

Llais Defnyddwyr
Cymru

Gwarchod Buddiannau Defnyddwyr



Consumer Focus
Wales

Wales' Consumer Champion

Consumer Focus Wales

Making the consumer voice heard, and making it count
2010/11



Looking back

Consumer Focus Wales works on issues that affect consumers in Wales, while at the same time feeding into and drawing on work done across the UK and beyond. We aim to influence change and shape policy to reflect the needs of consumers.

We do this in an informed way based on the evidence we gather through research and our unique knowledge of consumer issues. Our successes to date show that we are well on the way to achieving our aims. We have been able to join up our work across different sectors, for example bringing our research on financial services in to the debate on the Post Office network's future and in to our work on fuel poverty.

Aside from the recession, probably the single biggest consumer event of the year in Wales has been the switchover to digital television. Wales is now the UK's first 100 per cent digital nation. Consumer Focus Wales partnered with Digital UK, Citizens Advice and Consumer Direct to run a national advertising campaign warning people – particularly the vulnerable – about potential scams around switchover. We also conducted research with Trading Standards to drive up the quality of information available from aerial installers.

On fuel poverty, working closely with National Energy Action (NEA) Cymru, we established a cross party-group in the Assembly, and working with a wide range of other stakeholders, launched a coalition – which the Minister responsible for fuel poverty branded 'probably the most important coalition in the history of devolution'. We have argued for significant changes in Welsh Assembly Government policy, and expect to see the fruits of that work in their forthcoming strategy.

We will continue to work with government at all levels and civic society to argue that no one in Wales has to live in a cold home.

Food safety has also been a major theme, and one which will continue next year. Working with the Food Standards Agency and a range of partners, we have reviewed the implementation of recommendations made in the wake of the *E. coli* O157 outbreak in South Wales in 2005. We are working to ensure consumers get access to information about hygiene standards in the food businesses they buy from so they can choose safely.

Our work also covers consumer attitudes to genetically modified (GM) crops, digital inclusion, the impact of Post Office closures on communities, single use plastic bags, health reforms and financial inclusion.

We have listened to consumers and shared their concerns with UK Government and Welsh ministers, politicians in Wales and Westminster and representatives of the energy industry, and other consumer sectors. We have built relationships and are working with a wide array of partners. We have asked the consumers of Wales hundreds of questions, and worked to turn those answers in to the change that consumers want.

I am proud of what we have achieved, but even more ambitious for the coming year. We are dedicated to giving consumers a strong voice, and making a difference. That work goes on.



Viv Sugar
Chair,
Consumer Focus Wales



Looking forward

'Making the consumer voice heard and making it count' – that's the goal for Consumer Focus Wales and I'm proud of the difference we have already made.

But in the year to come, we have much more to do, and five major areas in which we will do it.

In energy, we will be continuing our work on fuel poverty – which effects one in four households in Wales. We will be working with partners, for example:

- Children in Wales – to look at the specific effect of fuel poverty on younger people
- the Fuel Poverty Coalition in Wales – to ensure that once the Welsh Government's forthcoming strategy is published it is implemented effectively and fuel poverty remains high on the agenda

In financial services, we are looking at the issues faced by older people as they near retirement. Wales has a higher proportion of older people (22 per cent) than other parts of the UK. We will also look at the financial needs of care leavers – an often overlooked group of vulnerable people.

We will follow up our work on post office closures with a look at how branches are making use of the Assembly Government's support for post offices – and highlighting the best examples. We will also keep an eye on the quality of the postal service in Wales.

We will continue to champion high levels of food safety, building on our work this year on *E.coli* O157, and we will be raising the consumer voice in the debate on Welsh language legislation – to ensure consumers know what they can expect from Welsh language services, and that their wants and needs are given full consideration by law makers.

Our proposals for 2010/11 are ambitious, and reflect the considerable input and advice we have received from a variety of stakeholders across Wales over the last six months.

We look forward to engaging with our partners and getting down to the research which underpins our evidence-based approach to getting the change consumers want and need.



Maria Battle
Senior Director,
Consumer Focus Wales

Maria Battle

Achievements

Digital switchover

Partners: Digital UK, CAB, Consumer Direct, Welsh Heads of Trading Standards

Action: Placed adverts with a combined reach of 500,000 people warning how to stay safe during the switchover.

Ensured posters were available at Citizens Advice Bureaux across Wales and that Consumer Direct was primed to help people over the phone.

Impact: Our adverts appeared in a wide range of local newspapers across Wales, and our research into the advice given by aerial installers was widely reported in the Welsh media – raising awareness of the potential for scams. Our research was shared with Trading Standards officers who expressed an interest in following up the work in their areas.



The launch of our Digital Switchover campaign, with representatives of each of the partners involved

Protecting consumers from *E.coli* O157

Partners: Families of victims, Professor Hugh Pennington and the Consumer Food Safety Group

Action: We have worked with a range of partners to make the progress to date of the recommendations of the Pennington Report transparent.

Impact: By shining a light on progress to date, we have highlighted the pressing need for more money and stronger leadership to ensure there is no repeat of the catastrophic *E.coli* O157 outbreak.



*Families of South Wales *E.coli* O157 victims at the launch of our report aiming to ensure it does not happen again*

Fuel poverty

Partners: NEA Cymru, Fuel Poverty Coalition (40+ members)

Action: Working with NEA Cymru we established a coalition to address fuel poverty in Wales. We have also set up a cross-party group to keep the issue on the political agenda.

Impact: Minister Jane Davidson says she is using the coalition's Fuel Poverty Charter as a benchmark for her civil servants as they produce a new Fuel Poverty Strategy for Wales. Many of the charters key asks are likely to be taken up by the strategy. Some have already been delivered.



