



CONSUMER

► What's in a name?

Why it can be helpful to think of people as consumers

We think there are advantages to viewing a very wide range of people as consumers - not necessarily as a label for them to use - but to recognise that, when they use services, people are in a particular kind of relationship with those who provide services.

▶ The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) aims to ensure that consumers matter. But who do we include in our definition of a 'consumer'?

Consumer organisations like the SCC have developed ways of working which we think can be very helpful even in areas which don't like the label *consumer* - for example in areas like health, social services or education.

Our starting point is that anyone who buys or uses goods or services, either in the public or private sector, is a consumer of those goods and services.

This means that as bus users, pupils, tenants, shoppers, savers, carers or internet users, for example, we are all consumers of goods or services. We also use the word

make all our definition



consumer to include those who don't use a service at present but might need to use it in the future, or who should have access to it, but for some reason do not.

This allows us to look at services not just from the point of view and experience of current users, but also to see if there are barriers that unfairly exclude some people from those services.



Do names or labels matter?

Some people tell us that it is unhelpful to describe people as consumers. They argue that the word *consumer* is only relevant in a private market setting. They think this means that we must believe that public services should be run on a competitive market model.

Some people say we shouldn't use the word *consumer* where people have little choice or no choice at all – for example when treatment is given without consent, in emergency situations.

However at the SCC we do use the word *consumer* in situations like this. Where there is limited, or even no choice, as in the case of water services in Scotland, people are still consumers of those services.

For example, we believe it is helpful to view older people living in residential care as consumers of services even though

they may not be paying for their care, and may have no real choice about where they are cared for. The same applies to pupils in schools.

People being treated for mental health problems are sometimes kept in hospital and treated against their wishes. But even here, thinking of these people as consumers helps us to analyse whether services could be doing more, by listening to patients' views, responding to complaints, and providing good information for patients and their families.



It is not the Scottish Consumer Council's business to tell people what to call themselves or how to think of themselves. What does matter to us is whether we have the tools to lobby for the interests of people who buy or use goods or services, whatever they call themselves.

▶ What else can we call consumers?

There are many words which people use to describe their relationship with public and private service providers - for example, passenger, pupil, shopper, patient, and tenant. Others prefer to use terms like client, user or customer. The words **patient, pupil** and **student** are fine in many situations – and people often do think of themselves as patients, pupils or students.

But sometimes these words aren't right. ▶

Patient isn't always the right word - it's not so good for someone who isn't ill (like a pregnant woman), or someone who is living with and managing a long-term condition like diabetes.

Some people want to think about themselves as **partners** or **co-producers**, for example as partners in their education, or as co-producers of their own health. This idea is attractive, and it should be a goal of our education policy to make pupils and their parents partners in their education.

But this language does not always reflect reality - it is not easy to have a genuine partnership when one of the partners has knowledge, power and resources and the other partner has none. Lots of people find it hard to think of a head teacher, a lawyer or a surgeon as an equal partner.

In the field of mental health, people sometimes describe themselves as **survivors**. People using the services provided by a prison are unlikely to think of themselves as consumers. Victims of violent crime may not think of themselves as consumers of legal or police services.



A consumer approach

We describe our work as consumer advocacy, and the range of work which the SCC gets involved in shows how widely we define the word 'consumer'. We work, or have worked, in the following policy areas:

In all these areas, we think of people as consumers – so this is much wider than a narrow definition of consumers which would see consumer affairs being mainly about high street goods and services.

- *utilities*
- *legal services*
- *transport, environment and rural affairs*
- *food*
- *housing*
- *education*
- *local government services*
- *health and social care*

Through our work we hope to have an impact on policy makers and service providers, but at the end of the day what matters is having an impact on the lives of consumers.

There are four main ways in which we work to make our advocacy of the consumer interest effective.

1 Every year we have a **research**

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programme which focuses on areas where we think there is, or may be, a problem for consumers, particularly disadvantaged consumers. We only carry out research when we believe that this research will help to bring about change, and we don't carry out research if we think that another body would be better placed to do it. Our research gives us the evidence of what services are really like for the people who use them, or about the things which are stopping people from using services.

2 After we have done some research,

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there is often more work to be done – we call this **development** work. This is when we explain and promote our research findings to people who can change things for consumers: policy makers in the Scottish Executive, local authorities, NHS managers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, or whichever service provider the research focuses on. We also support development projects which are working to improve things for consumers – whether that is the Scottish diet, making information accessible for disabled people, promoting more healthy choices for people, or providing people with information about their health rights.

