

CONSUMER FOCUS WALES

Senior Director: Maria Battle

1 ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING

1.1 Change/ Impact Achieved

- 1.1.1 The Chair, Angharad Griffiths and I met with Carl Sargeant AM, Minister for Social Justice and Local Government who has responsibility for Post Offices. We requested that consultation with the local community should be an integral part of the application process for the Post Office Diversification fund. The Minister agreed and this should now be part of the application process in the autumn.
- 1.1.2 The Minister of the Environment recently held a meeting with the big 6 energy suppliers. We prepared a detailed briefing on each of them, their performance and issues in relation to consumers for the Minister. These issues included concerns about pricing on the part of Scottish Power in North Wales, the levels at which debt is recovered from pre-payment meter customers and customer service and complaints. The Minister was very impressed with the standard of the briefing and information and, as a result, we have been asked to attend the next such meeting.
- 1.1.3 The Welsh Assembly Government has been consulting on proposals to introduce a charge on single use carrier bags. Consumer Focus Wales was asked by Welsh Assembly Government officials to suggest appropriate questions to put to consumers on this issue. The final research report acknowledges Consumer Focus Wales' input in to the questions and that our suggestions were incorporated in to the final topic guide.
- 1.1.4 On 23 March, Consumer Focus Wales launched their report 'Protecting Consumer from Ecoli 0157: Progress on implementation of the Pennington report in Wales' at the National Assembly for Wales. The report which was written in clear plain English and Welsh and was the first time consumers had access to this information.
- 1.1.5 The launch event featured not only speeches from the Presiding Officer, Assembly Members and I, but also from Sharon Mills, whose son Mason died as a result of the original outbreak. Other families who have been affected were also in attendance.
- 1.1.6 Media coverage for the report was widespread .It was the top news story on BBC One Wales and ITV Wales bulletins throughout the day and S4C featured it. BBC 5 live breakfast and BBC One Breakfast also ran the story, as did regional daily and weekly newspapers and well as six radio stations, including the two most listened to, BBC Radio Wales and Real FM. Press Association ran updates of the story during the day, resulting in several health publications and current affairs news sites picking up the story. Coverage is still continuing.
- 1.1.7 The report was raised by three separate Assembly Members during First Minister's Questions which took place immediately after the launch: Kirsty Williams AM, Leader of the Lib Dems asked three supplementary questions on the issue of additional funding; Peter Black AM (Lib Dem) asked a supplementary question on a Welsh Assembly Government pledge to provide a written analysis of the reviews carried out by the 22 local authorities; Andrew R T Davies AM (Cons) asked two questions on implementation and lack of funding. The families were present during First Ministers questions time.

1.1.8 In follow-up, we are meeting with the Presiding Officer to discuss the most effective way the Assembly can scrutinise the government. The Wales Audit Office, are interested in pursuing a partnership project on implementation of the Pennington recommendations and the Chief Medical Officer for Wales will be producing his annual progress report later this summer, featuring our report.

1.1.9 Jennie Bibbings and Sharon Mills met with Tim Smith, CEO of the Food Standards Agency GB, on 26 April. He has invited Ms Mills to speak at an international conference on E.coli the FSA is planning on holding in November or January. The Food Standards Agency will shortly be issuing guidance for consultation on the separation of equipment for raw and cooked meats. He informed us that as a result of our report they will adopt a complete separation stance as an interim measure during the consultation period. Both of these initiatives were recommendations in our report.

1.1.10 We have also secured a meeting with the First Minister, Carwyn Jones AM to discuss the outcomes and recommendations of the report.

1.2 Significant Activity

1.2.1 Cornwall Energy have produced a significant report for Consumer Focus Wales on the costs of electricity in Wales and why these costs are higher than other areas of the UK. This work was presented in our Cardiff offices on Thursday 15 April with attendees including civil servants, NEA OFGEM and others. We will be providing the Minister with a briefing on our findings.

1.2.2 On the 4 May 2010, Consumer Focus Wales hosted a presentation of findings from the research behind our work on off-gas consumers. The presentation was attended by representatives from CFW (Board and Staff), Wales and West Utilities, Scottish and Southern Electricity and the Welsh Assembly Government's cartography department. The findings cover not only who is and isn't connected to the gas network, but also payment methods and attitudes to both connection costs and alternative energy sources. Subsequently, our report will have findings relevant to Wales Government policy on micro-generation and connection to the gas mains.

1.2.3 A postal strategy roundtable will be held in Consumer Focus Wales on Thursday 27 May.

1.2.4 Consumer Focus Wales has submitted a response to the Communities and Culture Committee inquiry into 'Financial Inclusion and the Impact of Financial Education'.

