

Consumer Focus Corporate Plan

2010-13



Challenges

This is a dramatic time for consumers. The impact of a recession that hit with alarming speed in 2007-08 created a different economy and wider areas of detriment compared to the circumstances that prevailed when Consumer Focus was established. Issues relating to climate change now mean there must be a move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption.

In the face of these challenges, Consumer Focus has an important responsibility to act in the interests of all consumers, especially those facing disadvantage, now and in the longer term. We will focus on identifying and advocating solutions, rather than merely describing the problem.

Value for money counts more than ever in both the private and public sectors. Complaints are high, and growing, and the number of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers is rising as a direct result of the recession. In addition, issues related to climate change and the need to move towards sustainable patterns of consumption give Consumer Focus an important responsibility to act in the long-term interests of all consumers.

Against this backdrop, Consumer Focus will continue to campaign, working towards solutions to these issues, on behalf of consumers.

The White Paper, 'A better deal for consumers', in July 2009, proposes the creation of a Consumer Advocate. It is proposed that he or she will be part of Consumer Focus with power and authority to act for consumers in the areas of education and redress. We have welcomed the Government's initial proposals and look forward to developments. We are ready to maximise the benefits of working with the Advocate on behalf of consumers.



Corporate Plan

This Corporate Plan 2010-2013 sets out our approach to delivering a fair deal for consumers over the medium term. It outlines how we will address the challenges ahead, the outcomes we aim to achieve and how we will achieve them.

The Corporate Plan is used to focus our efforts on achieving results that make the most difference to consumers. It is intended to:

- Explain what we do and make our formal statutory remit a reality
- Present a vision of success that guides how we use our resources and serves as a framework for decision-making across the organisation
- Provide a basis for more detailed annual planning
- Be a basis for monitoring our performance and show we are accountable
- Show how we are contributing to Government objectives and targets

Each year as part of our planning process, we will publish an Annual Plan, identifying the work we will undertake during the financial year. The Annual Plan, which is subject to consultation, provides the detail around the work set out in this Corporate Plan.

We recognise the need to maintain flexibility in our approach and the ability to respond to changes in the consumer environment. Accordingly, our work programmes are continuously reviewed to respond to unforeseen events, building on our successes and focusing our efforts on areas of consumer priority.

After each financial year, we will publish our annual report and accounts to provide an overview of the impact our work.

Our Corporate Plan, Annual Plan and Annual Report for 2008-09 are all available on our website.



Last Collection
Monday to Friday
6.30pm
Saturday
12 noon

Who we are

Consumer Focus is the independent champion for consumers across England, Wales and Scotland, and for postal consumers in Northern Ireland. We are uniquely placed to work across the whole of the economy, persuading businesses and public services to put consumers at the heart of what they do.

We gather evidence so we can champion the consumer and give the public a stronger voice. Our aim is to change the behaviour of companies, Government and suppliers of public services. We want to improve access, fairness and customer service for all consumers, paying particular attention to the needs of those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable.

Working with consumers and a wide range of organisations, we suggest and champion creative solutions that make a positive difference to consumers' lives.

