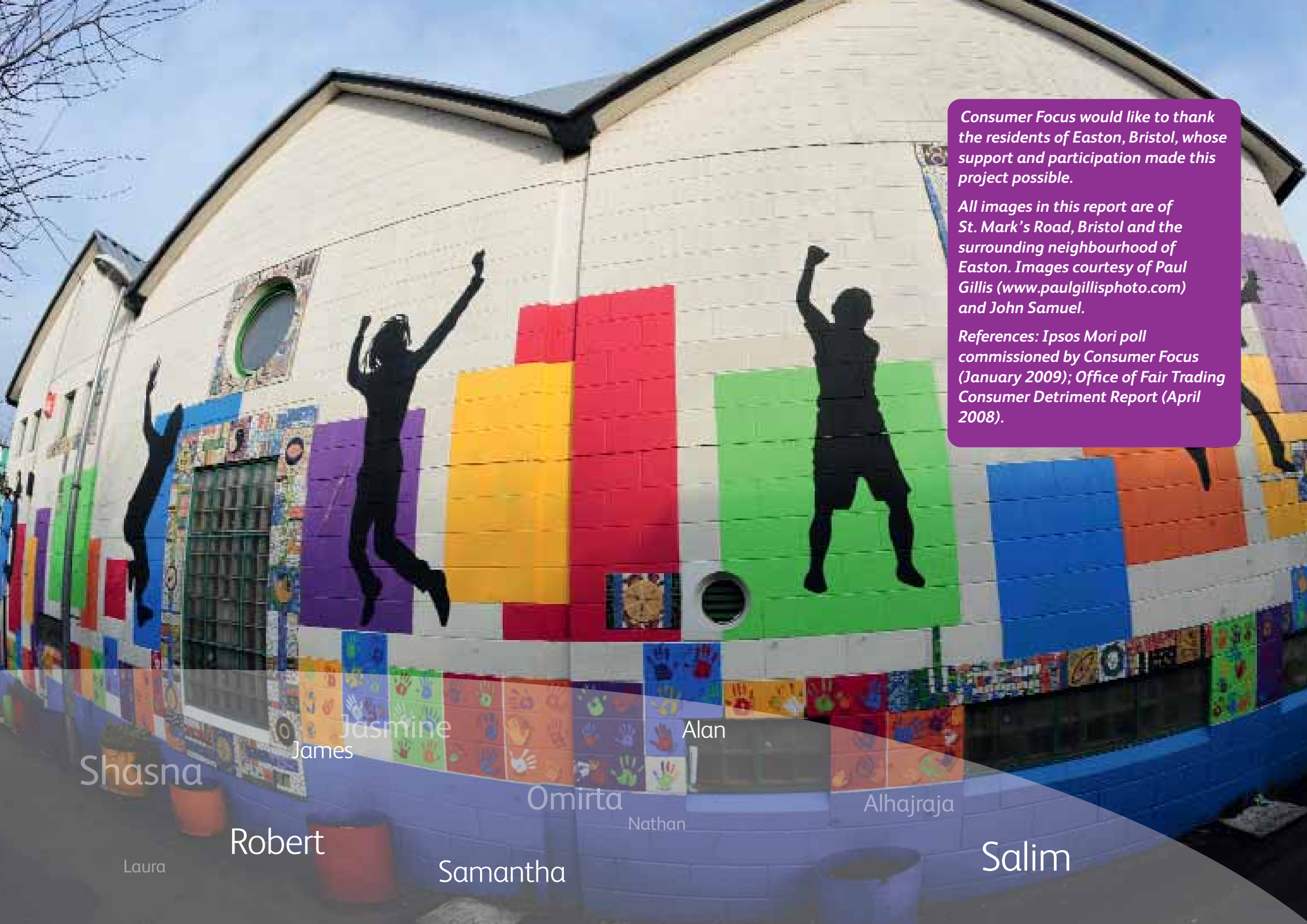




Streetwise: real people, real issues



Consumer Focus would like to thank the residents of Easton, Bristol, whose support and participation made this project possible.

All images in this report are of St. Mark's Road, Bristol and the surrounding neighbourhood of Easton. Images courtesy of Paul Gillis (www.paulgillisphoto.com) and John Samuel.

References: Ipsos Mori poll commissioned by Consumer Focus (January 2009); Office of Fair Trading Consumer Detriment Report (April 2008).

Shasna

Jasmine

James

Alan

Omirta

Nathan

Alhajraja

Robert

Laura

Samantha

Salim

Introduction:

Consumers in 2009

Consumers in the UK lost out on billions of pounds in 2008 because of problems with goods and services. Consumer Focus is the new, strong voice campaigning for a fair deal in 2009 and beyond.

Getting a fair deal for consumers is more important in 2009 than ever before. Times are tough and will get worse before they get better. But we find that consumers are increasingly streetwise.

The falling value of the pound will make imported goods more expensive. The value of personal savings will remain low due to low interest rates. Although some prices, particularly petrol and food have reduced as a result of the downturn, personal debt is at a record high and will account for a big slice of monthly income for many families.

Consumer Focus could not have been established at a more important time. Struggling consumers need a strong voice

to ensure we all get a fair deal. Businesses under pressure need to be monitored to ensure that they operate fairly and in the interests of consumers – which will ultimately help them compete better.

Consumers are becoming more likely to complain and assert their rights. The Internet has given rise to an array of consumer rights actions ranging from one-off complaints to concerted action against industry practices including banking charges. Customer review sites have changed the relationship between businesses and consumers, with many companies now employing bloggers to address consumers' concerns. These trends are good news.

