



SUZE GOMME RESEARCH

Marketing Research Consultancy · Training

**Consumer Focus
Reputation Audit
SGR 0180
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Report

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APPENDIX

Discussion Guide

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Objectives

Consumer Focus was established via legislation in 2008 and is the new statutory organisation campaigning for a fair deal for consumers. It builds on the work of its predecessors (Energywatch, Postwatch and the National Consumer Council) and intends to be the voice of the consumer and to work to secure a fair deal on their behalf.

A Forward Work programme for the organisation was set out at launch covering the period October 2008 to March 2010.

In May 2009 it was decided that feedback should be sought from key stakeholders at GB level concerning Consumer Focus' reputation and performance thus far.

A small-scale, diagnostic research exercise was therefore commissioned. The main objective of this study was to gain an early and partial snapshot of stakeholder views, but it also acted as a pilot for a larger-scale exercise planned for the end of the year.

1.2 Method

A qualitative approach was adopted: individual depth interviews were conducted with a small number of stakeholders.

A topic guide was used (see Appendix) which covered issues pre-determined by Consumer Focus, but also allowed participants to raise any other subjects they felt were relevant. Stakeholders were encouraged to speak freely and their anonymity was assured (see below).

It should be noted that this approach yields information that is indicative rather than definitive, in that the sample is small and, while it covered as wide as possible a range of roles and sectors, not necessarily representative. It illustrates a range of views articulated by stakeholders, but not necessarily all of the perspectives that exist. Similarly, the 'balance' between positive and negative views expressed here might not apply to stakeholders as a whole.

Initial contact was made with stakeholders by telephone and email and Consumer Focus provided an introductory letter to be sent to potential participants. This outlined the purpose of the study and assured them of confidentiality and anonymity, in accordance with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

The discussion was conducted by telephone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted between 5th and 23rd June 2009.

1.3 Sample

Stakeholder organisations were selected to represent a wide range of commercial and non-commercial organisations, Government, the media, etc., spanning postal, energy and general consumer interests. In addition, they were expected to represent a range of views on the organisation's performance. All participants already had dealings with Consumer Focus and many had experience of the predecessor bodies.

A list of around 30 potential participants was provided by Consumer Focus. Within each organisation a named senior individual (e.g. Chief Executive; Director; a senior civil servant, etc.) was nominated for interview. In most cases, that individual was interviewed, but in a few instances a senior substitute was spoken to e.g. where the Chief Executive nominated someone with a specific consumer remit to respond.

Stakeholders showed considerable willingness to participate, given the fairly limited time window of the research study. It was clear from this that they considered the issue important and wanted to contribute their views. This enabled us to achieve 14 interviews. This included:

- Regulators
- Key suppliers
- Senior civil servants and Government departments
- NDPB's
- Representative and voluntary advisory bodies
- Media representatives

To indicate the seniority of the stakeholders interviewed, this included:

- two Chief Executives
- two Managing Directors
- five Directors
- two Heads of Consumer Affairs/Policy

The only stakeholder types not represented were the charity sector and MP's, only a small number of whom had figured on the list. The timing of the study i.e. around the European elections, made it less likely that MP's would co-operate.

We should note that particular individuals opted to waive their right to anonymity and indeed one specifically asked that his comments should be made known to Consumer Focus. This has been done under separate cover.

In addition we must also note that in some cases it is not possible to detail the specific examples stakeholders gave to support some of their comments, as doing so would inevitably identify them. In some instances this has meant that it is just not possible to quote an individual directly on a particular topic; in others specific details have been removed from quotations.

1.4 Piloting/Future Research

At the end of the interview, in order to pilot the question format for the planned exercise later in the year, stakeholders were asked to rate Consumer Focus' performance on a small number of dimensions using a standard scale.

The findings from this exercise are discussed in the body of the report, but here we comment on the pilot aspect.

All those interviewed were asked whether they would be prepared to take part in the subsequent quantified study and without exception they were. Several actively wanted to participate again as they considered it would be valuable to review performance slightly further into the life of the organisation. Our recommendation is therefore that all of those on the list provided for this exercise should definitely be invited to take part in the quantified study.

As mentioned above, the co-operation from these key stakeholders was excellent: interviews were achieved with very senior individuals whom one would not typically expect to participate in research. This should bode well for the future study, though we cannot necessarily assume the same level of co-operation among those 'further away' from the organisation.

As much time as possible should be allowed for the fieldwork element of the quantified research – at least 2 weeks and ideally 3, depending on the intended sample size. Finding time in the diary of very busy individuals is not easy and so the larger the 'window' the better. A degree of flexibility is also required over the time of the interview i.e. the only slot in the diary might be early in the morning.

In order to overcome the lack of representation of certain sectors i.e. charities and MP's in the qualitative exercise, we can only suggest increasing the number of each of these types of contact included in the sample frame.

The 1 to 10 scale worked well, giving sufficient flexibility and discrimination for stakeholders to express their views. It also works on an intuitive level i.e. 'marks out of 10' is a familiar concept and so answering in this way is quick and easy.

1.5 SG Research

The company was established in 1999 and provides qualitative and quantified market research to a wide range of commercial and non-commercial organisations.

Suze Gomme, the principal, is a Full Member of the Market Research Society and has over 20 years' market research experience.