Maria Battle (Consumer Focus Wales), Nuria Zolle (NEA Cymru) and Environment Minister Jane Davidson at the launch of the Fuel Poverty Charter

Our other work

- As a result of our work on attitudes to GM food, Consumer Focus Wales is representing consumers in the Food Standards Agency's work to discuss GM issues with the public
- Our ICT report *Logged in or locked out* has shown the scale of those in Wales at risk of being left behind in the digital revolution
- Our work on post offices has been highly acclaimed by the public and members of all political parties for bringing an evidence-based approach to an often emotionally charged issue
- As part of an Assembly Government steering group we help scrutinise the implementation of their Financial Inclusion Strategy
- We have also responded to Assembly Government consultations on plastic bags, Welsh language legislation, health reforms, energy efficiency and fuel poverty



Workplan 2010/11 highlights

In 2010/11 all of our work will be designed to help achieve five key objectives:

- 1 Getting a better deal for energy consumers in Wales so that everyone can afford to live in a warm home
- 2 Ensuring high standards of postal services in Wales so that consumers can access a range of good quality services
- 3 Ensuring that all consumers in Wales have access to financial services and advice that are appropriate to their needs so that they are able to be active and informed consumers
- 4 Influencing public service providers so that delivery in Wales is built around the needs of consumers
- 5 Ensuring market regulation in Wales is effective so that it protects consumers' health and wellbeing

Consumers in Wales are well known for being cautious about switching suppliers. We will work to understand this attitude and to increase the confidence and capacity of people in Wales, so that they become active consumers in the energy market.

Wales' geography is one of its defining characteristics, but it can pose problems for consumers. With this in mind we will be looking to develop solutions to meet the needs of consumers who are off the gas network, from deep rural communities to modern suburban developments.

We will continue our work on fuel poverty in Wales, using our cross-party Assembly group and support from coalition partners to influence the Welsh Assembly Government's thinking and policy proposals.

We will monitor performance and satisfaction with post office services; continue to support the intention of the Welsh Assembly Government's Post Office Diversification Fund and search for other ways of guaranteeing the sustainability of the Post Office network.

As part of the Welsh Assembly Government's Financial Inclusion Steering Group we will continue to scrutinise the implementation of the Government's strategy.

To help us we will undertake research on the levels of indebtedness in Wales, as a way of monitoring the 'financial health' of consumers, particularly older people and care leavers.

As literacy rates in Wales are lower than many other areas of the UK, we will work with the financial services industry to highlight examples of 'financial jargon', and why consumers need greater clarity.

We know that public service providers in Wales are going to have to make some difficult decisions in the next few years. Our research will help providers make decisions about changes that are based on an understanding of people's needs and views.

In tough economic times we will look at some of the debt collection practices of Local Authorities to make sure that these don't unintentionally make matters worse for vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers and do not place undue stress on consumers.

People can play an effective and active part in regulation by voting with their feet when they have information which helps them make choices. We will push for consumers to have easy access to food hygiene information on the businesses they buy from so that they can be empowered in their choices.

We will also continue our work with our Food Safety Group partners to make sure that consumers in Wales are protected from the possibility of another *E-coli* O157 outbreak.

We will improve people's knowledge of some of their basic consumer rights via a targeted communications campaign in the form of 'shoppers' rights' cards and undertake specific work looking at young people and how they can be empowered to be responsible and active consumers.

Welsh ministers now have the power to legislate in relation to the Welsh Language. We will use our research to influence the Welsh Language Measure, highlighting the views of consumers and arguing that they must be at the heart of any new developments in this area.

More information about
Consumer Focus Wales can be seen at
www.consumerfocus.org.uk/wales/

Teams working across the Consumer Focus Family

Consumer Focus Investigations

The Consumer Focus Investigations team leads investigations examining important and sometimes high profile consumer issues. When appropriate this involves using our statutory powers to obtain information. The team receives referrals from external and internal stakeholders who work directly with, or have knowledge about, the issues that are important to consumers.

Based in Cardiff, but operating GB-wide, the team has already started work looking at the safety of side-hinge mechanisms on fold-up pushchairs. The team is working with Trading Standards and the industry to establish whether more can be done to minimise the risk of injury to consumers.

Consumer Focus Labs

www.consumerfocuslabs.org

Based in Cardiff, CF Labs was established to extend our advocacy programme to the online realm by developing innovative websites and tools to make people's dealings with companies fairer, save them money, or keep them informed about products or issues that are important to them.

Their first project – **RecalledProducts.org** – pulls in product recall notices from the EU's RAPEX notification system and makes the data available to consumers in a variety of easily accessible formats.

Extra Help Unit

The Extra Help Unit supports consumers whose complaints against energy suppliers, and in some cases postal providers, have reached crisis point. Consumers are referred to the EHU through bodies including Consumer Direct, Ofgem, the statutory Redress Schemes and directly from MP's and AM's using a specially dedicated service.

In our first full year the EHU supported people in over 7,600 complaints, obtaining almost £700,000 in compensation. But the real achievements of the Extra Help Unit are the homes that stayed warm, the anxiety lifted and the increased awareness of good practice among energy suppliers. The team is based in Glasgow, with representatives in Cardiff to offer a bi-lingual service.

You can find out more about us and view
our full UK workplan at
www.consumerfocus.org.uk

Consumer Focus Wales
3rd Floor Capital Tower
Greyfriars Road
Cardiff CF10 3AG

t: 02920 787100
f: 02920 787101
e: contactwales@consumerfocus.org.uk
www.consumerfocus-wales.org.uk

Media Team: 02920 787 110/111

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