

CONSUMER FOCUS SCOTLAND

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1 ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING

1.1 Change/impact achieved

- The Scottish Government published its digital strategy *Scotland's Digital Future* on 3 March 2011. Consumer Focus Scotland's contribution to the discussion is acknowledged in the foreword by the Minister for Culture and External Affairs. The document also quotes the report of the Civil Justice Advisory Group (CJAG), published by CFS in January 2011, which argued that the digital strategy should include consideration of the use of IT in delivering justice services.
- On 10 February 2011 the Scottish Government announced, as part of the budget agreement for 2011-12, that it would provide £1 million to continue the post office diversification fund for Scotland for a second year. Consumer Focus Scotland played a key role in lobbying for this original fund, and we had urged civil servants to continue it for a second year. We have now met with civil servants to help inform the design of the second round of funding.
- Lord Rooker, the Chair of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), confirmed in a letter to the Chair of CFS in response to the draft annual plan that the FSA plans to commission research on food hygiene behaviours in the home to inform its future consumer education strategies on safe food handling. This follows a joint response from CFS and CF Wales to a Food Standards Agency consultation on its foodborne disease strategy in September 2010 which said that messages to the consumer must be clear and that messages on food hygiene should be reinforced.
- The Property Factors (Scotland) Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament on 3 March. CFS has a long history of working on property management services and has provided expert support to the member in charge (Patricia Ferguson MSP). The Bill still makes significant improvements to consumer protection in property factoring. It introduces a registration system underpinned by a fit and proper person test and a code of conduct, and a much needed source of external redress.
- On 7 March, the Scottish Government published a consultation paper on switching land management companies. The consultation is the result of over 18 months work by CFS to raise the profile of this issue with the Scottish Government.

1.2 Significant activity

- Following recent recruitment activity, the number of volunteer members of the Consumer Network has now reached 455. The network is now more than double the size it was at the merger in October 2008 (209 members). Numbers have increased from 347 in the past year since 1 March 2010, an increase of over 30%.
- At the request of the Scottish Government, Douglas White produced a briefing for First Minister Alex Salmond to inform him of key consumer issues in the postal sector ahead of his scheduled meeting with Moya Greene, Chief Executive of Royal Mail, in early March.

- Workloads within the EHU are at a more manageable level and are now comparable with levels received this time last year. Having the vacant Consumer Adviser post filled enhanced our capacity to meet casework volumes and to undertake effective casework analysis from January onwards.
- We met with CAS/ CitA on 8 February to provide a detailed overview of the work of the EHU. We explained our statutory duties and role within current representation, the volumes of contacts received, the types of complaints and consumers we support, the outcomes achieved through casework, our work with other Consumer Focus teams and changes to suppliers' policies secured. CAS/ CitA indicated that they would have proposals prepared by the end of February on how they will deliver Consumer Direct's functions and will consider the role of the EHU at a later stage in the process.
- A critical element of our public affairs work during this period was the launch of our Consumer Agenda for the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday 16 February. Around 1000 stakeholders, including all current MSPs and most candidates for May's elections were sent a copy of the Agenda electronically, and the launch received some coverage in both the print and broadcast media. A copy of the agenda has also been sent to the policy teams of each of the main political parties in Scotland, and Douglas Sinclair and Trisha McAuley met with Stephen Noon, the Chief Policy Advisor to the SNP, to discuss the Agenda on 10 March. A breakfast seminar with key stakeholders to discuss the Consumer Agenda, and the Consumer Focus Annual Plan, is taking place at our offices on 14 March.

2 CHALLENGES RUNNING UP TO NEXT BOARD MEETING

- A priority will be getting support from retailers for the Shoppers' Rights Card initiative. Developing and utilizing the support of the Scottish Retail Consortium will be a key tool in this and we will continue to engage with them on this project. We hope to be in a position to launch the cards jointly with the Scottish Retail Consortium in late May.
- The EHU faces a significant challenge in the light of reduced management capacity. Natasha Murray, Head of the EHU, will return mid March, but working reduced hours, while Monica Davidson, whose post was not backfilled while she acted up for Natasha, will be going on maternity leave. We are exploring all possibilities to address this including secondments from CAS and the energy companies.
- Waterwatch transfer: As we enter the final three months prior to the transfer date, CFS will face the resource-intensive challenge of delivering on the TUPE transfer process and the set up preparations for our new functions.
- Continuing to make an impact in the public domain following the departure of the CFS (sole) Communications Manager at the end of February is critical – interim arrangements are in place.
- The redevelopment of the Healthy Living Award is drawing to conclusion – this is to ensure the award is working within the limitations of the European regulation on Health Claims which is likely to become legislation in the summer of 2011.
- The pre-election period will be the opportunity not only to ensure political parties' awareness of key Scottish consumer issues, but also of the importance of a strong consumer voice for the benefit of Scottish consumers and Scottish business.
- We will work with stakeholders in Scotland to inform them of the issues for Scotland that arise from the BIS consultation.