2. Management Summary

Background, Objectives and Method

- Consumer Focus was established in 2008 as the new statutory organisation campaigning for a fair deal for consumers.
- In May 2009 Consumer Focus decided to seek feedback from key stakeholders concerning the organisation's reputation and performance thus far, so a small-scale qualitative research study was commissioned. This also acted as a pilot for a larger-scale exercise planned for later in 2009.
- Individual depth interviews were conducted by telephone with 14 key stakeholders, selected from a sample frame provided by Consumer Focus. They represented a range of commercial and non-commercial organisations, government, the media and so on, spanning postal, energy and general consumer interests. They were also expected to represent a range of views on the organisation's performance.
- While the sample covered as wide as possible a spread of roles and sectors, nevertheless given its small size, the information must be treated as indicative rather than as necessarily representative of the entire stakeholder body.
- A topic guide was used (see Appendix) but participants were free to raise other issues if they wished. Stakeholders were encouraged to speak freely and their anonymity was assured.
- The interviews took place between 5th and 23rd June 2009.

Key Findings

- The majority of the stakeholders interviewed have a positive view of Consumer Focus, though more in the sense of the organisation having made a good start rather than having achieved very much yet.
- Further to this the next six months are a key period for stakeholders, in which the organisation is expected to shift its focus to external issues and start to make its mark.
- However these stakeholders are optimistic about the organisation's future and there is confidence in the Board and senior management, particularly in Ed Mayo.
- The organisation's people in general are highlighted as a strength, together with its extended capabilities.
- The main potential weakness stakeholders observe is around the breadth of Consumer Focus' remit: how its efforts will be balanced across the various sectors and across the humdrum traditional areas versus more topical or high-profile activities.
- Nevertheless, they consider the organisation's agenda to be correct and welcome a 'one-stop shop' for consumer affairs.
- A particular challenge they highlight is the difficulty of any new organisation to establish its brand and presence in the media. At this point Consumer Focus' profile is not as high as some would hope, but they warn that the focus must remain on quality of output rather than on achieving headlines or column inches

3. Detailed Findings

3.1 Achievements to Date

We asked what stakeholders thought the organisation had achieved so far. We should note here that the stakeholders and their organisations have had varying levels of interaction with Consumer Focus, and sometimes their knowledge is limited to a particular sector, so the comments which follow are sometimes based on partial knowledge.

Overall they were divided in their views, though more were positive than negative.

Several commented that the establishment of the organisation had gone well, when this was by no means a given.

'Sometimes with these huge amalgamations the actual process falls into disarray and there are huge question marks over it. You've had the Equal and Human Rights Commission, with resignations and so on and that's not happened at Consumer Focus.'

Representative Body (industry)

'We think the process has proceeded smoothly and sensibly and all the contacts with the new organisation in that start-up phase were pretty constructive and useful. So we would say that we think Consumer Focus could be pleased with the fact that they have set themselves up in a calm fashion and there were no clangers dropped...I think that's important to record.'

Postal Supplier

Several stakeholders commented on how much time is required to get a new organisation properly 'up and running', with some adding that for this reason it would be unrealistic to expect great achievements at this stage. However a few did then add that they felt the organisation was now emerging from this phase and starting to deliver.

'They underestimated, as we all do, the impact of organisational change on effectiveness. It's not a criticism, it's just what happens. I'd have been surprised if they had come out all guns blazing.'

NDPB

'They're a new organisation. Much of the time over the first 6 months has just been sorting out day to day issues – getting staff in place. I thought they were a little behind schedule in recruiting and getting the strategy in place, but over the last few months they've made more progress. If you'd asked me before Christmas I would have been a bit concerned, but now it's slotting into place and we're much happier about the position they're in.'

Civil Servant

One stakeholder shared this view and specifically wanted to convey that the leadership should be given some breathing space at this point in the organisation's development.

'If you take all these bodies and squash them together to create a new organisation, I would imagine the first six months to a year is going to be very much working through all of the operational issues of getting a team together. There's a lot of internal focus required to do that and you then start to represent the consumer. What I would say to them is to give their leadership time to build their organisation in the right way to be a long-term player. I think it's very early to start to think about whether they're doing well or not.'

Energy Supplier

However, while it was acknowledged that there had to be a bedding-in period, a couple of stakeholders did comment that the coming months would be critical: their expectation was that the focus would now shift from internal to external issues.

'The next 6 months – that's the critical period for me to expect to see some action.'

Media

Nevertheless, several stakeholders made approving comments around the subject of treading carefully in the early days. In general, a more measured approach was considered more suitable.

'I think that they are very steeped in what is achievable, what is sensible. They know what is the system. They appreciate that if you are going for something, you have to look at the whole system, the whole network of cells and that you have to join up the issues – so I think they're going about it the right way.'

Representative Body (industry)

'They're starting to really work as a team, pursuing reasonable outcomes and doing it in a professional, quality way – rather than bouncing about all over the place. I don't think that's a bad start, actually,'

Energy Supplier

'I think it's not had any major wins, but it could be that it's also not gone in like a bull in a china shop, which is a useful approach as an organisation starts up. But I think it's getting there...'

Representative Body (industry)

Half of those interviewed made some positive comment about what had been achieved against their sense of the organisation's agenda, though this was sometimes qualified by saying that the impact had been small, or had only started to emerge more recently.

'They've managed to hit some fairly big targets in the last few months on postal issues and more recently mobile phones.'

Since the turn of the year there's been a lot more coming out and there is a lot in the pipeline.'

Government Department

'I'd say they have achieved a bit more than I expected in the first few months, actually....they've set out what they're doing fairly well, and secondly they've managed to engage in comment and a lot of specific publications and specific campaigns. So that's not an easy thing to do. I can't remember all of them, but it looks like they are managing to engage in specific issues as well as a lot of broad leadership.'

