

## CONSUMER FOCUS SCOTLAND

Senior Director: Marieke Dwarshuis

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### 1 ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING

#### 1.1 Change/impact achieved

- 1.1.1 The Scottish Parliament, in passing the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Bill, agreed to abolish WaterWatch Scotland, and that its policy functions are taken on by Consumer Focus Scotland, while its complaints handling function moves to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (Scottish Water being a public body). The change over date is set at 1 July 2011, and the decision is subject to ratification by the new Scottish administration after the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections. We are now moving ahead with putting in place the detailed arrangements. This will have resource implication for CFS as well as Corporate Services over the rest of the year.
- 1.1.2 As a result of Consumer Focus Scotland's follow up work with the Scottish Prison Service, after the NCC supercomplaint re. prison phone call charges in 2008, we finally received confirmation in early April from SPS that call charges in Scottish prisons have been reduced. The reductions are broadly similar to those in England and Wales: costs of calls to landlines have reduced by 23% for peak times and 34% for evenings and weekends, and calls to mobiles have reduced by 63% for peak times and 42% for evening calls. Average calls cost reduction is 37%.

#### 1.2 Significant activity

- 1.2.1 Phil Bentley, Managing Director of British Gas, visited the Extra Help Unit on 27 April together with three BG managers. In addition to key Consumer Focus Scotland Staff, Mike O'Connor and Audrey Gallacher also attended. The meeting allowed us to raise matters of concern in relation to British Gas policies in dealing with individual consumers, as well as raising issues of concern across the energy supply industry. We gained some concessions on BG policy on the definition of vulnerable children in revenue protection cases.
- 1.2.2 Douglas Sinclair and I met with BIS officials in the context of the Review of the Consumer Landscape.
- 1.2.3 A very successful 'Energy and the Consumer' seminar was jointly hosted by Consumer Focus Scotland and Ofgem. The seminar highlighted the need for Scottish Government to take account of the consumer perspective in its energy policy, a point well received by the Scottish Government officials there. We intend to follow up on this by a discussion between the CFS Board and key Scottish Government officials on energy policy.
- 1.2.4 Consumer Focus Scotland sponsored the 'Scottish Young Consumer of the Year' competition finals, at the Scottish Parliament. The UK finals will be held at the Trading Standards Institute conference in Edinburgh in June.
- 1.2.5 Douglas White responded to the Scottish Government consultation on a Proposed Housing Bill: The Private Rented Sector, Licensing of Mobile Home Sites and the Twenty Year Rules

- 1.2.6 Gemma Crompton provided a CFS briefing paper for the stage 1 Scottish Parliament Debate – Legal Services (Scotland) Bill
- 1.2.7 Anne Marie Sandison responded to consultation on options for improving information on the labels of alcoholic drinks to support consumers to make healthier choices in the UK
- 1.2.8 Gemma Crompton provided Supplementary Evidence to the Public Petitions Committee on Petition PE1247: McKenzie Friends
- 1.2.9 Mary Lawton responded to the Food Standards Agency Scotland consultation on draft guidance for consumers in Scotland on country of origin information on food labels
- 1.2.10 We responded to the Department of Health consultation on options for improving information on the labels of alcoholic drinks to support consumers to make healthier choices in the UK.
- 1.2.11 Jennifer Wallace responded to the initial call for contributions to Scotland's Independent Budget review, which will consider the implications of forecasts of reductions in public spending in Scotland in the short and medium term for the patterns of public spending that have developed since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament.
- 1.2.12 Jennifer Wallace provided written evidence to the Finance Committee on the Budget Strategy Phase
- 1.2.13 Sarah O'Neill provided evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Health and Sport Committee, on the Patients Rights (Scotland) Bill
- 1.2.14 Jennifer Wallace and I met with officials from the Local Better Regulation Office, and explored what parts of its role are not provided in Scotland (most). The role of LBRO is relevant to our recent work on Review of Trading Standards in Scotland and our forthcoming discussion paper on 'Local regulation and the consumer interest in Scotland'. Recent by LBRO with the Welsh Assembly Government and local government in Wales may provide useful learning for Scottish policy makers.
- 1.2.15 I have now met with all relevant Scottish Government officials in relation to the four SG funded projects in CFS, and have started work on preparing for renewal/ renegotiation of funding of these after March 2011.
- 1.2.16 I have met with Lorna Jack, Chief Executive of the Law Society of Scotland, in particular to discuss the (difficulties in) progress of the Legal Services (Scotland) Bill, which aims to open up the legal services market in Scotland to competition. There is considerable resistance against this from within the legal profession (though not primarily from the LSS).
- 1.2.17 Consumer Focus Investigations have assisted us in obtaining a legal opinion in relation to work on Land Maintenance Companies. We are now considering how to move forward.

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

- 2.1 We will finalise the work on our Review of Trading Standards Services in Scotland, and present at the Trading Standards Institute Conference in Edinburgh in June.

- 2.2 We have a number of research reports ready for publication in June. Three of these are on Post related issues. We have already met with Royal Mail to discuss the findings and hope to be able to do some joint work in presenting these.
- 2.3 We will continue with our meetings between Chief Executives or Senior Managers of the 'Big 6' energy companies and the Extra Help Unit over the next two months.
- 2.4 The Consumer Focus Scotland Board will meet in advance of the All Boards Away day to discuss strategic direction and prioritisation of current work in light of the new political climate and expected/known cuts on public sector spending, and our focus on disadvantage and sustainability.
- 2.5 We will make a targeted effort to bring the consumer interest back to the fore in the consideration at Stage 2 of the Legal Services (Scotland) Bill. To do so we will meet with relevant MSP's: the four main parties' committee members and justice spokespeople, over the coming weeks.
- 2.6 The annual appraisal round (as every year) will create a pressure on time for all staff and in particular Line Managers during May and June.
- 2.7 I will continue to work on embedding Consumer Focus processes and procedures in Consumer Focus Scotland.