investigations. At present it must go to court to enforce such obligations.

REFORMS TO CONSUMER LAW ENFORCEMENT

The Act will substantially strengthen the enforcement of consumers' rights, in particular by enhancing the CMA's civil consumer enforcement powers to match its competition powers. This includes powers of the CMA to issue decisions, make directions requiring removal or modification of infringing online content, impose measures to improve consumer law compliance, impose fines for infringements of up to 10% of group total worldwide turnover (1% of such turnover for procedural infringements), and require payment of compensation or redress to affected consumers. Previously, the CMA had to seek a court order to enforce consumer protection laws, so these new powers to enforce directly (without a court order) are likely to lead to much more active enforcement by the CMA.

Certain infringements of consumer protection laws – such as unfair, misleading or aggressive commercial conduct – continue to be criminal offences punishable by fines or up to two years in prison.

CMA decisions to impose fines and give directions are subject to the higher "on the merits" standard of judicial scrutiny, allowing a full review of the correctness of the CMA's decisions on issues of fact and law, and courts may quash or vary appealed CMA decisions.

As well as consolidating certain consumer protection laws and replacing the Unfair Trading Regulations 2008, the Act also provides for new protections, including:

- Subscription traps: traders offering subscription contracts will need to give reminder notices for renewal payments, provide cooling-off periods and meet requirements about enabling consumers to bring such contracts to an end;
- Consumer savings schemes: providers will need to have insolvency protections in place and provide consumers with prescribed information;
- Fake reviews: the Act extends the unfair trading rules to cover commissioning or incentivising fake reviews, offering or advertising to submit fake reviews and hosting consumer reviews without taking reasonable and proportionate steps to check that they are genuine; and
- Powers for the CMA to enforce legislation regulating secondary ticketing for events (*i.e.*, rules restricting ticket touts).

COMMENT

The legislation will create a lot of new work for the CMA, with an entirely new suite of powers to regulate digital markets and new possibilities to enforce consumer protection laws directly.

The Government has trumpeted the "flexible and principles-based" approach of its digital markets regime as superior to the "blanket set of obligations" imposed by the EU's Digital Markets Act (**DMA**) which, in the Government's view "risks creating unnecessary regulatory burdens for firms". Whether that proves to be the case will depend on the obligations that the DMU decides to impose on the firms that it designates as having SMS, and – to the extent that those obligations are less stringent than those applicable under the DMA – whether it is cost-effective for the regulated businesses to tailor their business models to the UK's regulatory regime.

While the competition law changes are less far-reaching, some may have significant impacts for certain businesses. In particular, the possibility for the CMA to tinker with market investigation remedies for up to 10 years after they are imposed could make such remedies even more intrusive in the future.

For many businesses, the aspect of the new legislation that may have the most impact is the considerably stronger enforcement regime for certain consumer protection law infringements. Given the substantial new fining powers, businesses operating in the UK should ensure that their compliance policies cover the relevant consumer protection rules.

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