

CONSUMER FOCUS SCOTLAND

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1 ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING

1.1 Change/impact achieve

Policy

- 1.1.1 On 11 November, Consumer Focus Scotland, with the support of Ofgem, formally launched Energy Best Deal Scotland (EBDS) at a successful stakeholder event in Edinburgh, followed by a briefing session in the Scottish Parliament, attended by fifteen MSPs. The key aim of the campaign is to deliver a programme to build capacity among frontline advice agency advisers, so that they are better able to support and empower Scottish energy consumers and disadvantaged groups to switch energy tariff /supplier successfully. The campaign has learnt from, and builds on, the successful Energy Best Deal campaign undertaken in England and Wales by Ofgem and Citizens Advice.
- 1.1.2 We have produced, and are delivering, a training package, with supporting materials, complemented by a wider public awareness raising campaign and with media support at local and national level. We have been very encouraged by the demand for the training and are now planning to deliver a further tranche in the new year.
- 1.1.3 Audit Scotland has agreed to alter the wording of its Best Value Judgements, to make them more consumer friendly, following research followed out by Consumer Focus Scotland earlier this year.
- 1.1.4 CFS welcomed the establishment by the Scottish Government of a national advocacy service for parents whose children have additional support needs. The need for such a service was repeatedly raised by the Scottish Consumer Council. Sarah O'Neill, Head of Policy, was a member of the panel which assessed the tenders received for the new service.
- 1.1.5 The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman has published its complaints handling principles and procedures. Research by CFS found that the draft principles and procedures were endorsed by consumers; however, the final published principles place more emphasis on timeliness and accessibility, both issues which were raised in our research.
- 1.1.6 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 was passed by the Scottish Parliament. The Act strengthens tenants' role in the regulation of social housing, following CFS' involvement in the Ministerial Sounding Board set up by the Scottish Government to develop the bill.

HLA

- 1.1.7 Forty-eight awards achieved in this period, of which 9 were hla plus. 7 3rd term awards are now held. (Total number of current award stands at 656).
- 1.1.8 The healthyliving award has been included as one of the key performance indicators for monitoring the Scottish Governments 'Preventing Overweight and Obesity in Scotland. A Route Map Towards a Healthy Weight'.

CFHS

- 1.1.9 The Scottish Government's strategy on maternal and infant nutrition, which CFHS helped to write, is to be launched on January 18th and recent work to facilitate the contribution of community food initiatives to a developing healthy weight outcomes framework will be incorporated into the government's implementation strategy for its Obesity Route Map due to be launched in February.

1.2 Significant activity

Policy

- 1.2.1. Consumer Focus Scotland published *Power at Home* on 17 November. The report highlights the benefits of microgeneration, especially in relation to heating for consumers without access to mains gas.
- 1.2.2. Consumer Focus Scotland has published two new information leaflets on dealing with the domestic energy supply at the start of the tenancy: '*Sort your supply: gas and electricity supply - advice for tenants*' and '*Smooth supply: gas and electricity supply - advice for landlords*'.
- 1.2.3. Douglas Sinclair gave evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee on its scrutiny of the Scottish Government's draft budget 2011-12 on 24 November. Jennifer Wallace also submitted written evidence to the committee.
- 1.2.4. We gave oral evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities committee on the Private Rented Housing (Scotland) Bill on 17 November, and also submitted written evidence to the committee.
- 1.2.5. We prepared a briefing for MSPs in advance of the Stage 1 parliamentary debate on the Property Factors (Scotland) Bill on 6 December.
- 1.2.6. We submitted a response to the call for evidence by the Scottish Digital Network Panel on proposals for a new Scottish Digital Network providing public service broadcasting.
- 1.2.7. We submitted a response to the Lord President's consultation on Judicial Conduct: rules for investigating and determining matters.
- 1.2.8. We submitted evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Health and Sport Committee on the Certification of Death (Scotland) Bill.

SAIF

- 1.2.9. SAIF agreed the final draft of a significant new publication called Making Services Accessible, to be produced on the website and in hard copy in January.

CFHS

- 1.2.10. CFHS's annual conference held in Kilmarnock in October was very well attended by everyone from frontline practitioners to policy makers and will be followed up by an extensive learning and development programme, due to be completed by February.

Extra Help Unit

- 1.2.11. Workloads in the EHU have been particularly challenging during the reporting period. The EHU has seen a significant increase in total contacts: priority cases, where the consumer is disconnected, or about to be disconnected, are at an all time high. Prior to September the highest number of priorities received in one month was 193, the highest in one week was 59. In November the EHU received 300 priorities and during the w/c

29 November we took over 140 priorities in one week. Winter months (and winter started early!) are always particularly busy with domestic consumers having difficulty with pre-payment meters. During severe weather engineers struggle to gain access and are overwhelmed in terms of manpower to meet appointments. The EHU has managed to assist many consumers by making alternative arrangements with the suppliers; getting power restored, electric heaters provided and credits placed on electric pre-payment meters to cope with the extra demand where gas supplies are off.

1.2.12. The EHU has continued to deliver an effective service in these circumstances – achieving beneficial impact on average for 93% of consumers, with 83% of consumers satisfied or very satisfied with the service from the EHU. This is particularly noteworthy given reduced staffing numbers (down one f/t and one p/t Consumer Adviser).

SG Working Group on UK Reform of Consumer and Enforcement Bodies

1.2.13. The first meeting of the Scottish Government working group took place on 18 November. Since then CFS has prepared and submitted a paper to Scottish Government. We also met with Citizens Advice Scotland to discuss the nature of our submission, as well as to explore initial issues of implementation of the UK government's plans, in particular in relation to consumer advice .

2. CHALLENGES RUNNING UP TO NEXT BOARD MEETING

Policy

2.1 We expect to publish the following reports in December/January:

- Report on consumer network broadband survey
- Report on Regulating Energy Efficiency in Existing Housing
- Report on complaints signposting in public services
- Report on user engagement in public services best practice

2.2 We will also launch the report of the Civil Justice Advisory Group on 18 January. We expect the Minister for Community Safety to be in attendance at the launch.

Scottish Government Projects

2.3 The funding situation of three SG projects (SAIF, CFHS and HRIS) is expected to become clearer over the next months. The uncertainty over the timescale expected for the closure of CF/CFS, as well as the possibility that the Scottish Government may wish to see a different solution in Scotland complicate decision making for SG officials as well as for CFS. At present we argue that interim arrangements should be made (e.g. one year extension of current arrangements) to allow time for appropriate long term solution to be arrived at.