

## CONSUMER FOCUS SCOTLAND

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### 1 ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING

#### 1.1 Change/impact achieved

- 1.1.1 Following significant ongoing work on digital issues and consumers in Scotland, including a joint seminar with the Consumer Communications Panel on the implementation of Digital Britain in Scotland, the Scottish Government has established a Digital Stakeholder Group chaired by the Enterprise Minister, Jim Mather MSP. This group will feed into the Digital Britain agenda being taken forward by the UK Government. Trisha McAuley will represent CFS on the Group.
- 1.1.2 Following research carried out by the Scottish Consumer Council, and a market study by the OFT which that research led to, the Scottish Government launched its consultation paper on standards for property managers on 10 May. The launch was supported by CFS, and Douglas Sinclair was quoted in the Government's press release.
- 1.1.3 Consumer Focus Scotland has been invited to be represented on the Scottish Government's Zero Waste Programme Board, which will oversee its recently launched Zero Waste Strategy.

#### 1.2 Significant activity

- 1.2.1 Extra Help Unit - Jim MacDonald, Commercial Director, E.On Energy visited the office on 28/05/10. Amongst a wide ranging agenda, discussions took place in relation to EON's tough stance on back billing cases, smart metering rollout, social tariffs and the improvements the industry needs to be making, in relation to the exchange of data between suppliers.
- 1.2.2 Extra Help Unit - Julie Jaglowski, Customer Services Director, Npower and Chris Johnson, Managing Director of Retail Operations, Npower, visited the office on 02/06/10. Positive feedback was given to Npower in terms of the proactive way they have been dealing with very difficult cases, including harnessing the help of social services when needed and going to a great deal of effort to make sure all is being done to help some of their more vulnerable consumers. The issue of prepayment meters not being able to be installed in flats where meters are generally kept in intake rooms and communal areas was also discussed at some length.
- 1.2.3 We launched a suite of three reports resulting from our work on a Review of Trading Standards Services in Scotland at the Trading Standards Institute Conference in Edinburgh on 15 June:
- Local regulation and the consumer interest in Scotland: A discussion paper - Cause for complaint?
  - How consumers deal with problems with goods and services in Scotland
  - Up to Standard? A Review of Trading Standards Services in Scotland.

The reports have been very well received by our stakeholders.

- 1.2.4 Working in partnership with Digital UK, Switchover Help Scheme and Digital Outreach Ltd, CFS has produced *Supporting the digital switchover: Get your clients on the right wavelength*, a new resource for local authorities and voluntary and community organisations, to help them to support their clients to make the switch to digital TV. The leaflet provides answers to some of the key questions that consumers might have about digital switchover, and signposts support workers and consumers to further sources of help and advice. Copies of the resource are being disseminated by the Switchover Help Scheme and Digital Outreach Ltd.
- 1.2.5 We made a targeted effort to bring the consumer interest back to the fore in the consideration at Stage 2 of the Legal Services (Scotland) Bill. We met with MSPs from the four main parties, including Justice Committee members and justice spokespeople in June. Although the committee rejected 100% outside ownership of law firms, which was our preferred goal, it did agree a compromise position allowing for 49% outside ownership, having rejected an amendment which aimed to limit this to 25%. The committee also agreed the provisions introducing regulation of non-solicitor will writers in Scotland, which we supported. The Scottish Government also made amendments to the Bill in relation to complaints about approved regulators, in response to concerns which we had raised that the provisions would lead to confusion for consumers.
- 1.2.6 As part of the work being led by Consumer Focus at UK level to develop a postal strategy for the whole organisation, Consumer Focus Scotland organised and hosted a roundtable discussion with key Scottish stakeholders to explore the specific needs of postal consumers in Scotland. The session was held on 26 May 2010 and included participants from the Scottish Government, COSLA, Postcomm, Highland Council, Federation of Small Businesses, Citizens Advice Scotland, and Money Advice Scotland, along with Board members and staff from Consumer Focus and Consumer Focus Scotland.
- 1.2.7 Following the publication of our civil justice policy paper in March, we have re-convened the Civil Justice Advisory Group, established by the Scottish Consumer Council in 2003 under the chairmanship of the Right Honourable Lord Coulsfield. The Group's first meeting was on 8 June. The group, which has the support and involvement of the Scottish Government, will be undertaking work on some of the recommendations made in Lord Gill's recent civil courts review, specifically in relation to access to justice issues. The group will submit a report with recommendations to the Scottish Government to feed into its proposed White Paper on civil justice reform early next year.
- 1.2.8 Following the first CFS publication in October 2008 on measuring customer satisfaction in local government, we have been working jointly with the Improvement Service to develop the tools that local government required to do this work better. The Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tool was launched on 9 June, at an event in Edinburgh at which Douglas Sinclair spoke.
- 1.2.9 The Consumer Focus Scotland Board met on 3 June 2010 to discuss strategic direction and prioritisation of current work in light of the new political climate. A number of areas were discussed including the Operational Work Plan, the planning cycle, priority areas and financial implications. Individual projects were discussed and a programme agreed for going forward.
- 1.2.10 Consumer Focus Scotland has launched a call for nominations for best practice in user engagement in public services. Nominations will be considered by an expert panel and successful projects will be invited to take part in an event to discuss best practice and how it can be shared more widely across public service providers in Scotland. The projects will also be featured in a publication exploring best practice in consumer engagement that will be circulated to MSPs and senior managers across the public sector. The closing date for submissions was 14 June.