Many consumers are harnessing the power of the Internet to get a better deal, but we must recognise that some social groups are being left behind by changing technology and excluded from the advantages of

access to online communities or price comparison sites. At the same time many consumers are losing the knowledge that local community networks used to pass on. The new tech savvy generation may be adapting well to our changing neighbourhoods but some social groups are being left behind and disempowered.

In 2009 Consumer Focus is getting under the skin of consumers: finding out what real people and real families are experiencing. This report looks at the consumer landscape and whether consumers today are getting a fair deal. Real people tell their stories. Stories that – as our MORI polling shows – reflect the challenges people across Britain are facing. It sets out how Consumer Focus will get to grips with these issues and how, armed with real powers and influence, it will bring change for the benefit of consumers.



Rebecca

Lara

Nathan

Suhel

Shirley

Melanie

Haroon

Jasmine

Alhajraja

Sumen

Shasna

Jasmine

Salim

What is Consumer Focus?

Consumer Focus is a statutory organisation that aims to give consumers a stronger voice. Our vision is simple: 'more power to the people'.

Despite major advances in UK consumers' rights over the last two decades, many consumers still receive bad service or don't get value for money – and the most vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers are often the ones who get the worse deal.

Consumer Focus works to understand the needs of all consumers across England, Wales, Scotland and (for postal consumers) in Northern Ireland.

We are a campaigning body – taking on vested interests and tackling companies and services that fail consumers. We use our powers of influence to achieve change. But where persuasion fails we have statutory powers to investigate any consumer complaint and to demand information from businesses. We have 'super-complaint' powers to refer failing markets to regulators for investigation.

We don't just draw attention to problems – we work with consumers and with a range of organisations to champion creative solutions that make a difference

to consumers' lives. We're working to put consumers at the heart of business and government decision-making, both at home and in Europe. We're working to give every business, every public service a consumer focus.

tenovus

the car...

You can't be sure of a fair deal in Britain today ...

The majority of people in Britain have experienced bad customer service at least once in the last year.

UK consumers lost a total of £6.6 billion due to known problems with goods and services in 2008 .

3 in 10 people think that banks are less likely than other organisations to give a fair deal.

1 in 5 people don't trust insurance companies to give them a fair deal.

3 in 10 consumers believe that companies are untrustworthy in labelling products as 'green'.

... there is a long way to go to improve customer service ...

3 in 4 consumers feel that big companies treat them as numbers rather than people.

3 in 5 consumers feel that the system, not the staff, is to blame when companies don't do the right thing.

3 out of 5 think that large companies would willingly mislead them to make more money.

Consumers: the big picture

79-81

BHOOGAL DISPENSING CHEMIST

... but consumers are increasingly streetwise.

1 in 4 consumers claim to have used the Internet to leave feedback about a company at least once in the last year.

3 in 5 people say that they have changed supplier after being treated badly by a large company

3 in 4 of the most wealthy consumers say that they have taken their business elsewhere because they have been treated badly by a company.

Only half of the poorest consumers have done the same – and 15 – 24 year-olds are significantly less likely to.

2 in 5 people have made a complaint about bad customer service in the last year. Nearly 1 in 3 people made more than 1 complaint.

4 in 5 pass on news of their good or bad experiences to other people.

1 in 3 people have decided not to buy something from a company after hearing of others' bad experiences.



Campaigning for a fair deal in 2009

This year, we have four campaigns to achieve a fair deal for consumers.

Access for All

Creating 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

Quality of Service

Improving customer service and removing unnecessary problems that generate complaints from consumers

Value

Helping people obtain better value by increasing the influence they have over the goods and services they receive

Going Green

Harnessing the appetite of consumers to adopt more sustainable lifestyles

The people behind our campaigns

In addition to gathering consumer intelligence from a range of sources, such as Consumer Direct, Trading Standards, charities and businesses, most importantly, we talk to real-life consumers about their real-life concerns.

Our consumer research informs everything we do, and the people behind our campaigns are the ordinary consumers throughout Britain. Consumer Focus reaches out to them in many ways, from talking to people in focus groups, deliberative sessions, and questionnaires in the street, people's homes, on the phone and on-line. We talk to consumers about things that matter to them in ways that suit them.

For this report Consumer Focus wanted to get under the skin of consumers. We

wanted to look at how consumers are becoming increasingly streetwise, so we've engaged with consumers in and around a specific street – St. Mark's Road – in the Bristol neighbourhood of Easton. It was carefully chosen to reflect wider consumer concerns.

These are the real people for whom Consumer Focus exists. The stories are the stories we hear across the country and – as our research shows – reflect the challenges and opportunities that exist for consumers across the UK.



Welcome to Easton

The River Frome runs through Easton, on the east side of Bristol. Historically it was a major trade route and, like many communities that grew up around trade, Easton has seen a lot of change. The diversity of the UK is reflected in the local community with one in four residents of Black or Asian origin. It has mosques, a synagogue, a Sikh temple and several churches of different denominations.

Like many urban areas there are problems of deprivation, unemployment and a lack of local jobs. Like the rest of the country, residents in its inter-war housing terraces and high rise tower blocks are feeling the pinch of the recession.

There are challenges to community cohesion, as there are everywhere, but there is also a richness to the local community: Easton is the street party capital of Europe, with more per year than anywhere else.

For our research we focussed on St. Mark's Road in Easton where colourful murals – several attributed to Banksy – give distinctive character. Its high street faces challenges from major supermarkets but you'll still find a newsagent, cafes, chemist, butchers, and convenience store – the Bristol Sweet Mart. All our case studies live or work on or near the road.