Civil Servant

Some specific issues were singled out as achievements. Several stakeholders mentioned work in the energy sector, specifically on fuel poverty, energy efficiency and disconnections. The organisation was not solely responsible for, but had also played a part in reducing prepayment prices. A few also mentioned work on Post Office closures and one the prisons supercomplaint.

'Good work on fuel poverty, energy efficiency rates and household costs going up. I thought that was a good piece of research that had been completed by Consumer Focus. So some things coming out that are beginning to be quite good.'

Energy Supplier

'They've been vocal on fuel poverty, quite rightly. Vocal on Post Office closures.'

Media

In some cases this work had been started by the predecessor bodies and only come to fruition under the current regime. One stakeholder mentioned this in the context of wanting to see the organisation break new ground rather than just continuing the work it inherited from its predecessors.

A few stakeholders mentioned the Rating Regulators report. Where comments were made by regulators, predictably some of their reactions were coloured by whether or not their organisation had emerged well from the exercise. Nevertheless, this was thought to be an important piece which had generally been well-received, as the comments from two regulators below illustrate.

'Quite tough – professionally delivered but they didn't hold back. But this is good for us - to hold up a mirror to what we are doing. Very helpful to an organisation like this one as otherwise we could become complacent.'

'An important thought leadership piece - the sort of thing they should be doing.'

On a different note, some stakeholders commented that the organisation had made good progress in establishing a presence. It was represented in many fora, had a clear message and had established itself as the 'go to' commentator on consumer issues.

'They are there as the voice of the consumer and I think that will continue. Have they had a massive impact? – No. But are they making good observations generally, I think yes.'

Energy Supplier

One of the regulators noted that the suppliers in their sector had had a change in attitude since the advent of Consumer Focus. So they had not noted any specific achievements in that sector, but the existence of the organisation had made a difference.

'The presence and the communication with the sector I feel there's an impact in terms of it's made the industry think a little bit, maybe change their engagement with others as a result. I'm not 100% sure about that, but I do feel a sense that there are those in the industry that are sitting-up and thinking "Ooh, we've got some attention on us now – we'd better watch what we do", in a way that's potentially quite positive.'

Regulator

Two out of the fourteen stakeholders, however, were critical of what had been achieved. One stated that their organisation felt very little had emerged at all and the other that they had observed little activity in their particular sector.

'To be honest, I'm just not sure what they have been doing. And it was a great shame that they were internally focused at a time of economic turmoil and so there was no voice on a lot of the issues and their implications.'

Voluntary Advisory Body

'To be frank, we've not seen or heard them in the XXX space. Their role in this area has been very low. They had around £XXX budget last year to cover these issues and we're not sure what they've done with it as we haven't seen any output. How long do you give them?'

Regulator

In addition, a few stakeholders described the organisation's achievements as 'patchy', with good work in some areas being to some extent offset by lack of action in others, or perceived mistakes. The specific issues mentioned in this context were:

- A perceived lack of action on the customer service agenda in the energy sector (an issue around Direct Debit customers where Consumer Focus had not been seen to comment)
- Lack of definition of the organisation's role and what it can achieve in consumer empowerment and education

- Variable quality of output, e.g.

'The early stuff, some of it's been good, some of it less good...they repackaged something they had done for Government, without paying much attention to what it was they were responding to.'

Regulator

'Some of the early work was a bit inept. They issued something on an initiative by one of the energy companies that they saw as groundbreaking but it wasn't. Was ridiculed in the media.'

Voluntary Advisory Body

3.2 Involvement with Consumer Focus

Perhaps predictably, the most commonly mentioned point of contact was with senior Consumer Focus people, particularly Ed Mayo and Larry Whitty. For several, the contact with Ed was ongoing as they had known him in his previous post. Philip Cullum, Steve Brooker and Audrey Gallacher were also mentioned.

Some of the organisations had more in-depth contact with Consumer Focus, having already worked on joint initiatives together. Others, though, were not so far advanced, with one, for example, mentioning that the two organisations had set up a framework for joint working, but not actually used it yet.

Not surprisingly, some of those we interviewed had dealt with the same people in the predecessor organisations. The transition for them had therefore been fairly seamless.

'I used to deal with most of their staff in their previous incarnations, and now they are in the one body.'

Media

'I was (our nominated contact) for the NCC and I knew Steve Brooker there, so we've just carried on – worked together then and we still do now.'

Government Department

Others, however, did not feel that a full working relationship had yet been established.

'We're not sure yet how it will pan out. Still developing. It's not "normal service" yet compared to how it was with the NCC.'

NDPB

'It's still developing. I've met Steve, and knew him before, but not yet met his team.'

Government Department

'I used to talk to Energywatch much more. I saw Ed Mayo at the launch but I haven't met anyone else. Not their Press Officer, or anyone like that, when I would have expected to.'

Media

Other points of contact were:

- specific shared interests, for example an interest in the European consumer agenda
- regulators, as one might expect, mentioned the Rating Regulators report
- stakeholder events – either those held by Consumer Focus or their own organisations

3.3 Leadership

We should note here that most of the stakeholders interviewed did not have a well-developed view of the Board as a whole: they typically knew one or two members and there was no in-depth knowledge. Only one stakeholder had an overview and they were positive.

'Strong Board: attracted experienced non-execs who are consumer experts and advocates.'

Regulator

Some of those interviewed knew Larry Whitty, though in some cases they had simply met him at stakeholder or launch events. Various positive comments were made specifically about him, sometimes in conjunction with references to Ed Mayo.

'Larry is very effective – he always strikes me as someone with gravitas and presence.'

