

Consumer Focus Wales

Senior Director: Maria Battle

ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING (1 Sept – 19 Oct)

1 Change/ Impact Achieved

1.1 Consumer Food Safety

- 1.1.1 As a result of our E Coli report the First Minister requested the FSA Wales, to undertake a full review of food safety enforcement in Wales which they expect to complete in February 2011. The First Minister specifically asked if consumers in Wales are adequately protected and wanted the FSA Wales to evaluate other possible models of delivering food law enforcement. The Food Standards Agency is responsible for the controls on food in the UK, but the enforcement is currently done in different ways: by employees of the FSA, by other government departments, by contractors and by local authorities. This system can be complex.
- 1.1.2 The FSA announced on 3rd December 2010 a review of how food safety regulations are enforced in the UK to build on the work the FSA Wales is already doing and extend their evaluation to the whole of the UK. This review across the four countries of the UK is a direct result of our work on E Coli.
- 1.1.3 The Inquest into the death of 5 year old Mason Jones was held in November 2010. We provided a summary of our work to the Coroner and Counsel for the family. The Coroner recorded a narrative verdict and exercised his power under Rule 43 Coroner's Rule 1984 (as amended) and wrote to the Welsh Assembly Government and the Ministry of Justice, recommending that the mechanism for the enforcement of food hygiene regulations should be reviewed as a matter of urgency and in particular:-
- a. Unannounced inspections of abattoirs and premises on which meat is processed should take place more regularly;
 - b. Compliance with food hygiene regulations should be more strictly enforced;
 - c. That the enforcement of H.A.C.C.P should be more strictly policed with increased and regular training for those responsible for compliance and enforcement;
 - d. That the consideration be given when setting up a non-judicial enquiry to establishing a robust review mechanism.
- 1.1.4 These mirror the recommendations and findings in our E Coli report
- 1.1.5 The FSA agreed on 7 December to issue guidance making it clear to food businesses that they must ensure separation of equipment used to prepare raw and

ready to eat foods to the highest degree possible. This is a direct result of our E Coli work and empowering consumers to respond to the draft guidance.

2 Significant Activity

2.1 Energy

2.1.1 On 13 September Vivienne Sugar spoke at the Wales Energy Summit in Tredegar, leading the session on consumer issues. The opportunity was taken to impress upon industry and government for the need for the consumer voice to be heard as the supply of domestic energy becomes far more complicated with the introduction of feed-in-tariffs, smart meters and pay-as-you-save schemes.

2.2 Fuel Poverty

2.2.1 On 29 September we held a meeting of the cross party group on fuel poverty to brief AMs on the coming big issues, including the introduction of the pay-as-you-save 'Green Deal' by the UK government. On 8 October Ceri Williams attended a meeting of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Fuel Poverty where we discussed the Winter Fuel Payment, the production of an annual report and forthcoming workshop to improve the efficacy of the group.

2.2.2 On 18 October the Environment Minister's held an Energy Roundtable with the Big 6 energy suppliers and Ofgem. We attended and it was an opportunity to tackle the Big 6 about their policies and their impact on Welsh consumers. Under the item on consumer experience the Minister and Ceri Williams raised concerns about the failure to pass on low wholesale fuel costs and the identification and treatment of vulnerable consumers.

2.2.3 On 12 November we published our Domestic *Energy Report* which highlights the potential benefits of switching.

2.3 Off Gas

2.3.1 Since the publication of our report on off gas we have concentrated on influencing the implementation of our recommendations. This includes a range of meetings with suppliers and decisions makers including Calor, who subsequently announced that they are in talks with First Utility about offering a dual fuel discount deal. The Federation of Petroleum Suppliers (FPS), the trade association for the heating oil industry were very open about some of the difficulties the industry faces in terms of low margins and the obligation on the customer to shop around for the best deal. They were however resistant to our call for a code practice on customer service.

2.3.2 We also met with Ofgem who welcomed our report and agreed with our recommendation that the fuel poor connection scheme should be continued but improved. They said they would welcome any further evidence we could produce about the costs and benefits of connection.

- 2.3.3 UKLPG, the LPG trade association welcomed the fact that our report suggested that switching rates are relatively high. We met with Energy Networks Association and Graham Edwards the chief executive of Wales & West Utilities, the gas distributor, plus ES Pipelines, who are the only independent gas transporters who connect existing off-gas communities to the mains. ES Pipelines welcomed our report and sought our help and advice in persuading Ofgem to amend the fuel poor connection scheme so that their company could use it to connect homes.
- 2.3.4 We also met with Nicola Robinson, the Department for Energy & Climate Change's lead official on off-gas issues. She welcomed our report. She is drawing together an off-gas strategy in response to the line in the UK Coalition Government's agreement that they will tackle off-grid issues. A number of schemes exist which benefit off-gas consumers. We agreed to stay in touch about developments in research and policy.
- 2.3.5 Kyla Brand, the Wales representative for the OFT, agreed on 29 September, that the OFT would send us a formal response which recommended that Consumer Focus would publish a guide to domestic oil consumers, to help them get a better deal for the fuel.
- 2.3.6 Ceri Williams who is our dedicated energy expert will be leaving Consumer Focus Wales in December 2010. Ceri expertise in this field and will be missed by Consumer Focus Wales.