Salim
Suhel
Harroon
Martin
Sumen
Janet
Linda
Nathan
Shasna
Sharon
Jasmine
Melanie
Halimo
Lara
Rebecca
Omirra
Alhajraja

Access for all

Mike Pickering | church manager, 61

'Access to Post Offices, banks and the sorts of things you'd take for granted is a real problem for people round here. I use the Post Office for most of my personal banking and to get stamps for myself and for the church. I bank with Alliance and Leicester, who let you use the Post Office, which is lucky as there are not as many banks around here as there used to be.

Our community is cut in half by the dual carriageway. We used to have three Post Offices this side of the road and one the other side. They closed all of them except one and opened a new one in the shopping centre – a forty minute walk away – on the far side of town.

Lots of older people live in the high-rise flats in the area we call St Jude's; they have to walk a long way to the Post Office now. What's worse is that the local bus service isn't that reliable or that frequent – and the buses can get really crowded too. There's

not a week goes by without local people writing to the paper about the buses.

If you do get to the Post Office you'll find our sub-post master is very good; a local lady was just telling me the other day how nice and friendly he is. When he took over he decided to open it at lunchtime like people wanted. He owns the supermarket next door and he'd noticed the long queues in the afternoons and all the parents about at lunchtime because of the schools. He's making a real difference to the community – giving people what they need.

I would say, though, that a lot of local people who have pensions would be happy if the Post Office stopped changing the system. They used to get money in a book and now it all goes on a card. People want to get cash rather than money being paid into their bank account – they want things the way they used to be.'



4 in 5 pass on
*news of their good
or bad experiences
to other people.*

A fair deal for all?

While three quarters of the most wealthy consumers say that they have taken their business elsewhere due to bad treatment by a company, only about half of the poorest people have done the same, while 15-24 year-olds are notably less likely than other age groups to do so. It is the most disadvantaged groups in society who find it hardest to get a fair deal as consumers.

The working poor: a forgotten group

The threat of unemployment is an immediate concern to people across the economy. But there are also particular challenges facing the five million low-income workers in the UK who do not claim benefits and do not have dependent children.

People in this group work long hours and often have more than one job. They have little time to spend building and maintaining relationships and they have less money to spend on social activities. Limited social housing, high private rents and unaffordable home ownership leave many of the working poor living in shared

accommodation which is often temporary and leaves them unsettled. Their movements are often dictated by the public transport service in their area, or their ability to drive and pay for cars, taxis and cabs.

As consumers they feel that they often get bad value for money, receive poor customer service and have to waste their limited time and money chasing providers to sort out difficulties. When they do make complaints, the response is often inadequate and many feel as if they are being blamed for the problems. They tell us that large businesses deliberately make the process of complaining difficult so that consumers will give up.

Access to information

Most consumers will listen to other people's opinions and experiences before they buy a product or service. One in three people have decided not to buy something because of a story they've heard, while one in four people claim to have left feedback about companies on the Internet.

Given the growing importance of the Internet in enabling consumers to research products and services, Consumer Focus is determined to play a role in making new media accessible to all. This will require working with the government and with Ofcom. Consumer Focus is keen to ensure that Internet suppliers operate fairly with easily-understood tariffs and that there is healthy competition in the marketplace.

The information society and online communities have become ever more accessible, but there remains digital divide. Some social groups remain alienated from these consumer tools and without them can be left with little consumer voice or power, less choice about the goods and services they receive, and paying more. Society needs to recognise this challenge and provide alternative ways for them to engage with the consumer economy.



Rija

Campaigning for an end to fuel poverty

Consumer Focus's first piece of major work has been to address fuel poverty. Too many people in Britain do not have reliable, consistent and affordable access to energy – and the consequences of this are profound. Consumer Focus is leading a campaign with other organisations to ensure that everyone can afford to heat their home properly in the future.

Consumer Focus is the driving force behind the Fuel Poverty Bill, a Private Member's Bill sponsored by David Heath MP that would bring in two measures: a major programme to bring existing homes up to modern energy efficiency standards, and a system of social tariffs that would limit vulnerable households' exposure to high-energy bills. The measures in the bill are backed by major charities and campaign groups including Help the Aged, Friends of the Earth and the Association for the Conservation of Energy.

The Bill came second in the Private Member's Bill ballot, which guarantees debate in the House of Commons.

Ensuring access to postal services

Consumer Focus will monitor the provision of post offices to make sure that no one lives further than the specified distance from a post office and that replacement 'outreach' post offices work well. These could include a mobile van service, a sub postmaster from a nearby post office providing a service to a community from, for example, a village hall or local shop, or a local business person running post office services from their premises.

Consumer Focus will also examine cases where specific groups of people are denied access to important services and products. For example, we have identified a specific challenge in Wales, where older people do not have the same access to financial services as other groups across the UK. We will also be looking at wider issues in marketing with regard to campaigns that may indirectly exclude older people.

Harcharan Kasbia | day care worker, 45

'For lots of people around here it's not possible to get a better deal on services like energy or banking, or even to research the deal they're getting.

