

Consumer Focus Wales

Senior Director: Maria Battle

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

1.1 Change/ Impact Achieved

1.1.1 Post

1.1.2 Having persuaded the Welsh Assembly Government to make consultation with consumers a condition of the application process for sub-postmasters to access the Diversification Fund, CFW has since been working on a 'how to' guide to explain to applicants a step by step consultation process.

1.1.3 The guide explains the consultation process and includes sources of information and case study examples of Post Offices who have previously diversified their premises and ensured their viability and profitability as a result.

1.1.4 The guide was published in mid October and will be posted out to applicants by the Welsh Assembly Government as part of the application pack, along with a letter of endorsement from the Government.

1.2.1 Energy

1.2.2 CFW has now been invited to attend the Ministerial roundtable meeting with the big 6 energy suppliers.

1.2.3 We had previously supplied a briefing to the Minister but now we have been invited to actually attend the meetings to ensure a consumer voice is heard and to provide an expert analysis not available elsewhere in Wales.

1.2.4 We attended the first meeting on 18th October and the Minister welcomed our contribution.

1.2 Significant Activity

1.2.1 Finance

1.2.2 Our report on older people's finances, 'Financing the Future' was launched on 6th October by the Deputy Minister with responsibility for Older People. The launch included a drama presentation to highlight individual consumer stories. The report received extensive media coverage in the Wales media

1.2.3 The report examines the extent to which older people are managing financially, especially in light of the recent economic downturn; identifying specific areas of financial detriment, along with some worrying signs for the future given that some older people are only just coping now and more could struggle in the future.

1.2.4 The Deputy Minister has already asked for 100 extra copies for her office so that she can circulate them to her networks and welcomed the strong evidence base the report provided to inform ongoing work in this area.

1.3.1 Consumer Engagement

- 1.3.2 All Staff have completed their participation training and plans were finalised for our series of consumer engagement workshops.
- 1.3.3 The workshops are being held across Wales, with a wide selection of diverse consumer groups and workplan topics. The evidence gathered will be used to inform our annual planning and our influencing work.
- 1.3.4 The first groups provided invaluable material that is already being used to illustrate the consumer experiences and our work in meetings and briefings with stakeholders and politicians in Wales.
- 1.3.5 On 18th October we published 'The Difficult Conversation' which outlines the importance of the citizen voice in local public spending cuts. We have been in discussions with the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure the citizen voice is reflected in their National Innovation and Efficiency Framework for transforming public service delivery in Wales. We have been invited to share the intelligence gathered during our consumer engagement workshops on consumer's views of local spending cuts to help shape the Welsh Assembly Government's work in this area.

1.4.1 Welsh Language Measure and Consumers

- 1.4.2 Following our evidence to the National Assembly on the proposed Measure, we were asked to provide written and oral evidence to the Assembly's Enterprise and Learning Committee on our recent research into consumers and the Welsh language. We were only one of two bodies invited to give evidence, the other being the Welsh Language Board.
- 1.4.3 The proposed amendments to the Welsh Language Measure have now been published and are being considered by the Legislation Committee. In line with our recommendations, this includes a stronger voice for the citizen. Final decisions have not yet been made on what amendments will be taken forward for debate so we have issued a briefing to the members of the Legislation Committee reminding them of the key points of our evidence and how they should to be reflected in the amendments.

1.8.1 Consumer Food Safety

- 1.8.2 As a result of our campaign to enable people to respond to the FSA consultation on draft guidance on separation of equipment for raw and ready to eat foods – 768 individual consumers have submitted a response to the consultation, making it the biggest response FSA has ever had to a consultation. The FSA have welcomed our work in empowering consumers to respond directly.
- 1.8.3 On 1 Oct 2010, the Food Hygiene Ratings Scheme was launched. We continue to campaign for more material to be included on the scheme, for it to be more accessible to consumers and for mandatory food Hygiene Certificates to be displayed at the point of purchase. We participated in a Radio Wales discussion programme with the First Minister, the FSA, Ms Mills, whose five year olds son died from the E Coli outbreak and Professor Pennington. We ensured ad a member of the steering group that information is included on the site to let users know their rights to see full inspection reports through making Freedom of Information requests.
- 1.8.4 As a result of our E Coli report the FSA, requested b the First Minister, are undertaking a full review of food safety in Wales which hey expect to complete in February 2011.