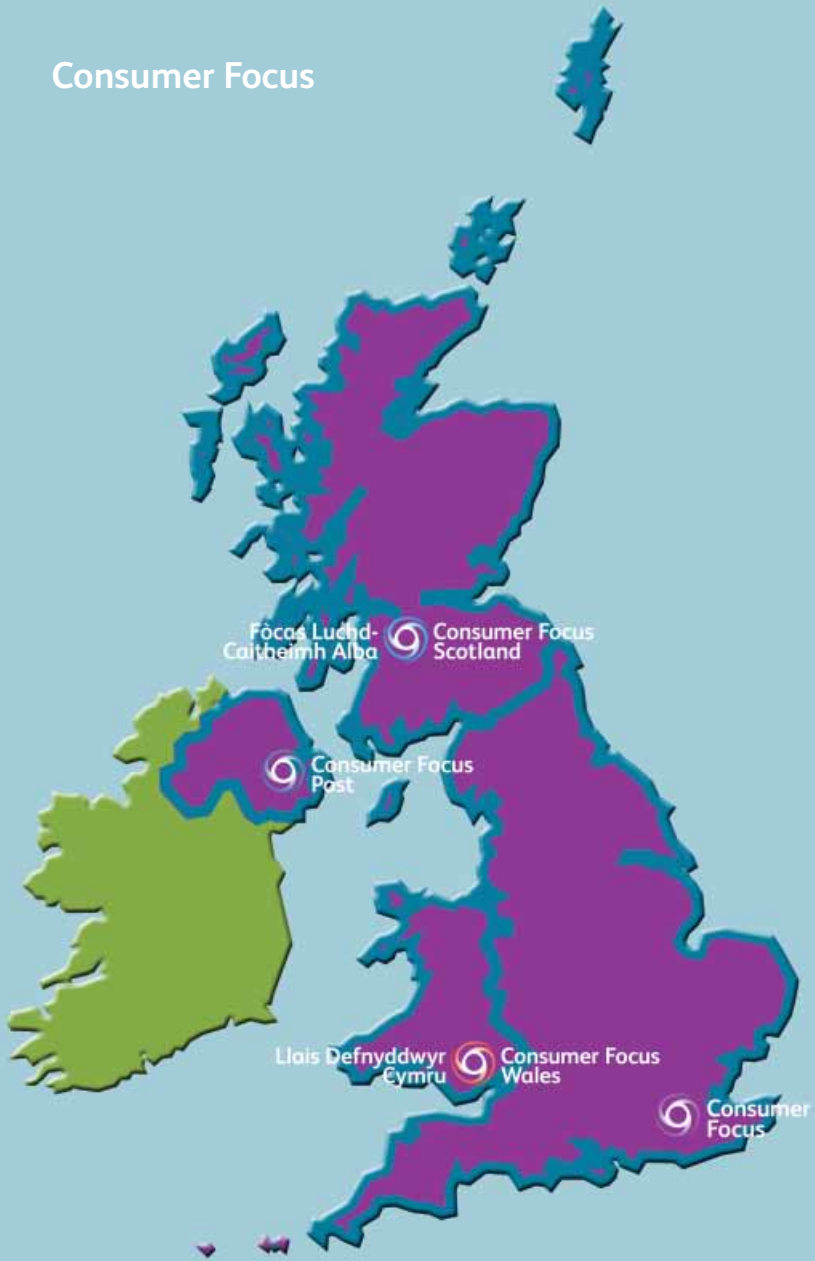
We help companies and public services put their consumers first, and challenge those who fail to do so.

We are a statutory body, created through the Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress Act 2007.

Our Background

Consumer Focus was formed on 1 October 2008 from the merger of energywatch, Postwatch and the National Consumer Council (including the Scottish and Welsh Consumer Councils). We receive about a third of our funding from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), our Government department sponsor. Funding also comes from licences paid by energy suppliers and the postal industry and we are also able to raise our own funds – for example, through externally funded projects.

Consumer Focus



Our structure

The Consumer Focus Board (or the ‘main Board’) is the governance Board and has responsibility for:

- overall governance
- resources, finances and their allocation
- staffing and HR matters
- oversight of the CEO and senior management team
- the performance of the whole organisation

The main Board also has responsibility for policy in England, the UK and at EU level, and for all other policy not devolved by the Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress Act to the Country Boards.

The Boards of Scotland and Wales are primarily responsible for areas of consumer policy specifically within their own territories and for making contributions to main Board led GB, UK and EU policy projects.

The Consumer Focus Post (Northern Ireland) Board is responsible for postal services policy and implications for Northern Ireland, and for ensuring a Northern Ireland contribution to the main Board UK postal services policy.



What we do

Consumer Focus

- Identifies consumer issues across the economy
- Analyses issues and develops solutions through research, policy development, and working with stakeholders and consumers
- Brings about necessary changes by persuading decision-makers in Government, business and public services

Our mission

We will make a difference to people's lives as consumers, particularly the more vulnerable, by championing policy changes that can help make people as powerful as the institutions that serve them.

We will engage, inform and support consumers to act. Where they cannot act for themselves, we will act for them by working to improve the performance of those who serve them.

Our vision

We believe people are the best judges of their own needs, and Britain will be more successful if consumers, particularly those who are most vulnerable, have a greater voice in relation to the goods and services they receive.

It is not just the economy but society that benefits if consumers have robust rights. Given the right chance, consumers will play their part in promoting a fair and sustainability society.