NDPB

'I only know Lord Whitty and Ed. I saw their performance at the BERR Select Committee before Christmas and they seemed very on top of their portfolio. They come across as people who have a clear vision and are committed to delivering it. Very good, I think.'

Government Department

Two of those we interviewed were critical of Lord Whitty, with both referring to the 'political' nature of comments he had made. One comment concerned his opposition in principle to the privatisation of the energy industry and the other to what the stakeholder felt was unfair and exaggerated use of Consumer Focus' research to justify a particular recommendation.

Ed Mayo was always described in positive terms.

'Nice man. The ideal man to lead the organisation.'

Postal Supplier

'Ed's a good advocate for the consumer, persuasive and has good connections in Government.'

Civil Servant

Interestingly, both the stakeholders who were critical of Lord Whitty were positive about Ed Mayo.

Leaving aside the issues around individuals, a further comment made by a few stakeholders concerning senior Consumer Focus people was simply that they wanted more contact with them and to establish more effective ways of working together.

'We'd just like to see them more often, then they would be more front of mind. Six of one and half a dozen of the other, but I think really the ball is in their court. I'd just like to get a clearer understanding of how we can be more effective together in understanding how consumers are thinking and feeling.'

NDPB

In the light of stakeholders' generally very positive reactions to the senior Consumer Focus people that they knew, it is not too surprising that they were optimistic about the future of the organisation. This was true even where they had earlier been critical of a lack of achievement or of specific activity.

'I'm optimistic – it's just teething problems. Though I have to be optimistic or it's a hell of a lot of money wasted in the reorganisation!'

Voluntary Advisory Body

'In view of the people at the top, I'm optimistic.'

Representative Body (industry)

'I'm optimistic, but it has been a bit of a slow burner.'

Media

'..it really is too early to say definitely 'Yes, they're going to be fine', but any progress at this stage is good; the engagement has been good; I think they've got good vision, a good sense of what matters and they're moving in the right direction. I feel positive and I think that's the mood in (my organisation) as well as me as an individual. Different people (here) will have had different experiences, some more positive than others, but across the board, as an institution, I think it's going in the right direction.'

Regulator

3.4 Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses

We asked stakeholders what they saw Consumer Focus' main strengths and weaknesses to be.

Strengths

Two main areas emerged, plus a number of other unrelated comments. The two key strengths related to **people** and the new organisation's **capability**.

Looking at **people**, not surprisingly given the nature of the stakeholders, their focus was generally at the senior level. Ed Mayo in particular attracted a lot of positive comments and Philip Cullum was also specifically mentioned.

'Ed Mayo is seen as a credible commentator. He's credible, thoughtful and does his homework And I find him sensible, straightforward and easy to relate to.'

Energy Supplier

'I think their Chief Exec Ed Mayo is highly-regarded, highly-respected.'

Representative Body (industry)

'(Ed and Philip Cullum) Two leaders of the organisation with experience in consumer advocacy and insight.'

Regulator

'Philip Cullum I regard highly. Generally good people there who are interested in the issues and good advocates. A real positive.'

Civil Servant

Other individuals who were mentioned positively were Steve Brooker, Jill Johnstone and Audrey Gallacher.

'Some skilled staff – Philip, also Jill Johnstone.'

Civil Servant

'Steve Brooker – a lot of good work.'

Government Department

'I think it's a good leadership group. I mean the people I've met, which is Ed Mayo, Audrey Gallacher and a few Scottish guys.'

Energy Supplier

Other stakeholders specifically described Consumer Focus staff as very straightforward to work with and as having a passion for consumer rights.

Capability typically arose from the size of the new organisation: that it would carry more weight and be able to do more than the predecessor bodies

'By being a bigger organisation they carry more weight and doors open more easily for you.'

Regulator

'Their depth and breadth of reach – they're certainly not short of research or capability.'

NDPB

'That always impressed me, the way that even in the past they made a little go a long way, but now they have more resource.'

Government Department

Other strengths which were mentioned (several of which are somewhat related to the size/capability issue) were:

- Being a 'one stop shop' for consumer issues
- Combining a campaigning focus with a genuine underpinning of research
- Having a solid evidence base, particularly for energy
- A focus on very concrete issues

Weaknesses

The issues that stakeholders identified here spanned a wide range of issues, with relatively little agreement, except around the scale of the organisation's **remit**.

Some stakeholders voiced reservations about how Consumer Focus would balance its various areas of responsibility. In a variation on this theme, another raised a concern that the traditional and perhaps less exciting issues would be neglected in the face of more topical concerns, or that there would be more focus on campaigning than on resolution of basic issues.

'A worry around are they into campaigns rather than the day-to-day stuff? Not certain that losing the sector-specific bodies is the right idea. If for example energy issues are very topical and political, will Consumer Focus pursue that at the expense of the more mundane issues in for example post? It doesn't mean they go away. I just have a concern that by trying to do everything, the more day-to-day issues are forgotten.'

Regulator

One stakeholder also commented that such a wide remit could leave the organisation too thinly spread and possibly slightly exposed.

'The "complaints of general interest" area is very broad and they have no identity around stuff outside the post and so on....I think the next stage could be quite tricky as they go beyond what you might call their comfort zone where they don't have that back history like they do in energy and post,'

Government Department

A civil servant stakeholder also commented that in his view, the organisation is not yet being taken entirely seriously by the higher levels of Government due to the breadth of remit issue.

'I think there is a bit of a challenge about really getting taken seriously at a political level with all the different areas. The span is so wide across public services, private and so on. I'm not sure that they've yet received complete political cut-through on that. It feels it's registering at middle to senior official level but not really above that.'