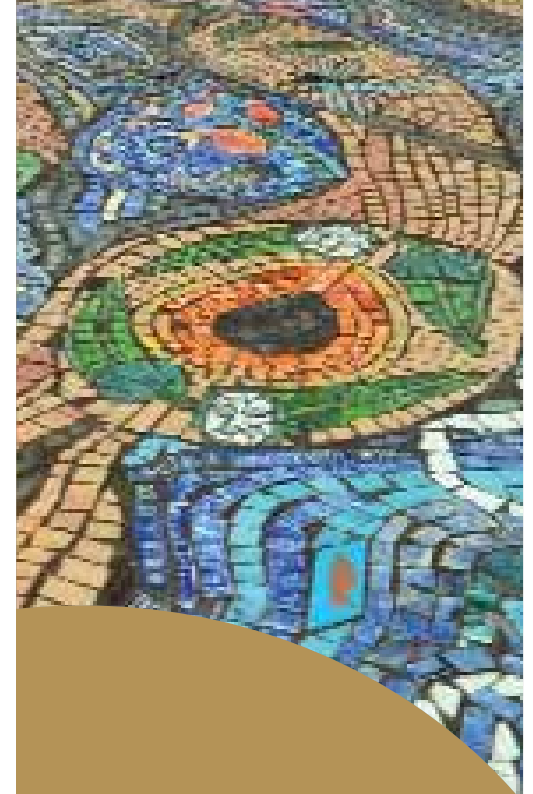
If you don't speak the language and you don't want to get in trouble you pay the bill, whatever the figure. You can't even tell whether the amount you're paying is the final total or just an estimate. Unless it's massively more than you were expecting you just pay it without even thinking about it.

Members of our community, for whom English isn't their first language, are unwilling to think about switching providers. They think they would be asked lots of difficult questions they can't answer and possibly be tricked into agreeing to things they don't want. This is quite likely as many people say yes, just to be polite, even if they don't understand what's going on. Or they get frustrated and give up and feel powerless.

People around here are often unwilling to use local services because they don't understand them. Recently, the NHS offered free breast screening at the Community Centre but most people I know didn't go

because they couldn't understand the leaflets and posters. It can be very scary not knowing what people are doing to you or why they are doing it, particularly when it comes to health. There are also concerns among some women that some activities are against their religion.

Important NHS flyers should have a line in a number of languages saying something like: "this is important for your health; if you don't understand this leaflet, please call this number". Energy bills and financial information should also provide key information in a number of languages. And, if people are going to come door-to-door they should do research into languages in the local community.'



3 in 4 consumers feel that big companies treat them as numbers rather than people.



Lara

Shasna

Jasmine

Sumen

Linda

Janet

Munir

Omirta

Melanie

Martin

Nathan

Alhairaj

Sharon

Salim

Suhel

Rebecca

Halimo

Harroon

Quality of service

Consumers and customer service

Over the last 12 months, the majority of people in Britain experienced bad customer service at least once. Two out of five people made a complaint about a company and almost one in three made multiple complaints. The Office of Fair Trading calculates that people in Britain lost a total of £6.6 billion due to known problems with goods and services in the same time period, while an unknown sum was also lost due to hidden charges.

Consumers perceive shops – and supermarkets in particular – as the most likely to offer a fair deal. More than half of people think that supermarkets have responded well to the downturn and one in five think that high street shops have also responded well. British supermarkets are some of the most successful in the world; this is surely due in some part to their good customer service.

The companies perceived as least likely to give a fair deal are banks, energy providers and insurance companies. One in three people feel that banks are less likely than other organisations to give them a fair

deal; the number is similar for energy companies. One in five people don't trust insurance companies to give them a fair deal; putting them in the same category as estate agents and car salesmen. Car and vehicle insurance is traditionally much more trusted by consumers although there are specific issues with certain types of insurance packages, including mobile phone cover.

Large companies have a poor image

When dealing with large companies, three quarters of people feel that they're treated as numbers rather than as people. This proportion is highest in Scotland where four out of five people feel this way. Across Britain three out of five people feel that large companies would willingly mislead them to make more money. Many consumers see little difference in the way that large companies treat their customers, while four out of ten people believe that those running big businesses do not understand what their customers want.

There is a particular problem with the customer service culture of large companies. Three out of five consumers feel that the system, not the staff, is to blame when companies don't do the right thing. A similar number of people report that companies repeat the same mistakes.

How consumers take action

Consumers vote with their feet: three out of five people say that they've changed supplier after being treated badly by a large company. Companies must wake up to the fact that consumers will share their bad experiences and vote with their feet when they don't like what they hear: one in four people claim to have left feedback in the last year and one in three have decided not to buy something from a company after hearing of others' bad experiences.



Food & Spices

OFF LICENCE
West Indian Foods

FP
5500

Melanie

Rebecca

Lara

Marta

Jasmine

Linda

Shasna

Alan

Violetta

Munir

Suhel

Denise

Harroon

Omirta

Sharon

Halimo

Alhajraja

Janet

Salim

Natha

Sumen

Martin



WELCOME WAI
LARRY
THE HOUSE OF EASTON
26 OCTOBER 1999

Reatitis

Zoe

Melanie

Denise

Jasmine

Violetta

Linda

Barcosz

Hargovind

Lija

Marta

Munir

Wai King

Harroon

Sumen

Suhel

Shasna

Martin

Alhajraja

Parsin

Ramatoulie

Sharon

Janet

Omirta

Salim

Nathaniel

Halimo

Luckbeer

Aripr

Liz Jones | community worker, 58

'I've had the same GP for the last 26 years and he's brilliant. He's very open and doesn't try to shovel inappropriate medicines at me. When I was having my kids, he was great. I find that the practice is very responsive, and though you might not always get to see your own GP, you always get to see someone in your practice on the same day, which is pretty good. So, for me personally: I have no problems with health provision at all.

But I do know that there are other doctors in the area that people moan about. And you tend to find that a variety of people will moan about the same particular doctor – so I think that there may be some real differences within local health provision.