3 Some of the time we have the role

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of a **watchdog**. We watch what is happening in the different policy areas that we work in, and make sure that the interests of service users are not overlooked. We take part in working groups, and groups developing policy, where we try to make sure that the interests of those using services are not ignored or undervalued. We respond to consultations from the Scottish Executive, from professional bodies, and from other agencies like the Food Standards Agency. If we think proposals are not in the interests of consumers we will make a fuss.

4 Finally, we sometimes work as a **think tank**, stimulating new

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and challenging approaches to services. This is not the most important area in our work, but it is important that we sometimes have this role. Our colleagues in the National Consumer Council take the lead in think tank work and an important part of their work is to look quite far ahead and set out the challenges and opportunities for consumers in the future.



The consumer tests



We use a set of tests in our work – if we are looking at a service, whether in the public or private sector, we ask about all these things. These are particularly important if we don't have any research available in a particular area.



● **INFORMATION** People need information about services if they are to make best use of them – information about how to access services, about what their rights are, and about what to do if something goes wrong.

● **FAIRNESS** This involves considering whether there are groups who are not as well served as others – for example, people living in remote or rural areas, or people from ethnic minority groups.

● **ACCESS** Can people actually get access to the services they need?

● **REDRESS** When things go wrong, is there a system in place to make sure that consumers get some redress? Is there an effective complaints procedure? What kinds of compensation are provided?

● **REPRESENTATION** Where consumers don't have a choice there should be alternative ways to find out what they think about the service. There should be ways of making sure that service users are involved in making decisions about how services are provided, and for having their voice heard.

● **CHOICE** Do people have choices about services? Having choices can make markets work better, but choice is not always possible, and in some services there are no or only limited choices. But even in the NHS, where one organisation provides all the publicly funded healthcare, there can be choices – and people should have choices about the care and treatment they receive, and about who provides that care.

● **SAFETY** Are services safe? What systems are in place to identify poor practice, and to make sure that standards are as high as they should be?

We have argued that even if people don't want to think of themselves as consumers, it can still be helpful to use the approach we have developed to look at and comment on services, using the consumer tests, and basing what we say on sound research. But we would also like to argue that the word *consumer* can be a positive one.

... it can bring people together ...

consumer is widely used even in areas such as health. One advantage is that it can bring people together who have shared interests. For instance in Australia there is a Consumer Health Forum which brings together a wide range of organisations all working in the area of health, who want a health service which puts the needs of consumers, patients, co-producers, or whatever you want to call them, at the heart of healthcare.

Using a term like *health consumer* shows what we have in common, rather than what divides us.

▶ Some reasons for using the word *consumer*

... it's a positive word ...

Consumer is quite a positive word – it is more active than the word passenger or tenant, and suggests

someone who wants to make choices, to get the best they can from services, and is prepared to argue for their rights.

We encourage people to be assertive consumers, but we recognise that alongside rights consumers often have responsibilities too.



▶ . . . it recognises the reality of the relationship with service providers

Using the word *consumer* means recognising that consumers and providers of goods and services are different and will often have conflicting interests. It recognises the power imbalance between providers and consumers.

SCC was set up in 1975 to give consumers a stronger voice which could be heard over, and alongside, the voices of bodies which represent the interests of business, the professions, and the trade unions.

▶ . . . it links different aspects of our lives . . .

Finally, using the word *consumer* lets us join up the different issues which can affect people. For example, someone who has a mental health problem may find it difficult to remember to pay their rent or their electricity bill on time, and may need additional support with child care. They may need access to money advice services, or to an advocate who can help in their encounters with the health service.

The bottom line – making a difference

▶ We believe the tools which we have developed are helpful and do work, and we would like to see them used more widely by people who do not usually think of themselves as consumers.

We would like to see wider use of the consumer tests when looking at all kinds of service provision and when lobbying for change, more lobbying and advocacy based on research, and more rigorous thinking about the issues that really matter for real people.



The Scottish Consumer Council

The purpose of the Scottish Consumer Council is to make all consumers matter. For more information on what we are doing, visit our website at **www.scotconsumer.org.uk**.

The website gives free access to all our reports, campaigns and policy work in progress. SCC reports in printed formats are available from our office at the address below. We are often able to make our publications available in alternative formats. Please contact us for details.

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