

## Consumer Focus Board

Paper 10.1

**Title:** Potential revisions to Forward Work Programme

**Purpose:** For discussion and decision

**Date of meeting:** 13 October 2009

**Responsible officer:** Philip Cullum

**Prepared by:** SMT and programme leads

**Attachments:** None

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### 1 Overview

1.1 The Board asked in the September Board meeting that we identify good uses for unallocated resources, should we be likely to face a potential underspend in this financial year. It was suggested that we identify at least £250,000 of potential external spend; although as noted in the management accounts paper for this meeting, we are now forecasting savings of some £600,000. This paper sets out our initial thinking on revisions to the Forward Work Programme. It should be noted that given the short time between the September and October Board meetings, this is not a finalised list, and we propose to do further work on it, taking into account any 'in principle' Board decisions on priorities at this meeting.

### 2 Action for the Board

2.1 The Board is asked to **DISCUSS** the contents of this paper and agree in principle the priorities.

### 3 The key issues

3.1 At the last Board meeting we reported on the likelihood that we would underspend on this year's budget, unless we took active steps to revise our forward work programme. This is the result of changed external circumstances, project delays and efficient budget management. The Board asked us to identify how we might spend at least £250,000 on work that is not currently listed in this year's work programme, in a way that would most effectively advance the consumer interest.

3.2 Since the last meeting, Kingsley Arnold has been meeting with each of the GB programme leads to review their actual, committed and predicted external spend. This has fed into the Board paper on our management accounts, which predicts savings of some £600,000 on our initial budgeting.

3.3 In developing ideas for spending, we are conscious that staff time is already accounted for on other projects, so commissioning work that will require ongoing staff involvement is not straightforward. We have in the main focused on GB projects, and we have tried to go for a small number of sizeable projects rather than lots of small ones.

3.4 We have sought to identify strategic investments in the organisation's capability and/or insight, not merely research projects.

3.5 Our initial ideas, in order of priority, are as follows:

- a) **Structured engagement with vulnerable/disadvantaged consumers.** This was raised by Sukhvinder Kaur Stubbs at the last Board meeting and fits in well with our work on engagement more generally; it also helps reinforce the extent to which we are connected into consumer experience. A number of colleagues had a detailed discussion with Sukhvinder on 30 September to develop this idea further. We are scoping three projects: (a) commission someone to review which organisations (who might not think of themselves as consumer bodies) we could engage with and how best to do this, including drilling down into two or three local communities; (b) conduct a series of small scale qualitative or deliberative discussions with vulnerable consumers; and (c) commission a review on how we can engage staff directly with the experiences of vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, for example through short secondments to community organisations. We currently estimate that this could cost at least £150,000, drawn from all three funding sources.
- b) **Research on detriment in public services.** This project, which seeks to parallel the Consumer Conditions survey for public services, is planned for next year, but we could bring it forward, allowing us to use it to shape our agenda for 2010-11 and further demonstrate that our choice of issues is determined by evidence. We estimate that this will cost around £100,000, from the BIS funding stream.
- c) **Building the capacity of advice agencies.** We already work closely with advice agencies, particularly in relation to energy issues where we provide them with information and guidance to use with clients. We consider that a strategic investment in training for advisers, provided by trusted third parties, on key issues such as consumer rights and disconnections might reap real rewards. There is also scope for us to build on our 'consumer community' work, creating connections between advisers so that they exchange experiences and best practice between one another. This might involve creating a social networking approach for front line advice providers, with leaflets, briefing and training materials, news and the ability to 'chat' to one another. This too needs some work to develop the idea, but could cost in the region of £75,000, drawn from all three funding sources but especially the energy one.
- d) **Consumer rights card/consumer empowerment.** The shoppers card already exists in Northern Ireland and evidence suggests that it has boosted consumer awareness of rights and raised the profile of the Consumer Council. Consumer Focus Scotland and Consumer Focus Wales have considered producing such a card in 2010-11, although the UK government has just launched a 'Know Your Consumer Rights' campaign with our support, so we would want to consider how to reinforce this rather than cut across it. We would like to pilot a card in two regions where there is strong local media, back by advertising and public affair activity - this would allow us to evaluate the impact of such an intervention in building consumer confidence and knowledge of their rights. The cost of producing cards is relatively modest, the real cost would come in advertising and public affairs support. This idea needs further work, building on our experience of advertising the Healthyliving Award, but could cost up to £250,000, drawn from all three funding sources but especially the BIS one.

e) **Data sharing for public services.** Debate about data sharing has unsurprisingly tended to focus on breaches of rules and losses of sensitive data, and we are active on privacy issues relating to the digital economy, but there are potential benefits to organisations sharing information so that services can be focused on consumer needs. We could add something of value in this space by working with consumers to establish how they feel about data sharing, the instances in which they'd be willing to have their data shared, the protections they'd want in place and the models of consent they'd want to see. This would lend itself to a deliberative piece of work, which would be funded from the BIS stream and would cost in the region of £75,000.

3.6 We are confident that all of these could be commissioned and completed in 2010/11, although we would need to start on some very soon and we will need to review the staff resources needed.

3.7 One further option might be to invest more heavily in training. We currently have management training under way, and we have employed a consultant, Tom Holden, to work with the HR team to develop our wider approach to training. It would appear that we have under-estimated the likely costs of a good training programme, particularly given our position as a relatively new organisation with many new staff – some of this initial training is currently being funded from our remaining transition budget. We might want to increase further the short-term spend in this area, subject to Tom's analysis; this would come from all three funding sources.

#### **4 Proposal**

4.1 The Board is asked to discuss the ideas listed in paragraph 6 above and make 'in principle' decisions on priorities, subject to further development work.

#### **5 Resources**

5.1 So far as possible we have tried to identify projects that would not involve a large amount of internal resource; the list above is focused on external spend.

#### **6 Next steps**

6.1 Subject to Board discussion, we will work up further the ideas listed above and initiate as soon as possible those which are feasible. We will report back to the December Board meeting on progress.