



Consumer Focus Wales

Senior Director: Maria Battle

ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING (31st Jan – 22nd Mar)

1. Change/ Impact Achieved

1.1. FINANCIAL INCLUSION

1.1.1. On 8 March we launched From Care to Where? How young people cope financially on leaving care. The project includes a report and a ten minute video showing the experiences of young care leavers. Copies will be sent to care leaving teams in all Welsh local authorities and residential units. We are discussing with the Children's Commissioner for Wales how we can make progress on some of the recommendations.

1.1.2. The launch was hosted by Brian Gibbons AM and Deputy Minister Gwenda Thomas addressed the event and was delighted to meet some of the young care leavers who had taken part in the research and the launch. Following this launch, Lindsey Kearton has been asked to present the findings at the next All Wales Leaving Care Forum on 5th April.

1.1.3. David Melding AM (Chair of Cross Party Group on Looked After Children) also attended launch and wants us present research/DVD at a future meeting of the Group post elections. Lindsey Kearton also attended WAG Financial Inclusion Steering Group meeting on 1 Feb. This was a special meeting called to discuss impact of UK Government spending cuts on delivery of financial inclusion objectives.

1.2. FOOD SAFETY

1.2.1. On 22 March we launched our second report at the Senedd monitoring the implementation of Professor Pennington's recommendation following the his public Inquiry into the outbreak of E Coli in 44 schools in South Wales. It was sponsored by Andrew RT Davies AM and the report was presented by the Chair, Viv Sugar, to the Presiding Officer.

1.2.2. In our first report we called for guidance on the separation of equipment for raw and cooked foods- the main cause of the E coli outbreak. We launched a campaign at the National Eisteddfod last year which resulted in 800 people writing to the Food Standards Agency, the biggest ever public response to a consultation they had ever received. In February 2011 that guidance was issued.

1.2.3. In October 2010 we saw the FSA launch their Food Hygiene Ratings Scheme with a high-profile advertising campaign in February. This scheme is another step forward in giving consumers the information and the power to make informed choices.

1.2.4. But Nine out of ten people (89 per cent) in Wales have told us they want to see the food hygiene scores displayed on the Business premises. We know from the evidence around the world, that mandatory display of food hygiene ratings works. In Los Angeles County when it was made compulsory the decrease in people being admitted to hospital with food borne illnesses was 20%. Following the yes vote in the referendum in Wales in March the Welsh Assembly Government will have the power pass an Act of the Assembly compelling mandatory display.

Unlike England and Scotland all 22 local authorities in Wales have signed up to the food hygiene scheme. At the launch the Presiding Officer said he will ensure the report will appear on the relevant committees work plan in the Next Assembly. And also the question of who will speak on behalf of citizens in Wales to ensure this important work continues.

- 1.2.5. We also scrutinised the food hygiene ratings of premises which serve food to vulnerable groups. We found there are some schools nurseries care homes and hospital cafeterias scoring as little as one or two. This has received intense media attention in Wales. We have tried to find out more about the reasons why they some premises are failing but some local authorities have refused to release full inspection reports. We want the FSA to encourage and enable local authorities to make full inspection reports available on their website.
- 1.2.6. CF Labs deigned an online map for easy access to the caring institutions with low ratings. We had 1,430 visits to the map on the day of the launch. 1,227 got there from the link on the BBC news article, the rest through Twitter and the CFW website.
- 1.2.7. Lord Dafydd Elis Thomas (who received the report on behalf of the National Assembly for Wales) said he would ensure that the report went to the relevant committees at the start of the next Assembly, and that the issue of consumer representation in Wales was also discussed by the relevant committees. He said the report was a good example of democracy working in Wales – an issue highlighted by us, scrutinised by NAW and WAG responding as appropriate.
- 1.2.8. Steve Wearne of the FSA was interviewed on Good Morning Wales on the day of the launch. He said the report was 'thorough' and 'comprehensive' and that the FSA would look in detail at the recommendations we made for them to see what they can do and when. He said the FSA can issue guidance and help facilitate the release of reports – one 'very good suggestion' made by CFW was that they do this through the FHRS website. In relation to mandatory display Steve said: 'The other thing Maria said was that display should be mandatory and I think it's certainly true that the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme will only work if businesses display their ratings where consumers can see them'.... 'We think the main focus should be getting the display of the ratings themselves in every food premises in Wales.'

1.3. CF LABS

- 1.3.1. An updated version of the Recalled Products website was released in February. The new site addressed issues such as clarifying the status of products either temporarily or permanently removed from the list. This was in response to manufacturers' concerns that had been expressed to CF Labs. Other enhancements included improvements to the interface and the methods in which the information is accessed.
- 1.3.2. CF Labs were also involved in a meeting with Passenger Focus on the Office of Rail Regulation regarding the push for the release of rail performance data. The team had previously built a prototype website to demonstrate how this information could best be delivered and this was presented at the meeting. The prototype was very well received and CF Labs have subsequently been asked to demonstrate the prototype a second time for Passenger Focus' Chair. The prototype will likely constitute an important element of the campaign for release of this data.
- 1.3.3. The team have developed a web resource that aims to improve on the Food Standard Agency's online representation of their recently launched Food Hygiene Ratings Scheme. In response to a request from CFW comms to investigate how the data could be better presented a website was produced which gives instant visual access to establishments with a rating of two or lower by way of plotting on a map.