Our values

To empower consumers and campaign for fairer deals, we must always be credible, challenging and present creative solutions:

CHALLENGING

- Tackling inequality
- Promoting fairness
- Leading by example

CREDIBILITY

- Evidence based
- Empowering
- Focusing on quality work

CREATIVITY

- Developing new approaches
- Engaging with others

Strategic aims

There are four defined strategic aims that underpin all our work:

Help people get better value by raising the influence they have over the goods and services they receive.



Improve customer service and remove unnecessary problems that generate complaints from consumers.



Create an economy in which everyone can access the essential services they need and where the poor no longer pay more or get less for their money.



Harness the appetite of consumers to adopt more sustainable lifestyles.

Core functions

The Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress (CEAR) Act 2007 identifies our core functions as:

- representation
- research
- information

Key powers of investigation

In addition, we have the key powers of investigation:

- general powers of investigation
- for complaints made by vulnerable designated consumers
- for complaints relating to the disconnection of gas or electricity supply to individual consumers

Helping vulnerable consumers

Our Extra Help Unit works with vulnerable consumers to help resolve individual complaints in energy or post – for example, if someone is facing disconnection. Vulnerable consumers are referred to the Extra Help Unit by Consumer Direct, Ofgem, the Energy Ombudsman, and MPs, Members of the Scottish Parliament and Members of the Welsh Assembly where their constituents have complained about energy or post.

Support is also available, for staff at advice agencies, with energy or postal queries via our online Knowledge Base and our telephone based Ask the Adviser service. Through these we provide industry information and help answer queries.



Operational philosophy

We are funded by taxpayers and energy and postal consumers, and operate at all times in the consumer interest. We are strongly independent and are open to collaborative partnerships.

We will act in the consumer interest, by taking steps to:

- Gather the intelligence required to track changing consumer experience and the needs of different groups of consumers
- Foster a culture of empathy and respect for consumers
- Continue to monitor and assess consumer ‘detriment’ (the welfare loss to consumers) and the consumer ‘interest’ (the configuration of goods and services of most benefit to consumers)
- Gather clear evidence for the work we do

We will maintain our independence by:

- Always acting solely in the interests of consumers, recognising the views of businesses and the public sector are adequately represented through numerous other routes
- Being in tune with the perspectives of consumers
- Appreciating that the experiences of consumers and relevant Government policies may differ as a result of devolution

We will build proactive and productive partnerships where these benefit consumers, recognising that:

- Many businesses, public service and voluntary sector providers are knowledgeable about their customers and have a strong interest in seeing a better deal for them
- There are many legitimate and effective civil society organisations that represent different people’s interests, without necessarily seeing themselves as ‘consumer’ groups
- A growing number of social enterprises are providing services for consumers in the gap between market, state and charity

Our approach to work planning

Consumer Focus has an economy-wide remit, so we need to make tough decisions about priorities, using our resources to best effect for consumers. Our statutory responsibilities form a key part of this prioritisation, along with our evidence on current and emerging consumer detriment and workplanning criteria that we have developed to assess each potential area of work. These are considered in more detail below.

1. Statutory requirements

The Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress (CEAR) Act 2007 identifies particular provisions which guide our work, including:

- Regard for designated consumers (that is gas, electricity and postal services consumers)
- Regard for the interests of consumers in different areas
- Regard for the interests of consumers who are one or more of the following:
 - disabled or chronically sick
 - of pensionable age
 - with low incomes
 - residing in rural and remote areas

2. Evidence base

We use research evidence, commissioned by us and/or others, to focus our work planning on areas of consumer detriment.

Our starting point is the Consumer Conditions Survey, commissioned by Consumer Focus and undertaken by Ipsos MORI in 2009. The survey is a major piece of research examining consumer experience in the United Kingdom which asks consumers about their experience in 45 private sector markets, covering in total some 72 per cent of household expenditure. For each market, the survey covers consumers' views on six key aspects:

- Range and choice available
- Living up to expectations
- Protecting consumer rights
- Trustworthiness of advertising and marketing
- The ease of comparing quality
- The ease of comparing prices

Consumer responses to each of these areas are aggregated and used to compile an overall Consumer Confidence Index (CCI), which provides the basis for comparing how consumers perceive the performance of a particular market against all others.

Additionally, we take into account the Office of Fair Trading's Consumer Detriment Survey that examines the purely monetary value of how things have gone wrong for consumers in 64 markets – these markets overlap the Consumer Conditions Survey.

Other sources of information such as the Unfair Practices Survey, complaints data from a variety of sources and other ad hoc surveys provide further context to our analysis of the consumer environment.