- 1.8.5 The FSA is going to amend the Food Code of Practice as a result of us facilitating a meeting with the FSA, the Directors of Public Protection Wales, the Wales Local Government Association the Welsh Assembly Government and Professor Pennington. This should ensure the implementation of two of his outstanding recommendations.
- 1.8.6 Consumer Focus Investigations**
- 1.8.7 CFI presented their draft Annual Plan for the period 2010/2011 to the UK Board on 16th September. All proposed investigations were approved and the form and content of the plan was commended.
- 1.8.8 With the assistance of CFI, Ceredigion Trading Standards has secured BIS funding to pursue enforcement action against the parking operator which has been the subject of a large number of complaints. An important legal principle of whether private car parks overstay charges are unenforceable as penalties will now be tested.
- 1.8.9 CFI met with two MPs; Mark Williams and Henry Smith to discuss private car park operator complaints. Henry Smith is proposing an amendment to the Freedom Bill to the effect that the operators are obliged to secure operation licenses from local authorities. A meeting with the transport minister, Norman Baker is to be arranged at which CFI and Ceredigion Trading Standards will be present.
- 1.8.10 CFI attended the Consumer Protection Group meeting at the OFT where complaints against leaseholder property management companies and private car park charges were discussed in detail. The OFT may now extend its current market study on retirement home management fees to the whole of the leasehold management company sector
- 1.8.11 The npower announcement of compensation of £70 million gave some credit to CFI for advancing the legal arguments which pushed npower in to settlement.
- 1.8.12 Lisa Hawkins of CFI spent a week with MoneySavingExpert who will shortly be publishing an article on freehold/leasehold acquisition.
- 1.8.13 Gemma attended a very useful three day training conference on European collective action and small claims procedures. The course provided by BEUC in Belgium was free to successful applicants.
- 1.8.14 CFI is assisting another in team in London to present an idea to the OFT about the way in which debt is collected and sold on to third parties for collection. The idea was one of 8 presented on the day and was ranked equal top by the panel of 20 attendees.
- 1.8.15 CFI presented a day training on disclosure and consultation under CEAR and the Enterprise Act to colleagues in Wales and England. The feedback will form the basis of the Consumer Focus policy on disclosure of information and how we consult with business.
- 1.8.16 Consumer Focus Labs**
- 1.8.17 Once the content updates were finally complete, the team were able to launch the updated version of the Consumer Focus website.
- 1.8.18 The new version should bring a higher degree of functionality and a more dynamic presentation of the organisation's work.

1.8.19 There are now 24,500 people signed up to our staryprivate.org website

1.8.20 Northern Ireland

1.8.21 Stakeholder Engagement

1.8.22 The main focus of our stakeholder engagement has and continues to be meeting to influence key stakeholders on the future plans for consumer representation in Wales. In this reporting period we have met with a number of Assembly Members, including Andrew Davies, John Griffiths, Janet Ryder and Nick Bourne. We have also held 2 meetings with representatives of the Consumer Bodies in Wales, including Fran Targett, Director, Citizens Advice Cymru, Diane McCrea, Chair, CCWater, Craig Woolcock, Consumer Direct, Simon Pickering, Passenger Focus, Lorna Thompson, LBRO and Dave Riley, Welsh Heads of Trading Standards.

1.8.23 As part of the consumer engagement process, Jennie Bibbings and I attended a workshop around citizen engagement in public sector cuts, in Belfast on 16 September, organised by the General Consumer Council Northern Ireland. It was an excellent opportunity for us to observe the consumer engagement process and get an idea of what to expect from our own workshops, which began on 8th October.

1.8.24 On 20 September I attended a conference 'Scrutinising Scrutiny' hosted by Positif Politics. On Tuesday 21 September Viv and I met with Hywel Francis MP to discuss human rights and give a presentation of our current work.

1.8.25 On 27 September Steve Warren, Head of Communications Strategy, Consumer and Competition Policy, BIS, visited Consumer Focus Wales. He spent the day meeting with the Wales Management team, the Chair and staff to discuss our current work and see how the operation is run in Wales.

1.8.26 On 21 September: I met with Helen Howson, Welsh Assembly Government. On Tuesday 28 September Viv and I met with Steve Wearne, CEO and John Spence, Chair, Food Standards Agency.

1.8.27 On Wednesday 29 September I attended the Wales Heads of Trading Standards Business Planning meeting and gave a presentation on the work of Consumer Focus Wales.

1.8.28 On Friday 17 September Rhys and Gareth attended the launch of the Ofcom Communications Market report. On Thursday 7 October Rhys was interviewed as part of Office of Government Commerce Gateway review into Welsh Assembly Government's plans for next generation broadband.