I know someone who had a lot of difficulty getting appointments and ended up with the impression that the NHS was going down the drain – completely different from my experience. I know there's a lot of pressure on GPs – it's a densely populated area and there are lots of kids – so that

might be part of the reason. It could also be that I've lived in the area for a long time; I've got a relationship with my GP – he knows me – and there aren't any language barriers.

I know that access to health services is an issue for the wider community. Easton is an area of constant churn; new communities often find their first housing here and they find language and cultural barriers. The practice I go to does have people working as interpreters – but what you really need is someone on the front desk who speaks the language and can build a relationship with the patient.

I don't think that services have changed fast enough to deal with our changing community. What you need is to have local services sitting around the table with local residents and being answerable to local residents. We need to try to embed that in the way our society thinks, plans and delivers services, in order to close gaps between different parts of Bristol.'



The majority of people in Britain have experienced poor customer service at least once in the last year.

Our projects so far

Consumer Focus is running two main campaigns during 2009 to improve people's quality of service from energy suppliers and mobile phone suppliers. Consumer Focus will examine a number of areas where customers are disadvantaged by poor service, particularly failures in the cross-border postal service in Northern Ireland and digital switchover scams in Wales.

Many consumers in Northern Ireland think it unfair that they have to pay more for a stamp to send a letter a short distance to the Republic of Ireland than a stamp for a letter to the mainland. The postal service of the Republic of Ireland also needs to address reliability issues to improve the quality of service in Northern Ireland.

There have been a number of complaints about digital switchover scams in Wales as the country moves towards a full conversion to digital TV. Despite a comprehensive help scheme in place to assist people in changing their TV equipment, it appears that some

disreputable providers are misleading consumers and selling incompatible equipment. Consumer Focus will investigate this and take action where necessary.

Energy suppliers: ensuring a higher quality of service

Polling by Consumer Focus and research by the Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform indicates that dealing with energy suppliers is one of the major issues facing consumers.

Consumer Focus has established an Extra Help Unit to work with vulnerable consumers – people facing disconnection, for example – and to intervene on their behalf. Vulnerable consumers can be referred to the Extra Help Unit by Consumer Direct, their MP, Member of the Scottish Parliament or Member of the Welsh Assembly.

The last few months have seen a worrying increase in the number of people facing

problems with energy suppliers. There is strong and growing anecdotal evidence that consumers are struggling to pay bills and, compared to last year, there has been an increase in disconnections and in final demands being sent.

Consumer Focus will use all of its power and influence to ensure that energy suppliers treat customers fairly. We have legal powers to gather information from energy companies to ensure they provide a fair deal and, in particular, that they stick to the 'disconnection safety net'.



Melanie Denise
 Lija Marta
 Harroon Violetta
 Munir Linda
 Shasna Nathan
 Sumen Alhajraja
 Halimo Alan
 Jasmine

Yusuf Ali | community support worker, 35

'Most people in the Somali Community have a mobile and a land line. We use our mobiles the most and we call each other a lot.

Almost everyone is on pay-as-you-go. We top up at least £20 per month, more like £30 or £40 for those who can afford it. A lot of people used to have contract phones or knew someone who did. But they were charged extra for calling at peak times or to other networks and got confused and angry.

People gradually stopped using contracts because they didn't trust them. They thought the point of the contract was that you paid one fixed price, always the same – and now they were getting different bills every month. People don't like the idea of not knowing when they're allowed to ring without being charged; they want to know how much money they're using.

So, gradually, everyone switched to pay-as-you-go. It feels cheaper to them

because they know how much they're spending and what they're spending it on, even though I know it's not.

Contracts need to be clearer so people know how much their calls are going to cost them and what their obligation is. Then the people I know might go back to using contract phones and not paying extra for pay-as-you-go.'

Mobile phones: examining consumers issues

Research by the Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform shows that consumers do not have confidence in the mobile phone market and Consumer Focus is currently examining the main issues.

The marketplace has structural problems, particularly with the difficulties for consumers in switching providers. Tariffs are often complicated and difficult to compare, contract terms can be too complex and not sufficiently transparent

and there is some evidence that insurance packages may be mis-sold.

Consumer Focus is particularly concerned by charges that may not be noticed by individual consumers but, when added up, represent a significant income for the companies. It will be examining charges including the rounding-up of calls and the cost of dialling 'free' and national-rate numbers, as well as the significant disparity in costs for pay-as-you-go users and contract customers.

Whilst the EU has made progress in reducing the cost of mobile calls between member countries, a number of issues remain, including the cost of texting and data – a growing concern given the increasing popularity of mobile broadband devices.



Ajraja Parsin Jasmine
Marta
Munir Linda
Hargovind Alan
Halimo Martin
Wai King
Suhel Violetta
Denise
Sharon Janet Harroon Salim Barry Nathan
Lara Rebecca
Melanie Shasna

Value

Rashid Majothi | businessman, 44

'I got my insurance renewal through: nearly £1,200 for my home and contents insurance. I took the policy out in 2001 from Lloyds TSB when I got my mortgage – back then you were tied in with an insurance policy with them when you took the mortgage out.

Eight years has gone by and I've always stayed loyal. I used to find the premiums a bit high, but I always thought, "I've got a Rolls Royce insurance so why should I question it". You take it all in good faith that you are paying the right sums.

This year I thought, no, that doesn't sound right. So I asked around all the people who have houses like mine. They're all paying less than £500 for sure.

So I talked to my nephew who's an independent mortgage advisor - and he said 'you are paying way too much'. He got me onto this MoneySupermarket website and the quotes were coming out at less than £400.

