

CONSUMER FOCUS SCOTLAND

Senior Director: Marieke Dwarshuis

1 ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING

1.1 Change/impact achieved

EHU

- 1.1.1 During the summer months the EHU became aware of a Scottish Power policy affecting small business consumers. At the point of contract renewal Scottish Power was carrying out credit checks on their customers and asking for large security deposits. Threatening letters were issued advising the supply would be disconnected if the deposit was not paid. We challenged Scottish Power on this practice and highlighted that supplies cannot be disconnected for non-payment of security deposits where there are no arrears. Scottish Power immediately stopped sending these letters and refrained from requesting security deposits while they reviewed the policy. Along with a colleague from the Energy Team the EHU met the company at their offices in Cathcart. Scottish Power has now agreed that deposits will be requested on the basis of payment history and that they will no longer threaten disconnection for non-payment. They will waive the deposit where the consumer agrees to sign up for direct debits or where the consumer provides additional information about their company's credit.

CFS Policy Team

- 1.1.2 The Legal Services (Scotland) Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament on 6 October. Both SCC and CFS had worked on this issue for many years- in opening up the legal services market in Scotland by removing current restrictions on ownership of legal firms, the bill should widen choice and protection for users of legal services and increase access to justice.
- 1.1.3 On 1 October, a new duty on public sector scrutiny bodies to promote continuous improvement in user focus under the Public Service Reform (Scotland) Act came into force. This follows many years of strong advocacy by Consumer Focus Scotland (and previously the Scottish Consumer Council) for improvements in the user focus of scrutiny bodies.
- 1.1.4 A motion was lodged in the Scottish Parliament by Rob Gibson MSP in September, supporting the findings and recommendations of the recent CFS report Parcel Deliveries: Current Practice and Possible Solutions.

Health Rights Information Scotland (HRIS)

- 1.1.5 At this year's BMA Patient Information Awards, Health Rights Information Scotland's Caring and Consent won the prize for carers' information. The patient information award forms part of the BMA's annual medical book competition.
- 1.1.6 At the same awards, the multilingual DVD and web-based resource, 'How to use the Health Service in Scotland' was highly commended in the electronic or web resources category.

Healthyliving award (HLA)

- 1.1.7 58 awards were achieved during this period, including the achievement of 14 HLA plus awards. Two businesses have now achieved an award for the third term.

Community Food And Health (Scotland) (CFHS)

- 1.1.8 The second meeting is planned of the working group on food access and affordability that CFHS were asked to establish by the Scottish Government.

1.2 Significant activity

- 1.2.1 The CFS Chair and Senior Director met with relevant Scottish Government and Scotland Office officials prior to, and after, the announcement on the future of CF, to discuss implications for CFS and for Scottish Government, and to assess the possibility of an alternative way forward in Scotland.

EHU

- 1.2.2 In September all members of the EHU received training from the Helplines Association on dealing with difficult emotional content during telephone calls.
- 1.2.3 EHU members have become increasingly concerned by suppliers' application of industry back billing legislation. In 2006 energywatch and the OFT raised a super complaint about poor billing practices within the energy industry. As a result the Energy Retail Association agreed a code of practice to ensure that domestic consumers did not suffer financial hardship as a result of billing errors. Where the supplier is at fault they are not able to send a bill which includes unbilled energy consumed more than 1 year prior to the bill being issued. The EHU's experience has found that many suppliers have problematic interpretations of the billing code and consumers are being penalised as a result. In particular the EHU are concerned by Eon's activity in this area and have arranged a meeting to discuss. The EHU flagged up the problems with back billing to colleagues in the Energy Team who have now referred the matter to Ofgem for formal investigation.

CFS Policy Team

- 1.2.4 Liz Macdonald gave oral evidence to the Health and Sport committee of the Scottish Parliament on the Patient Rights (Scotland) Bill on 8 September.
- 1.2.5 Information produced by HRIS was referred to positively by the committee, and the written evidence submitted by CFS was quoted during the evidence session.
- 1.2.6 Douglas White gave oral evidence to the Local Government and Communities committee of the Scottish Parliament on the Property Factors (Scotland) Bill on 15th September.
- 1.2.7 Mary Lawton produced joint responses to two Food Standards Agency (FSA) consultations, written in conjunction with CF Wales. The consultations were on 1) FSA Food borne Disease Strategy 2010-2015'and 2) Reducing the Risk form E Coli 0157-controlling cross contamination. The first response included the results of a survey of the CFS Consumer Network on views on food safety risks in the home in relation to chicken.
- 1.2.8 Energy Best Deal- ten training events have been arranged by Money Advice Scotland across Scotland between early October and mid-December. It is already clear that further sessions will have to be arranged to meet considerable excess demand in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Inverness. A comprehensive plan has been developed for the distribution of supporting leaflets and posters, which covers libraries, community centres, other local authority services, student welfare centres, GP surgeries and Post Offices.
- 1.2.9 CFS organised a successful seminar held by the Civil Justice Advisory Group as part of the consultation process to inform its report to Scottish Government on access to justice

and the lower level civil courts. The keynote speaker was Professor Dame Hazel Genn of University College, London. CFS were particularly pleased to provide the opportunity for consumers to input to the discussion, and those in attendance have expressed their appreciation at being able to contribute. It was noted by some of those present that there are few other opportunities to bring a wide range of stakeholders to discuss issues of mutual interest in this area, and it is likely that one of the recommendations of the Group's report is that mechanisms should be found to enable such discussions in the future.

Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF)

- 1.2.10 SAIF drew a development plan for the three years 2011 – 2014. It was incorporated into the Section 10 funding application which was submitted to the Scottish Government by CFS prior to the deadline of 30th September.

2 CHALLENGES RUNNING UP TO NEXT BOARD MEETING

- 2.1 Following the announcement regarding changes to UK consumer bodies, a working group will be established by Scottish Government to set out a range of options for the consumer landscape that are appropriate to Scotland. CFS will be working closely with SG and others on this in the coming months.
- 2.2 The EHU has continued to see a steady increase in cases received from July onwards, particularly in relation to priority cases. September saw the highest amount of monthly priority cases since Consumer Focus was established. The EHU is still operating on reduced staffing numbers (due to freeze on recruitment) with one vacant FT Consumer Adviser post, another PT Consumer Adviser on maternity leave and the main duties of the Principal Consumer Adviser being carried out through additional responsibility.
- 2.3 Three further research reports are being finalised for publication in October/November:
- Public Awareness and Attitudes in Household Energy Markets
 - Improving Consumer Access to the Benefits of Microgeneration
 - Best Practice in Consumer Engagement in Public Services
- 2.4 CFS intend to publish information leaflets for tenants and landlords on their rights and obligations in relation to energy supply at the start of a tenancy.
- 2.5 CFS will hold a stakeholder event at the Scottish Parliament to raise awareness of the Energy Best Deal campaign on 11 November.
- 2.6 HRIS will be carrying out consultation and user testing on a leaflet providing information for patients on e-Health. HRIS are also producing a factsheet for parents and families who may have to make decisions about the resuscitation of children and young people.
- 2.7 HLA staff will be working on the changes that need to be made to operate the award within the restrictions of the EU Health Claims regulation (coming into force April 2011). This will require intensive work with stakeholders as well as Scottish Government, and is likely to significantly affect the nature of the award.
- 2.8 CFHS will be working with the Scottish Government and two further health sector intermediary agencies to move from separate agreements to a single strategic agreement with a single set of cross-cutting outcomes for all intermediary work. The work is intended to be completed in time to inform decisions following November's Scottish Budget.