2.4 Post

- 2.4.1 Our Diversification Fund guide for subpostmasters is now being distributed by the Welsh Assembly Government to applicants.
- 2.4.2 The quarterly postal services report was published in September

2.5 Finance

- 2.5.1 We launched our report on Fuel Debt in Westminster on 16 November. This was the third paper in our '*Consumer Finances in Wales*' series. This series has been used to highlight the results of a major nationwide population survey which we undertook earlier this year to monitor the 'financial health' of consumers in Wales. An overview report of the series, summarising our recommendations to the UK Government, was also produced for the Westminster event. The event was sponsored by the Conservative Member of Parliament for Cardiff North, Jonathan Evans.
- 2.5.2 The final report from the National Assembly's Communities and Culture Committee Inquiry into Financial Inclusion and the Impact of Financial Education was published on Wednesday 3rd November. We provided written evidence to the inquiry. One of our recommendations to the Committee that *'the strategic role of the Welsh Financial Education Unit is sustained and built on over the coming years to help improve the delivery of financial education both in schools and within the wider community'* (recommendation 3) has been adopted and many of the other issues we raised have also been acknowledged in other recommendations such as the rollout of the Consumer Financial Education Body (CFEB) 'Moneymadeclear' service, the

provision of Welsh language financial education resources, the establishment of a 'central hub' of information on financial capability projects and improving benefit take-up.

2.6 Consumer Engagement and Annual Plan

2.6.1 The consumer engagement workshops are now complete and a summary of the views of people in Wales who attended was summarised for consideration by the Wales Board to inform our annual plan. We will be consulting on a draft Wales annual plan in January 2011 with the views of consumers at the heart of the plan.

2.6.2 We have been agreed to work in partnership with LBRO to get the views on citizens about regulated services in Wales. We are increasingly being seen in Wales as the organisation which seeks, listens to and reports on citizens views, giving them a voice.

2.7 Consumer Focus Investigations

2.7.1 Private Car Parking

2.7.1.1 CFI has requested commercially sensitive information from Parking Eye Ltd (PEL) which is a UK wide private car parking operator through our sec 24 powers and will be meeting with them to peruse their documents will assist the investigation.

2.7.1.2 CFI has been working closely with two trading standards departments in accessing BIS fighting fund to challenge the unfair practices in the private car parking industry. East Riding Trading Standards department has successfully had their case committed to Crown Court.

2.7.1.3 CFI continues to work closely with Senior Advocate Susan Marks from CAB, Trading Standards and Henry Smith MP (Conservative MP for Crawley) concerning private car parking operators and wheel clampers. A recent 10 minute rule motion by Henry Smith was informed by some of the evidence presented to him by CFI. Mr Smith has written thanking us for our "invaluable support and useful information".

2.7.2 Buy as You View

2.7.2.1 CFI has requested information using our section 24 powers from Buy as You View, a Swansea based company high cost credit lender who use coin slot televisions. Bridgend Trading Standards are also involved in the investigation.

2.7.3 Energy

2.7.3.1 CFI has recently requested information from Country Wide Lettings Ltd based in Essex. Countrywide is a UK wide company involved in both residential sales and lettings. CFI has been made aware of Country wide Lettings switching tenants' energy suppliers without the tenants' prior knowledge or consent. The investigation is in its initial stages and CFI will be working closely with the energy team to look at possibly involving Ofgem.

2.7.4 Management companies

2.7.4.1 Lisa Hawkins has written an article for MoneySavingExpert on freehold/leasehold acquisition which will be published shortly on their website.

2.8 Consumer Focus Labs

2.8.1 Labs and CFI are working jointly with MoneySavingsExpert on the issue of leasehold management companies and communicating consumer rights. This will probably take the form of an 'online walk-through questionnaire' to be either hosted on the MSE site or on a Labs site.

2.8.2 CF Labs completed development work on Consumer Focus's energy Price Comparison service. The Price Comparison service allows users to keep track of the best energy deals available in their area based on volume of usage by way of email subscription. Launch is scheduled for mid December 2010.

2.8.3 CF Labs has also this month completed development work on Consumer Focus's Community Post Office website (<http://communitypo.cflabs.org.uk>). The website provides a directory of public post offices operated by and for communities. The website is part of a Community and Public Services team project. CF Labs were responsible for design and development exclusively

2.8.4 CF Labs is currently developing version 2 of its StayPrivate.org service (<http://stayprivate.org>). Version 2 will introduce more opt-out services including The Bereavement Service and will allow sign up for multiple households through a single email address. This is in addition to many necessary enhancements to the technology underpinning the site. StayPrivate.org version 2 is due for launch in January 2011

2.8.5 Following completion, CF Labs will be embarking on version 3 of its Recalled Products service (<http://recalledproducts.org>). Enhancements include broadcast of recall notices through Twitter and presentation improvements.

2.8.6 CF Labs is also involved with Passenger Focus in an ongoing joint initiative to leverage publication of rail performance data. This information is currently publicly inaccessible and its release will benefit consumers both in terms of effective redress and general transparency.

3 Future Challenges

3.1 Publishing and consulting on Consumer Focus Wales' annual plan.

3.2 Working with stakeholders in Wales on alternative models for the consumer landscape review in Wales

3.3 Launching our reports on children in fuel poverty and care leavers and financial exclusion both of which will include short films so the voices of young people can be heard by decision makers.