I rang up TSB and they told me that I won't find insurance as good elsewhere – but basically it's the same as what I've found on the Internet. So then they offer me a discount – but the figures still came to more than £700.

I ask them what they can offer me for my loyalty. At which point the lady says that she'll speak to her supervisor - which in my experience is a load of rubbish. 99% of the time they're just making you hold on so you think you're getting a better deal. So she comes back and says that she'll put me through the 'new customers department'.

They are really helpful – it's clear that they're independent advisors, not an in-house team. They eventually come back with a quote for £430 with £30 cashback. My insurance had gone from more than £90 down to just £36 monthly for both. That's a massive saving.

But then I spoke to my niece, who works for Halifax. She said to me, "Uncle, I'll take a look for you to see what deal we could offer". I gave her all my details and she

worked out a deal that was cheaper again, £430 with a £50 bonus back: that works out at £380. It's a better service as well, as it includes unlimited contents and unlimited buildings insurance. So I phoned Lloyds and used my 14 day opt out clause to switch to Halifax.

It really shook me. I know friends and relatives who'll now be checking that they are getting the best deal. I had access to the Internet and to people who are knowledgeable in this field. The worry is that if you didn't have that it would be a different story – even with me I think if the quote had been under £60 I wouldn't have questioned it. I would have thought they were looking after me – and that's not the case.

As a businessman I know that if you have loyal customers you should be trying to hang onto them – not spending lots of money trying to get new customers. It's the same with banks. What they don't realise is that this kind of bad publicity spreads like cancer.'



Violetta
 Rebecca
 Zoe
 Melanie
 Denise
 Marta
 Munir
 Lara
 Barry
 Hargovind
 Jasmine
 Wai King
 Martin
 Shasna
 Parsin
 Sharon
 Linda
 Alhajraja
 Halimo
 Suhel
 Janet
 Omirta
 Salim
 Nathan
 Ramatoulie
 Harroon
 Sumen
 Betty Ann
 Alan

Our projects so far

Ensuring good value is at the heart of Consumer Focus' work. It will fight the issues of the day, but also champion currently neglected causes. It will build on the work of its predecessors, taking up the baton for consumers in both the private and public sectors and whilst not duplicating the work of regulators, Consumer Focus will campaign for a fair deal where they cannot.

Ensuring good value from the Post Office

This year, Consumer Focus will audit the consultation and engagement of communities in the Post Office closure programme and ensure that commitments already made to people are adhered to.

Consumer Focus will also take a more proactive role to ensure that the Post Office does not become the 'red telephone box' of the 21st century – an institution confined to museums. We will work with other organisations to ensure that the post office's unparalleled reach into communities can be used to provide access to critical financial services.

Consumer Focus has played an important role in the debates over the future of the Post Office Card Account and will explore how the Post Office can play a wider role in providing access to financial services products – particularly if the reduced number of banks leads to less competition in the market.

Consumer Focus will also be examining the role of social enterprises in offering Post Office services: we will make an assessment of the market in order to better understand the role of not-for-profits in supporting local communities.

Ensuring good value from public services

In these tough times, people will rely on public services more than ever and will need public services that deliver.

In 2009, Consumer Focus will examine areas of service that aren't currently regulated or overseen by other organisations or third-sector campaigners. For example, the role of Jobcentre Plus is

coming under increasing scrutiny. As more people become unemployed and the government reforms the provision of job centre advice, Consumer Focus will test whether the Jobcentre Plus service is being delivered in ways that support people in a time of need, pointing them to those who can help and treat people with dignity.

Consumer Focus is also researching several contentious areas of public service delivery and will make an assessment of where it can make the most impact and end the most unfair treatment.

After a thorough analysis, Consumer Focus will put forward programmes of work later this year.



Rija

Zoe

Melanie

Denise

Sharon

Hargovind

Lija

Marta

Jasmine

Violetta

Linda

Suhel

Shasna

Wai King

Harroon

Munir

Sumen

Alhajraja

Halimo

Janet

Omirta

Martin

Parsin

Nazmi

Salim

Ramatoulie

Betty Ann

Aripr



Reatitisa

Melanie

Denise

Jasmine

Violetta

Linda

Lija

Marta

Munir

Sumen

Alhajraja

Harroon

Martin

Omirta

Salim

Nathaniel

Halimo

Luckbeer

Aripr

Suhel

Shasna

Sharon

Janet


Joe Wiggans | telecoms worker, 23

'I ended up with my energy company through switching. When I moved into my flat, I went on uSwitch and gave them information about my flat, the number of people living there and where I lived; my supplier came out as the cheapest. The website was really easy to use and it was clear they offered us the best deal.

I had been paying my direct debits at the quoted cost for a year when the supplier asked me for a meter reading. They then said we owed them twice as much per month as they had quoted – even though they had asked for information about my flat before quoting – and sent me a bill for £400. I'm lucky and can pay this – but this would be a massive problem for a lot of people. When I phoned the supplier, they told me that my original direct debit – the price quoted on uSwitch – was for half the average energy usage for a flat my size. They must have known this when they gave me the original quote.

They put me in this situation and now my bill is double what I expected. If they looked after you properly they would keep you informed about how much you owe more regularly, or contact you when the figures in your direct debit change. They wouldn't wait a year to tell you and then charge you all at once. They came out as the cheapest on uSwitch but they may well not be, now that we've had to pay double.

When you get a quote via uSwitch for something like insurance, that's the price you end up paying. For energy, it's more confusing. I'm quite switched on about these things but it's hard to figure out how much you'll eventually end up paying for your energy. You can't tell whether you'll get the deal quoted by the company on uSwitch; it all depends how many units of energy you use. A lot of people don't know this and, even if you do, it's hard to figure out when you move into a new home.'