Looking at the other issues that were raised, some tensions were apparent, particularly around the area of the organisation's presence/brand.

One stakeholder specifically referred to the relatively low profile as a weakness, and indeed this could be inferred from the comments around the organisation still finding its feet. However, others cited as weaknesses instances of what they considered headline-chasing or poor quality output (where perhaps the organisation had felt it had to make a mark) and stressed this should not be repeated.

'So far, I'd say the main weakness is a lower profile than I'd like to see. Get a few campaigning wins under their belt.'

NDPB

'I think they need to be careful that in their desire to build their brand, they don't prostitute their basic quality, which is well thought through, analytical research that is completely irrefutable. So if they were criticising us for X, we would never be able to argue with it because it would be a bloody fact, because they had researched it!'

Postal Supplier

'A weakness – that they haven't always focused totally on quality of output.'

Regulator

Other issues, each mentioned by a single stakeholder, were:

- The size of the Board – while they are strong as individuals, how well can it function with so many members?
- Capability not being demonstrated throughout the organisation i.e. in various industry/sector gatherings where Consumer Focus is present, the challenge to suppliers is not yet as robust and consistent as it should be (possibly now addressed via further recruitment?)
- A need for more weight on the economic policy front (post also now filled?)
- A need for more follow-up, with the specific example given being the Rating Regulators report
- A request from a supplier to take a more balanced view, giving credit where it is due as well as the more predictable criticism – feeling overall that more would be gained by working in collaboration than by being in conflict

3.5 The Organisation's Agenda

We asked stakeholders what they understood the organisation's agenda to be and specifically discussed the strategic goals.

We must note that not all of the stakeholders interviewed were aware of the agenda or the goals and those who were typically had a 'broad brush' understanding of them prior to the interview rather than a detailed one. Similarly, some referred to the work programme – but most only in the sense of knowing it existed rather than any of its detail.

The themes contained in the strategic goals were broadly familiar and deemed to be relevant, in that they represented fundamental consumer issues. The exception was sustainability, the inclusion of which came as a surprise to a few.

Perhaps inevitably, there was no definitive answer to whether Consumer Focus was achieving each of the goals and the same was true when we asked about effectiveness in terms of advocacy or developing policy. As the earlier sections have discussed, some stakeholders considered that little had been achieved so far; others felt there had been achievement in some areas but not across the board. Other stakeholders felt they simply could not comment on what had occurred outside their sector of interest.

Taking all their remarks into account, rather than just specifically the answers to this question, we would say that the issues stakeholders identified as achievements against the agenda were more in the areas of value and access than service, while sustainability did not figure at all.

One stakeholder, while being supportive of the agenda in general, commented that Consumer Focus should only have as its objectives things it can influence and measure.

We also asked whether this should constitute the agenda.

Relatively few suggested any changes. As has already been discussed, most saw the current agenda as comprehensive and potentially already difficult to deliver on across the board. However no-one suggested removing anything.

A few suggested other areas which could come under the organisation's remit. Water; SME's/SOHO's and the consumer roles of OFCOM and OFGEM were mentioned, but each by only a single stakeholder. The only sector mentioned by more than one stakeholder was financial services, with reference being made to recent consolidation and lack of consumer choice; increases in charges, etc.

A small number of stakeholders raised queries about the agenda. One asked why a consumer organisation had a public service remit and another somewhat questioned the nature of the agenda and specifically the fact that it

left unsaid important issues around the balance between the consumer and the provider.

'They're very grand, very campaigning things – but I do support them. But one interesting thing is for example how they will behave on XXX issue. How will they balance consumer issues with commercial ones. Are they for the consumer at all costs? Or 'best endeavours'? 'Reasonable endeavours'? i.e. you may achieve the consumer's ends, but will it bankrupt who's providing those services?'

Regulator

We note also that two stakeholders made additional comments around the strategy. One was familiar with it, but queried where the organisation was relative to it and the other wanted clarification of short- and long-term priorities.

'Yes, they have got a clear corporate strategy, but the issue for me is that I'm not clear on where they are on revisiting it and putting some life into it.'

Regulator

3.6 The Devolved Structure

A few stakeholders raised the issue of the devolved structure. One asked for clarification of the relationship between the centre and elsewhere and another had noted a potential disconnect between the two.

Both wanted clarity on who they should interact with and stressed the need for a common approach to dealing with stakeholders.

'We're not clear about the relationships and the consistency (between the centre and the devolved entities). (Under the predecessor body) it felt like the centre was not really in control of what the others would say.....We haven't had any problems with it yet, but we're not sure, for example, whether we should be maintaining a relationship with the other three, or whether it's enough to be dealing with people in the centre. It's not a complaint but a request for clarification.'

Postal Supplier

'I noticed a disconnect between London and Scotland and I think there's an interesting challenge for Consumer Focus to make sure that they are one organisation. I know they want to present regional consumer advocacy...but if they don't get that right it will drive a wedge between Consumer Focus itself. They can best serve their purpose by making sure they've got very strong teamwork and are supporting each other and recognising they've got the same agenda.'

Energy Supplier

One stakeholder raised a concern about devolution.

'I'm only pessimistic about whether they will get to grips with the devolution agenda – the same as I'm pessimistic that we will!'

NDPB

3.7 Media Presence

We asked stakeholders what their perspective was on the organisation's media presence in the broadest sense i.e. content generated by it; where perhaps Consumer Focus had responded to other activity, or the 'brand' as a whole.

A few felt the organisation's media profile was high – either generally or in their specific area of interest, where one might expect them to be more attuned to it.