1.2.5 We met with the Welsh Assembly Government Measure team to discuss the findings of the survey we commissioned on Welsh language use and our response to the Measure. They welcomed the findings and asked for a copy of the report and questionnaire. We met with the Welsh Language Board to discuss the research results and our response to the Measure. We have submitted a response to the Welsh Language Measure and will be giving oral evidence in June to the National Assembly.

1.3 Consumer Engagement

1.3.1 In our first year we have identified consumer issues through a number of avenues, including commissioning robust research directly with consumers, evidence and advice from stakeholders who work directly with consumers and occasionally working with consumers ourselves, for example E Coli. CF Wales Board and staff believe direct engagement is important to understand the views of consumers to identify issues, develop solutions, empower consumers and highlight human stories for the media. More direct work will strengthen our credibility and give us a better understanding of consumers needs.

1.3.2 In our work planning for 2011/12 we will engage with consumers at the start of this process to enable them to tell us what issues we should be working on and test some of our own ideas. We have asked Participation Cymru to initially organise five groups and at the same time train staff so we can lead the consumer groups in the future.

1.3.3 Liz Withers and I met with the Carol Edwards of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, who leads on consumer engagement. After having standing consumer panels, their preferred model now is ad hoc consumer groups which are facilitated by staff. They meet in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland and are valuable both in understanding consumer needs and in engaging with elected members. This model is very similar to the model we have adopted.

1.4 Draft Sustainable Development Action Plan

1.4.1 Consumer Focus draft SDAP was launched in April through the "I'm in" campaign which focussed on embedding sustainability in our operational work. We signed up to the 10:10 campaign on 1st April having first established our benchmark for carbon emissions across the offices. At the same time policy workshops were held, compulsory for policy and communications staff, across the offices where the dilemmas, conflicts and practicalities of embedding sustainability in all our policy work was discussed. Feedback has been excellent. This work will continue both at staff and Board levels leading up to the Joint Boards away day.

1.5 CF Labs

1.5.1 Prototype testing of the stayprivate.org website is now underway with selected individuals and will be launched in June.

1.5.2 Work on the architecture for the corporate site re-launch is complete, ready for the new site to be populated with content. Discussions have taken place regarding a date for the official re-launch.

1.5.3 Work continues with Energy Team aimed at bringing more of their site development work in-house, saving the organisation further time and money.

1.6 Stakeholder Engagement

1.6.1 Rhys and I met Graham Russell and Lorna Thompson of the Local Better Regulation Office on Thursday 25 March Gemma and I met with Kyla Brand of OFT on Wednesday 7 April and shared the respective work of the OFT and CFI and the sharing of consumer direct data. Rhys and I met Graham Russell and Lorna Thompson of the Local Better Regulation Office on Thursday 25 March.

1.6.2 On the 19 April Public Affairs Cymru held a memorial lecture in tribute to Gwyndaf Hughes. Gwyndaf's sister plus many staff and Board members attended. Keith Towle, Children's Commissioner for Wales gave the lecture on child poverty which was very well received by the audience.

1.6.3 I attended the Wales Consumer Council for Water Board Meeting in Chester on 27 April. In attendance were the management teams from two water companies, which operate in Wales. I also met separately with the Chair to discuss closer working together.

1.6.4 On 19th May Viv Sugar and Ceri Williams met the Minister for the Environment to discuss the cost of electricity report which she promised to respond to on publication. On the same day the Chair and I met with Nicolas Bourne AM, conservative Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly to share our annual plan.

- 1.6.5 The Chair and Rhys Evans met the Deputy First Minister, Ieuan Wyn Jones AM, on 20 May to discuss broadband availability and the findings of 'Logged in, Locked out'.
- 1.6.6 On 24 May we hosted a meeting with members of the Legal Services Consumer Panel.

2 CHALLENGES RUNNING UP TO NEXT BOARD MEETING

- 2.1 We are also considering how we introduce CF Wales to newly elected Welsh MPs and publicise our annual work plan
- 2.2 We are publishing the Cost of electricity in Wales in June. Which is already attracting media interest.
- 2.3 We will be giving oral evidence in June to the National Assembly on the Welsh Language Measure and our E Coli report.
- 2.4 We will be meeting with the First Minister, Carwyn Jones AM to discuss the outcomes and recommendations of the E Coli Report
- 2.5 We will launch our report on off gas consumers on July 20 at the Royal Welsh Show, at an event attended by Jane Davidson AM, Minister for Environment, Housing and Sustainability
- 2.6 We will be publishing our Prepayment metres and self disconnection report and 'Tracking Over-indebtedness in Wales' at the National Eisteddfod in August.
- 2.7 Publication of the Older People's work is scheduled for 6 October, with a launch at the Pier Head building. Dai Lloyd AM is sponsoring the event and will be speaking at the launch.