3 in 10 people feel that energy companies are less likely than other organisations to give a fair deal.

Going Green

Rowan Matthiessen | council staff, 24

'I'm very interested in local food and in trying to get people to think for themselves about what they put on their plate and how sustainable it is. It has to be a personal choice though – without us being told we have to do it.

For people like me, access to this stuff is relatively easy. My friends know about the local markets and where to get good value organic food – veg boxes are popular and, as they come almost direct from the producer, they're quite cheap compared to organic fruit and veg from the shops.

But I know we're a minority – for most people organic is too expensive. There is quite a wide choice of environmentally-friendly food in Easton; however, it tends to be dry goods as opposed to fresh. Local shops find that organic vegetables don't sell because retail prices are just too high and the people who would buy them are getting them cheaper elsewhere.

If you go to the supermarket, organic is still more expensive, but I think part of the price hike is because it's aimed at a certain audience – a wealthier middle class. That really annoys me. Good labelling helps people shop more ethically, but often it's also about the marketing. Plus the price of

goods still doesn't reflect their true cost which means that the less well-off simply can't afford to go green.

What I think people need is a website or guide where you could find out when spending more on organic really makes a difference. For example, manufacturing cotton requires a lot of pesticides and energy and the labour behind it is kind of suspect. I would definitely buy organic cotton, whereas the environmental impact of a non-organic onion isn't as bad.

I don't think the government is doing its bit, even though they are telling consumers that they have to change how they are behaving. They need to be making it easier for everyone to be able to get affordable sustainable food – for example, by promoting local supply networks so that food grown near Bristol could be sold locally.

There's also a need for more support for local shops and small businesses in Easton – they're more responsive to what the community wants and in the longer term it may be easier to persuade them to be more ecologically sound. At the moment it's all topsy turvy: it's easier for big businesses to succeed than small ones.'



3 in 10 consumers believe that companies are untrustworthy in labelling products as 'green'.



Rija Shasna Zoe Alhajraja
 Reatitisa
 Omirta Hargovind Lara Parsin
 Alan Linda Harroon Marta Jasmine
 Suhel Nazmi May Violetta
 Ramatoulie Janet Wai King Sumen Nathan
 Sharon Martin Barry Fong Yau Halimo
 Salim Denise Melanie Ian
 Betty Ann

Consumers need more information

Our polling revealed specific concerns about whether companies were adhering to the best possible sustainability policies. Three in ten consumers believe that companies are not trustworthy when they label products as 'green'.

Validating sustainability claims

Consumer Focus will work to promote policy changes that will help make sustainable choices easier for consumers. A particular focus will be on green claims being made by companies in their advertising. There are misleading green claims currently being made in the media – evidenced by the growing number of

complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority that result in adverts being withdrawn.

This 'greenwash' undermines consumer confidence to make informed choices, and people are left not knowing who or what to believe. It is therefore important that companies provide accurate and clear information on green claims to help harness the appetite of consumers to move to more sustainable lifestyles.

We will investigate the various green claims made in company advertising and look at consumer views on the issues. We will be looking at how well consumers understand the claims being made, whether such claims affect what people buy and seeking views on what

information consumers would find useful. This will give us concrete evidence and a strong influence to the revision of the Defra Green Claims Code, making sure that information for consumers is correct, clear and can be verified.

Other initiatives

Consumer Focus will work with the Scottish Executive and local authorities to ensure that recycling schemes are implemented consistently and in a way that is accessible for all. We will also continue our work with the Welsh Assembly Government to support the development of its Food Action Plan.



Rija Omirta Ramatoulie Sunel Denise Jasmine Linda
Martin Hargovind Lija Alan Rebecca Sumen Harroon
Barry Syed-Murshid Wai King Alhajraja Rebecca Fong Yau Parsin Halimo Marta
Betty Ann Nathan Sharon Janet Zoe Nazmi Salma Shasna Halimo Violetta Mia
Melanie Sharon Janet Zoe Nazmi Salma Shasna Halimo Violetta Mia

How Consumer Focus changes things

Consumer Focus will be fearless in taking on vested interests and tackling companies and services that fail consumers – but we also won't hesitate to give praise where it's due. Using our influence with the media, online campaigns (including petitions and complaints forms) and enabling people to rate providers are all effective ways of achieving change. Consumer Focus will also provide support for parliamentary legislation, as with the Private Member's Bill on fuel poverty.

It is important that Consumer Focus is as effective working inside government as it is outside. The organisation will have extensive contact with ministers, officials and politicians. It will lobby elected members, influence committee work and engage and promote amendments to government legislation in Westminster and in Brussels. Consumer Focus will also play an important role working with a range of partners where there are areas of common interest – particularly with regulators for each sector of the economy. It will provide evidence to official enquiries and public

consultations, collaborate on research and communications with like-minded campaigners.

Consumer Focus's powers of persuasion will often be sufficient to achieve change for consumers, but we also have strong legal powers in our armoury. Our expectation is that we will use our legal powers only as a last resort: we would expect to engage in a constructive way to try to deal with problems informally where possible. Our establishing legislation gave us powers to investigate any consumer complaint if it is of wider interest and to obtain information from providers to aid our investigations into consumer issues. Consumer Focus also has 'super-complaint' powers under the Enterprise Act (2002) which enable us to refer failing markets to certain regulators for investigation. This has been used to great effect by our predecessor organisations in the past in areas such as doorstep lending and energy billing.