'Often see them quoted in the media on stuff like fuel poverty, things to do with vulnerable consumers. Quite high profile – make the Daily Mail agenda and not uncommon to see Ed Mayo quoted.'

Civil Servant

However half of those interviewed considered that it was lower than they expected at this stage. But as discussed in earlier sections of this report, some could point to mitigating factors and others considered this no bad thing.

'I expected to see more around the customer service agenda in (our area). A particular issue blew up and I expected to see them commenting on it, but I didn't see anything at all.'

Regulator

'Less than I might have expected. We have them on our list of organisations to track via cuttings and I don't see them as much as I'd expect to. Maybe just a feature of newness?'

NDPB

'I've not really seen them too much in the media, but I'm not so sure that's necessarily a bad thing, because one of the problems with Energywatch was they used to chase any story.....but Consumer Focus haven't done that. They've been more mature in the way they've dealt with the media.'

Energy Supplier

Supporters of the more 'mature' approach felt that this was the right way to proceed for the long-term health of the brand: that gaining immediate impact was potentially the wrong course of action, no matter how tempting it might be to attract headlines in the absence of a large marketing budget. Among these comments were those detailed below, each made by a different regulator.

'I'd be wary if they did go for media exposure at the expense of the long-term value of the brand. The sort of things that get column inches and make a bit of a drama, I think they need to hold back and only make the drama for issues that are worthy. If they do that too often and too easily you can devalue the brand, so I think better to be steady as she goes at this stage.'

'I know they must be reliant on PR and therefore there's a certain need to attract headlines, but they need to hold fast to their evidence base and not let this sidetrack the organisation.'

One supplier and one media representative, however, specifically questioned the organisation's judgement in this area, mentioning separate instances where an advance story was given to a tabloid.

'That didn't feel like objective research. That felt like we're trying to go to war, we're trying to create a sensation in the headlines. Surely the definition of success is the publication of clinically prepared, factually correct research into an industry or sector? Doing things specifically designed to raise headlines doesn't seem in keeping with what I would have thought Consumer Focus should be about.'

Energy Supplier

'There was something that was given to one of the tabloids and I always think that's not a good idea for ..well, really, for any organisation. You should be more even-handed. I don't think that early cosyng-up to particular titles is a very good strategy generally. If you're a company, you can do what the hell you want, but it seems slightly different for what is a public consumer body to appear to be very much in bed with a particular title. I'm sure I'm not the only one to raise eyebrows.'

Media

This is clearly a difficult issue – and there are probably almost as many points of view on what is the right balance as there are stakeholders. The differing opinions may also reflect stakeholders' experiences to date i.e. whether Consumer Focus has been more or less critical of their organisation.

3.8 Comparisons with the Predecessor Bodies

We asked stakeholders how Consumer Focus compared with the predecessor bodies in terms of profile, impact and how different it was as an organisation.

Continuity

Some commented on the continuity provided by individuals they had previously worked with and respected, particularly Ed Mayo and Steve Brooker. One who had previously worked with NCC was pleased to note more and better engagement with Consumer Focus.

I think we've had quite good engagement from the top down in a short space of time. More so than we had with NCC. If I look in my inbox there's probably twice the number of emails (than I had from NCC).'

Government Department

Transition

Most felt unable to make comparisons about profile or impact at this stage: in their view comparing a new body with well-established ones was simply unfair and while there might be initial indications of performance, it was still too early to form a judgement.

'It's too early to say really. They have a stronger remit now, a wider remit and are starting to prove more big-hitting than the NCC, but it's early days.'

Civil Servant

It should be noted, though, that some felt that the day of reckoning was approaching. As mentioned earlier, the next 6 months was seen as a critical period for the organisation to make its mark.

'An unfair question at this point – it's just too early to say. But maybe by the end of 2009.'

Voluntary Advisory Body

Remit

As discussed above, stakeholders noted the much broader, combined remit of the new organisation.

Some specifically commented that Consumer Focus does not deal with postal and energy complaints and that this is handled by Consumer Direct.

A few commented on the new body's resources and emphasis relative to its predecessors. Several stakeholders saw it as better-resourced and as therefore having the potential to do more. However one thought there were now fewer people dedicated to the postal and energy sectors and another claimed that there was now less focus on postal issues than under Postwatch.

Style/Approach

Several stakeholders commented that the predecessor bodies had been quite different from each other and that reconciling the various approaches could be difficult.

'I think NCC had a reputation for being quite cerebral in its thinking, quite think-tanky. Whereas I think Energywatch had in the earlier days much more of a campaigning feel to it, and I wonder, I don't know whether Consumer Focus is having to manage those two ways of thinking...'

Regulator

One tangible difference several stakeholders mentioned was a change of style compared to Energywatch.

'It's a change of style, definitely. Ed is quite different from the Energywatch people. There was a certain element there of rent-a-quote, of always blasting off and complaining very loudly.'

Media

This was welcomed by one of the energy suppliers.

'I think they are much less strident than Energywatch were. You felt they had an absolute mission to criticise the supply companies, irrespective of the fact base. Whereas actually I find Consumer Focus far more balanced and fair generally. Not always, but generally, so I would say they are a big improvement.'

Energy Supplier

Management Challenge

One stakeholder raised the issue of potential difficulties in balancing work and effort across all the areas of responsibility.

'I think balancing their work across post, energy and the general consumer areas could be tricky.'

Civil Servant

One stakeholder also felt that managing the larger organisation would be a challenge.

3.9 Top of Mind Perceptions

Stakeholders were asked to describe Consumer Focus in three words or phrases. A wide range of responses emerged, with far more being positive than negative.