- 1.2.11 Gemma Crompton submitted a response to the Scottish Government consultation 'Eviction of Tenants in the Social Rented Sector: Protection of Tenants with Rent Arrears'.
- 1.2.12 Gemma Crompton submitted a response to the 'Review of a Strategic Approach to the Provision of Information, Advice and Representation
- 1.2.13 Gemma Crompton and Annie McGovern submitted a response to the consultation document on the proposal for the Enforcement of Local Tax Arrears (Scotland) Bill.
- 1.2.14 Douglas White gave a presentation to the Cross-Party group in the Scottish Parliament on Housing on Consumer Focus Scotland's joint report with Shelter Scotland on disadvantaged tenants in the private rented sector.
- 1.2.15 Myself and Jennifer Wallace met with staff from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman to discuss a pre-publication version of the consultation on draft principles and model procedures for complaints handling in the public sector. I sit on the Project Board for the Complaints Improvement Project and CFS had raised concerns that an early draft of the consultation document did not place enough emphasis on front-line, first instance resolution of complaints. Following this meeting, the SPSO redrafted the consultation paper and the version issued on 16 June better reflects the tone and emphasis on front-line resolution that CFS were advocating.
- 1.2.16 I met with Steve Marwick, Director, Evaluation Support Scotland on 8<sup>th</sup> June to scope the evaluation of Community Food and Health Scotland – in the context of the upcoming renewal of its funding.
- 1.2.17 I met with Charles Milne, Director Food Standards Agency Scotland on 11<sup>th</sup> June, as an introductory meeting and to discuss our shared work on food issues.
- 1.2.18 The healthyliving award annual award ceremony took place on 9 June at the Beardmore Hotel. This event saw over 140 catering businesses formally presented with a healthyliving award. The caterers ranged from small privately owned deli bars to large public sector staff restaurants.
- 1.2.19 Community Food and Health (Scotland) have continued to contribute to tackling health inequalities and social exclusion at both a policy and practical level. The Scottish Government have asked CFHS to establish and chair a food access working group for the national food and drink policy.

## **2 CHALLENGES RUNNING UP TO NEXT BOARD MEETING**

- 2.1 The policy team is working hard on a number of reports of research projects completed last year, most of which will be published over the summer. We have three research reports ready for publication in June/early July. These are:
- Consumers' views and experiences of post office and mail services
  - Parcel delivery, particularly in rural areas
  - Area-based energy efficiency programmes
- 2.2 Consumer Focus Investigations have assisted us in obtaining a legal opinion in relation to our ongoing work on Land Maintenance Companies. The CFS board has agreed that we should continue to campaign for reform of the Title Conditions (Scotland) Act, and that we should empower consumers to take action by publishing the legal opinion. We have written to all three of the land maintenance companies concerned requesting

certain information and asking for a meeting to discuss the opinion, before publishing it. We have arranged the first of these meetings for 30 June.

- 2.3 We will redraft the operational plan for the policy team in the light of reduction in research spend, and the priorities agreed by the CFS Board for activity for the rest of this year. We will assess the policy challenges for the next three years in the Scottish context, and will further consider the priorities for Consumer Focus Scotland over the next three to five years at our September CFS Board meeting.
- 2.4 We will start to implement the measures agreed by SMT to reduce general expenditure.