3 in **4** of the most wealthy consumers say that they have taken their business elsewhere because they have been treated badly by a company – only half of the poorest consumers have done the same.



Rita Sharon Zoe Janet Denise Jasmine Sumen Alhajraja Harry
Mia Robert Lara Marta Munir Nathan Linda Parsin Betty Ann Alan
Barcosz Hargovind Shasna Fong Yau Violetta Wai King Nazmi Omirta Martin May Ramatoulie
Syed-Murshid Sennichen Rebecca Halimo Melanie



Nathan

Robert
Barry

Zoe

Wai King

Marta

Hargovind

Denise

Sharon

Harry

Martin

James

Juliet

Linda

Sean

Shasna

Syed-Murshid

Suhel

Zoe

Salim

Sumen

Rebecca

Ursula

Jasmine

Lara

Omirta

Fong Yau

CHURCH ST.

Rebecca

Ursula

Richard

Alhajraja

Janet

Mandy

Nazmi

Melanie

Parsin

Halimo

Betty Ann

Ben

What's next for Consumer Focus?

There are three phases to the work of Consumer Focus over our first 18 months.

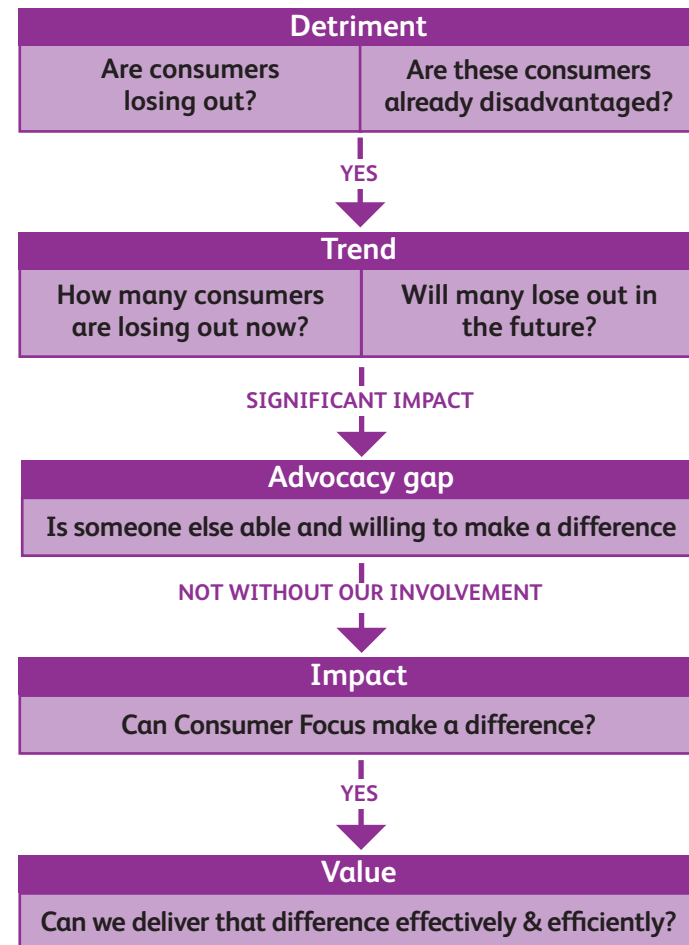
The first, six-month phase was about set-up and continuity – ensuring that the priority needs of consumers continued to be met while internal work to build a strong foundation for the future was completed.

In the second, current phase, Consumer Focus has invested in core issues, including fuel poverty, through additional initiatives that reflect our central concerns as a new consumer organisation.

The third phase will offer a more radical future focus, building on those core issues and activities to shape and champion a forward-looking consumer policy agenda.

How we decide what to act upon

The criteria that Consumer Focus uses to determine which projects, businesses or consumer complaints to investigate:



Conclusion

2009 is going to be a tough year for everyone. It is important to remember that the UK has many fair and responsive, yet competitive, companies, and it is Consumer Focus's aspiration that by the end of 2009 it will have many more.

Many people know how to get the best from the companies – they are becoming more streetwise. Consumer Focus research has shown that a lot of people know their rights and use them to make sure they get the best possible deal and that the right people are made aware when they don't. They use the Internet, alongside more traditional social networks, to share their views on goods and services and these views are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Our research highlights that there are still many barriers to getting a fair deal in Britain. Unequal income, disparities in

Internet access, language barriers and a certain element of 'postcode lottery' all mean that as many of us are becoming empowered, other consumers are losing their voice.

Finding your way through all the offers, comparison sites and recommendations is daunting and many of us still make decisions that turn out to be based on poor information or are simply wrong. People up and down the country face the same problems in their day-to-day dealings with business and the public sector as the people we met in Easton.

Our role is to ensure everyone the same access to a fair deal – whatever their background. Consumer Focus is working with consumers, companies, regulators, advice agencies, politicians and the media – among many others – to achieve that goal.

You can follow the work of Consumer Focus through our website and frequent reports. When issues are identified – whether through calls made to Consumer Direct, through advice organisations or other channels – you can be certain that Consumer Focus will take action quickly and effectively to ensure that the right systems are in place to secure a fair deal for British consumers.

We will help consumers by joining the fight on battles already begun whilst establishing coalitions of interested parties on new and developing issues.



Rebecca
 Zoe
 Melanie
 Denise
 Ramatoulie
 Jasmine
 Violetta
 Linda
 Harry
 Syed-Murshid
 Wai King
 Harroon
 Ben
 Mia
 Martin
 Sumen
 Amy
 Ben
 Sennichen
 Shasna
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Campaigning for a fair deal

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