The most common theme that emerged was around the organisation still establishing itself e.g.

'Still finding its feet'

'Early stages'

'Aspiring to be (a campaigning organisation)'

'Working towards being (evidence-based)'

'Taking a while to bed-down'

'Trying to establish a distinctive voice'

'Potentially exciting'

So for many there was a strong sense of work still in progress. On the positive side, though, Consumer Focus was credited with being:

'Off to a strong start'

and as

'Making good progress'.

The other main topic which was mentioned was around 'the consumer', i.e.

'For the customer

'Consumer champion'

'Campaigning'

'Watchdog'

'Focused on the more vulnerable'

'Social conscience'

A few also referred at this stage to leadership in general i.e. the organisation is well-led, or specifically to Ed Mayo as an asset.

Other positives mentioned were around:

- newness - fresh, contemporary, new
- activity and involvement - pro-active; engaged
- professionalism

Some criticisms or failings did also emerge.

A voluntary advisory body opted for the terms *'Disorganised, arrogant and need to be more humble'*.

However this individual did acknowledge that this arose from one particular contact and that it might be attributable to newness on the part of the staff member concerned, and/or the organisation generally. A desire to make a mark at that stage had perhaps led to a less than tactful approach by Consumer Focus and there had been an apparent unwillingness to share information to generate the best outcome.

A regulator took a less understanding view of what had been achieved in the first few months and said *'Disappointing; not done a lot and need to raise their game.'*

In this stakeholder's view, there was still some way to go to achieve the good relationship they had had with the relevant predecessor body. This individual also considered there had been a lack of activity in their sector by Consumer Focus.

One media representative used the term *'toothless'* – not as the fault of the organisation but as a systemic failing.

'They don't really have any power. We are very much in this light touch regulatory regime.....and Consumer Focus, for all its high endeavours, hasn't really got the power to do anything.'

Media

Finally, two stakeholders mentioned as top of mind something they felt Consumer Focus should do in future. Both a service provider and one of the

media representatives suggested the organisation could perform a real service to consumers by publicly discriminating between good and poorly performing suppliers.

3.10 Performance Ratings

At the end of the interview all stakeholders were asked to rate Consumer Focus on four dimensions, using a 10-point scale, where 1 represented the poorest and 10 the best possible performance. The order of presentation of the ratings was rotated.

This is a small sample and we should not place too much credence on the findings, but it is interesting to note that these questions made very concrete the differences and the considerable distance between the more 'pro' and 'anti' respondents. The less positive minority consistently gave ratings of between 0 and 3 on all the measures, while the majority gave scores of 6 to 8 across all four questions.

We should again bear in mind that at this stage, stakeholders' experiences of and interactions with Consumer Focus varied widely, leaving some less well-placed to answer some of these questions.

We would also observe that some of these articulate and fairly opinionated individuals simply resisted being constrained into a structured question format. Instead they answered the question they thought should have been put, rather than necessarily the one they were asked, or they refused to give one number as their answer! We assume that this was in part due to the fairly free-ranging nature of the preceding discussion – it is to be hoped that in the context of a wholly structured questionnaire they may be more compliant.

a) Vision and leadership

Stakeholders differed widely in their ratings of this area, giving scores that ranged from 2, to 9 out of 10. Most gave a score of between 6 and 8 and the average was 6.5.

Those who gave the lowest scores claimed they had seen no evidence of a vision, whereas those who selected points in the middle of the scale made comments such as that they were still in 'wait and see' mode, or that they did not doubt the leadership, but they were holding back from giving a more positive score pending how that vision actually translated into delivery.

b) 'What they do'

Again, stakeholders' ratings differed widely, ranging again from 2, to 9 out of 10. Most gave scores of 6 or 7 and again some qualified their scores with remarks around the organisation still not having entirely found its feet. The average score here was 6 out of 10.

Some, it must be said, gave a score based on what they knew to have been achieved just in their own sector, or on the basis of just one piece of work such as the Rating Regulators report. One did not wish to respond to this specific question and answered instead in the context of 'Are they where they ought to be at this point?' – on which he gave a score of 9 out of 10.

c) Value for money

This rating should be regarded with the greatest caution at this stage – several stakeholders simply did not know what Consumer Focus cost to run and refused to answer, while others reiterated the same caveats as for 'What they do'. Arguably no-one had a complete picture of all the areas of activity against the budget.

One had formed a negative view purely on the basis of seeing what they thought was a fairly well-populated organogram!

Nevertheless, overall the score was lower, ranging from 0 to 7 and averaging 5.

d) Softer aspects/Appeal of the organisation

This sought to establish how stakeholders felt about Consumer Focus, for example was it an organisation they felt good about.

The scores here ranged from 2 to 8, with most answering 7 or 8 and the average being 7.

3.11 Key Issues Going Forward

We asked stakeholders what piece of advice they would give Consumer Focus for the year ahead.

Most of these key points had already been raised by stakeholders and therefore they have been discussed in previous sections. Thus, they are summarised briefly below.