3. Criteria for work planning

When considering our work, we use workplanning criteria to assess whether an investment of time and/or money is merited:



4. Other Factors

Several other factors are not captured in the sections above but we consider them in parallel when defining our work. These include:

- Consumer experiences and detriment in public services
- Current trends and predictions of future consumer issues not already identified in our evidence
- Whether to continue work from the previous year
- Incorporating stakeholders input including our volunteer consumer networks and information from other consumer bodies
- Our partnership projects





Our core work

Consumer Focus's core work is derived from our funding streams and the Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress Act 2007.

Our core work consists of:

- Securing a fair deal for energy consumers
- Securing a fair deal for postal consumers
- Work on areas of private sector markets where available evidence points to consumer detriment
- The Extra Help Unit, which assists vulnerable consumers
- Our work on Complaints of General Interest
- The work of Consumer Focus Scotland on behalf of Scottish consumers
- The work of Consumer Focus Wales on behalf of Welsh Consumers
- The work of Consumer Focus Post on behalf of postal consumers in Northern Ireland
- Our earned income projects

Cross-cutting themes in our work

Safeguard and empower consumers

We have a responsibility to safeguard and empower consumers, in line with our statutory obligations. The consumer is at the heart of everything we do and all of our proposed work for 2010-13 sets out to tackle identifiable issues of consumer detriment.

Disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers

We have a specific responsibility to identify areas of detriment for vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers. As well as undertaking work that benefits all consumers, our proposed work for 2010-11 includes projects targeted at various disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Sustainability

As well as today's consumers, we are concerned with the interests, rights and responsibilities of the consumers of tomorrow. In the face of the growing challenges of climate change, resource scarcity and the threat to social cohesion, Consumer Focus is working to ensure that consumer choice and behaviour increasingly reflect sustainable patterns of consumption.

Sustainability in all respects – environmental, economic and social – is a particularly important feature in our work on energy and significant in other areas such as food. The sustainability dimension needs to feed into all our work; the aim being that both business offers and consumer preferences make it easier for consumers to make more sustainable choices.

As an organisation we are committed to operating in a manner that promotes sustainable practices and will review regularly how we operate.

Managing the organisation

Pride in Performance

We developed 'Pride in Performance', our integrated strategic and performance management framework, to ensure:

- Everyone in the organisation understands what Consumer Focus is trying to achieve and why (Strategic Management)
- All our work is delivered efficiently and effectively, and is clearly related to our overall aims and objectives (Programme and Project Management)
- The level of activity and achievement is measured and monitored on a regular basis so performance information is collected and corrective action can be taken, as and when required (Performance Management)
- Reporting and monitoring processes are such that, as circumstances change, the organisation and staff can adapt and take advantage of these changes (Change Management)

Developing organisational capacity

We recognise the challenge and importance of maintaining and building our ability to respond to changing consumer needs. This means having the right resources, people, finance, information, technology, processes and tools to deliver a fair deal for consumers.

Maintaining high levels of corporate governance

Our corporate governance framework ensures that we achieve our overall purpose and outcomes in an ethical, effective and efficient way. Three elements make up this framework:

- Organisation structures and processes including the Board(s) of Directors' responsibilities
- Stakeholder engagement
- Standards of behaviour

A key part of our organisational processes is our approach to corporate planning, performance management and annual reporting.

Developing employees

Consumer Focus aims to attract, develop and retain our employees to ensure a competent and committed workforce that delivers a fair deal for consumers.

We are developing a culture of personal development to ensure a diverse, professional and effective workforce. Our approach aims to reflect diversity in our thinking, with a wide range of skills, interests and abilities to promote innovative solutions.

Managing resources and delivering continuous improvement

We continue to ensure Consumer Focus is as efficient and effective as possible. In response to the Government's service transformation agenda we will continue to monitor opportunities to share services and work more efficiently with other organisations and Government bodies.

Evaluating success

We use a balanced scorecard approach to measure and report on our work. The balanced scorecard offers a performance model to evaluate the areas in which we must excel to most effectively deliver a fair deal for consumers. Our success is measured across four distinct perspectives, and against a number of strategic objectives within each, as shown below.

CUSTOMERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

'Achieving positive outcomes for consumers'

- To deliver the programmes set out in the Annual Plan
- To provide high quality customer service to support vulnerable people with complaints about energy and postal services, via the Extra Help Unit
- To be seen by stakeholders as being influential and to have an impact

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

'Sustaining our ability to change and improve'

- To ensure the continuous development of employee skills and expertise
- To promote high staff performance by ensuring that staff feel valued and motivated

PROCESS AND INNOVATION

'Having efficient operations and internal processes'

- To deliver high priority and effective corporate services activities
- To promote effective cross-collaboration and co-ordination of efforts in delivering our work

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

'Achieving results in an efficient manner that minimises costs'

- To provide realistic financial forecasts and monitor expenditure against budget, using property efficiently and effectively
- To ensure value for money and promote cost savings

We will use key performance indicators (KPIs) to track our progress against each objective for the year in question. The KPIs are kept under review to ensure they reflect the key drivers of our work and provide appropriate information with which to manage the organisation.

Developing the organisation



We have six development priorities that will enable us to deliver our work most effectively, including the delivery of our statutory responsibilities.

Our development priorities for 2010-13 are:

Development priority 1

We operate primarily as an advocacy organisation. This will continue to be true; however, we will be balancing our approach to develop and provide a greater ability for empowering consumers.

Over the next three years, we will be developing this role and beginning to build on work to empower consumers in areas such as energy and digital rights. As part of this, we will focus on:

- New ways to empower consumers
- Developing new communication methods for reaching audiences including social media
- Reviewing the skills and competencies of our staff

Development priority 2

In consultation with stakeholders, we will develop a common vocabulary and definition for disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers. We will use this definition consistently across our work to measure the value of individual campaigns.

Activities to develop this will include:

- Building relationships with organisations working with disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers
- Researching and understanding the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers
- Developing strategies for reaching and engaging disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers

Development priority 3

Develop and embed a sustainability strategy within our work.

To do this we will:

- Refine our approach to corporate planning to ensure due account is taken of sustainability in our work
- Develop campaigns aimed at changing public behaviour
- Develop indicators that consumers can use to measure and change their behaviour
- Offer our expertise to service providers and businesses to advance the cause of sustainability
- Build on our existing work in energy, promoting smart-metering, energy efficient homes and green tariffs

Development priority 4

Public services remain a key area of work for us, though increasingly it can be hard to see where the different sectors start and finish. This is the result of greater outsourcing, partnership working and changes in ownership. We will look at services as they impact on consumers, more often cutting across sectors and markets.

This focus will include:

- Developing our evidence base on consumer detriment relating to essential public and community services, which will then enable better targeting of our work
- Making more comparisons across sectors and services, based on our insight into consumer expectations
- Identifying other organisations with whom we can work on such services, including where appropriate businesses, third sector providers and community organisations
- Developing our skills to underpin this work

Development priority 5

Continue to develop our capacity and capability to respond to change and deliver benefits for consumers.

This will include looking at:

- a. How we operate, including our research methods, key relationships and communication style**
- b. The other organisations with whom we work**
- c. What role we take in relation to other organisations, voluntary and community groups, Government and other bodies**

Key activities in this area will include:

- Ensuring we have the ability to manage future change
- Supporting the successful delivery of our work by developing relationships and new ways of working with other organisations, and broadening our alliances
- Developing our technological capacity to take advantage of new forms of communication
- Developing our evidence base and use of research
- Developing more effective and efficient ways of working across our expert policy teams
- Embedding social marketing techniques across Consumer Focus

Development priority 6

Continue to innovate in the way we evaluate our impact and demonstrate our success. Our approach should reinforce our effectiveness and legitimacy.

Key activities in this area will include:

- Demonstrating a clear link between policy impact and consumer outcome
- Use Pride in Performance, our performance management framework, to facilitate the capturing and reporting of impact indicators
- Safeguard longer term projects, despite the pressure to quickly demonstrate short and medium term results
- Develop stakeholder measurement and consumer surveys as a proxy to demonstrating evidence of our impact
- Invest both time and resource in developing effective impact measurement

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Published: November 2009
Edited by: Alistair Moses
Design and production by: Lucas Fernleigh Ltd

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For the deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired,
contact Consumer Focus via Text Relay:
From a textphone, call 18001 020 7799 7900
From a telephone, call 18002 0207 799 7900

Consumer Focus
4th Floor
Artillery House
Artillery Row
London SW1P 1RT

Tel: 020 7799 7900
Fax: 020 7799 7901
Media Team: 020 7799 8004 / 8005 / 8006