- Do not become too thinly spread – identify a small number of key issues to deliver on and focus determinedly on these so that it will be possible to identify what has been achieved
- Be responsive to issues which arise, but do not 'blow in the wind' – be highly-transparent about your agenda and work plan and do not be diverted from it
- Pick your fights with care – only tackle issues with resonance and which apply to a sizeable consumer base
- 'Stick to the knitting' – do not lose focus on everyday, mundane consumer issues
- Be aware (as no doubt the organisation is already) that demonstrating cost-efficiency is important – at some point the spotlight will be shone on you

- Raise your profile – but in the right way, sticking firmly to the evidence base and with quality rather than quantity in mind
- Shift the balance further towards partnership/away from being adversaries – not just relative to suppliers, but also with regulators and other bodies
- Keep in contact with stakeholders to increase their knowledge of and commitment to you – and if possible, broaden who you have contact with e.g. to gain a better industry/sector perspective
- Ideally, bring solutions to the (Government) table alongside identification of the problems

Appendix – Discussion Guide

1. Introduction

- Briefly
 - thank for participation
 - stress anonymity and confidentiality
 - request permission to record interview
- Explain
 - purpose of research study
 - nature of interview i.e. flexible re. issues they wish to raise, plus some specific topics to discuss and then rate using 1 to 10 scale
 - free to express both positives and negatives, if they exist
 - starting with more general background information, then move on to cover some specific areas

2. Background

- Time in current role
- Relationship with Consumer Focus, if relevant (either way i.e. have they impacted on the organisation/how does it impact on them)

3. Top of mind perceptions

- What three words would they use to describe Consumer Focus
- Why/explain choice

4. Awareness of/Involvement with Consumer Focus

- Prior involvement with Consumer Focus e.g. with predecessor bodies; in its establishment; with specific programmes since inception, etc.
- Interaction with Consumer Focus – if so
 - with whom
 - frequency of contact
- Awareness of (probe for detail at each topic where respondent is aware)
 - Consumer Focus' remit (probe re. understanding of Consumer Focus vs. Consumer Direct and 'Which')
 - specific programmes/initiatives – which one(s) are they aware of
 - presence in media (formally or informally)

5. Impact

- What is their opinion of the organisation's presence (or lack of it)
- Do they think the organisation has had an impact – how would you rate its impact so far
- If it has had an impact
 - where is this
 - how/why has it made a difference
- Has it achieved more or less than you would have expected in its first 8 months
- What are its main strengths and weaknesses at present

- Has anything surprised you about it so far
 - if so, what
 - what has surprised you most
- How does it compare with the 3 predecessor bodies in terms of profile and impact
- Is it different from the predecessor bodies – if so how/in what way(s)
- Does there need to be more change for it to be really effective – if so, what still needs to change/how much more change is required
- How confident are you about the ability of the board and senior management to deliver this – why is that
- Which Board members are they aware of
- How would they rate those they know of
- Specifically, what is their opinion of:
 - the Chair, Lord Larry Whitty
 - the Chief Executive, Ed Mayo
- Are you optimistic or pessimistic about CF – why is this
- If you could give the board and senior management one piece of advice about CF over the next year, what would it be

6. Consumer Focus' Agenda

- What do they understand this to be
- Strategic goals
 - awareness
 - discuss each in turn re. relevance; to what extent Consumer Focus is achieving each one

Value – help people receive better value by raising the influence they have over the goods and services they receive

Service – improve customer service and remove unnecessary problems that generate complaints from consumers

Access – create an economy in which everyone can access the essential services they need, and where the poor no longer pay more or get less for their money

Sustainability – harness the appetite of consumers to move to more sustainable lifestyles

- Should this constitute the organisation's agenda – or if not, what should it be
- Is there anything the organisation has not yet done/is not tasked with, in which it should be involved in future
- How effective is the organisation in terms of advocacy
- And how effective is it in terms of developing policy

7. Specific Issues

- Reiterate desire to establish their view of Consumer Focus in terms of a few specific topics/issues – both 'open-ended' and via a 1 to 10 rating, where 1 represents the poorest performance and 10 the best possible performance
- Run through the list of specific topics, if required; rotate order (reflecting areas already raised by respondent, if relevant)

a) Vision and Leadership

What is their view of Consumer Focus in this area

Why is this

Do they consider that the organisation has a clear vision for the future

Why/not

Is Consumer Focus effectively differentiated from other bodies

Why/not

Do they think the organisation campaigns effectively

Why/not

How do they perceive CF staff – do they generally view them as good people/high-quality, etc.

Any other comments about this topic

Using the 1 to 10 scale, how would they rate Consumer Focus overall in this area

Why do they give that particular score

b) 'What they do'

What is their opinion of Consumer Focus in this area

Why is this

Do they deliver 'high quality service' – why/not

Are they innovative – why/not

Do they stand behind/stand by their actions – why/not

Any other comments about this topic

Using the 1 to 10 scale, how would they rate Consumer Focus overall in this area

Why do they give that particular score

c) Value for Money

Spontaneously, what is their opinion of Consumer Focus in this area

Why is this (or is it just too early to say?)

Prompt if required - as a taxpayer/post and energy consumer-funded body, is it providing value for money - why/not

Using the 1 to 10 scale, how would they rate Consumer Focus overall in this area

Why do they give that particular score

d) Softer aspects/ 'Appeal' of the organisation

How do they feel about Consumer Focus

Why is this

Is it an organisation they:

- feel good about
- admire and respect
- trust

Why is this

Using the 1 to 10 scale, how would they rate Consumer Focus overall in this area

Why do they give that particular score

Round-up this section – summarise/check that ratings do accurately reflect the respondent's view e.g. that Consumer Focus performs more strongly in area X than Y; areas of relative weakness are

8. Other

- Any other comments they wish to make/issues they want to raise
- In general, how do they feel the '1 to 10' scale 'worked' – would they prefer to use a semantic scale e.g. 'very good' to 'very poor'?

9. Close

- Thank for participation
- Establish willingness or otherwise to participate in larger-scale exercise on this topic in Autumn 2009, using a structured questionnaire i.e. entirely via rating scales