1.3.4. This is an improvement on the FSA's existing non-user friendly methods of accessing the data and the resulting resource was sent out to journalists in a CFW press release. CF Labs will be enhancing the resource from next month to add in ratings data from England, Northern Ireland and Scotland and introduce comprehensive search capabilities with the aim of bringing all the UK's food ratings information into one easy to use website.

1.4. WELSH LANGUAGE MEASURE AND CONSUMERS

1.4.1. The report of the Enterprise and Learning Committee on bilingualism has now been published. We provided written and oral evidence to the Committee and, as a result, four of the final recommendations of the Committee make direct reference to customer feedback and gathering the views of consumers. We have provided a briefing sheet to all AMs on why these recommendations are important to Welsh speaking consumers asking them to support the views of the Committee.

1.4.2. The Welsh Assembly Government has accepted these recommendations in principle and we will be writing to the Minister for Heritage to welcome their response and to further discuss our work on the Welsh language and consumers, including their proposals on following up the recommendations.

1.4.3. We have also responded to the call for evidence by the Welsh Assembly Government steering group on developing a Strategic Framework for Welsh language services in the NHS and Social Services. We were invited to provide a written response to the group and in this we have highlighted the key findings of our report on Consumers and the Welsh Language.

1.5 Energy

1.5.1 We published our report Off Gas Consumers and micro generation at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show in July 2011. One of the key recommendations in the report was our call on the Office of Fair trading to introduce a code of practice for suppliers of oil, LPG and coal. We highlighted the finding of our report with the OFT and discussed what further action they may take. On 15th March 2011 the OFT announced it is to undertake a market study on energy supplies to people who are off the main gas grids. Since that announcement we have been in discussions with the OFT on holding an evidence gathering seminar in Wales and focus groups on their behalf to feed into the review.

2. Significant Activity

2.1. ENERGY

2.1.1. On January 26 the Welsh Assembly Government announced that British Gas, in partnership with the Energy Savings Trust (EST) Wales, had won the contract to deliver their new Fuel Poverty Scheme. The new scheme is due to replace the old Home Energy Efficiency Scheme from April 1st 2011. EST will manage the central co-ordination advice point (the main entry point to the scheme and other forms of support available), while British Gas will lead on the delivery (i.e. installing energy efficiency measures etc.).

2.1.2. Consumer Focus Wales responded to the consultation on the regulations for the new scheme highlighting a number of concerns we have relating to the proposals. Most notably the fact that while those who are eligible for the scheme are more likely to be lifted out of fuel poverty (than was the case with the previous HEES), we remain very concerned that many households living in severe fuel poverty will fall outside the dual eligibility criteria for the new scheme

- 2.1.3. On February 9 we launched the short film (which was also shown at the last Wales board meeting) and accompanying report '*Keeping Warm This Winter: Hearing the voices of children and young people in tackling fuel poverty in Wales*', at an event in the Senedd, sponsored by Bethan Jenkins AM.
- 2.1.4. The film and report were produced by Children in Wales and funded by Consumer Focus Wales. The film brings together the stories of primary and secondary school pupils and highlights the real impact that fuel poverty has on many children's lives.
- 2.1.5. The event was very well-attended with some good press coverage. Attendees included some of the children and young people who'd taken part in the research. The project has also produced a colourful poster highlighting 10 Top Tips to stay warm, which will be distributed to all primary and secondary schools across Wales by Children in Wales in September, ahead of next winter.
- 2.1.6. On January 27 and March 2 Lyndsey Kearton attended the latest Ministerial Energy Supplier Round Tables with representatives from the 'big six' energy suppliers and Ofgem. These meetings continue to be a worthwhile opportunity to raise our concerns with energy companies about their policies and their impact on Welsh consumers.
- 2.1.7. On February 1 we published the latest edition of our *Domestic Energy Report* which provides subscribers with an up-to-date insight into current consumer issues in the Welsh energy market. This quarter's report received some press coverage and highlighted winter energy price rises, the potential savings some Welsh consumers may be able to make by switching suppliers, an update on the status of unclaimed npower refunds in Wales, as well as future
- 2.1.8. On February 9 the Cross Party Group on Fuel Poverty met for the last time of this Assembly term. On the same day the Group launched its annual report, highlighting the lessons learned over the last two years and the Group's proposed forward plan for the next Assembly. We received a very positive response to the report from the outgoing Energy Minister, Jane Davidson AM, who welcomed the good work that the Group is doing in raising the profile of fuel poverty in Wales. In her letter to the Chair, Mark Isherwood AM, the Minister also said she wanted to see the Group's report informing the incoming Assembly Government on areas of priority after the Assembly elections.
- 2.1.9. The Fuel Poverty Coalition Steering Group met on January 18 to discuss the coalition's response to the consultation on regulations for the new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme
- 2.1.10. In light of developments at the Wales and UK level the Group also discussed the need to update the Fuel Poverty Charter in time for the new Assembly, taking into account the new Fuel Poverty Scheme in Wales and the implications of the Energy Bill 2011-12
- 2.1.11. Together with Nuria Zolle from NEA Cymru, on January 26 Lindsey Kearton also met Martin Eaglestone, Policy Officer for the Welsh Labour Party, to discuss the party's manifesto. Martin indicated that tackling fuel poverty would continue to be a key policy area for the party and that their manifesto would largely be focused on the implementation of existing strategies

2.2. POST

- 2.2.1. We published our Quarterly Post Report on 15th March, including a commentary on the effect of the bad weather over the Christmas period and its effect on Royal Mail Quality of Service targets.
- 2.2.2. Angharad Griffiths has now left the organisation and responsibility for any work relating to post offices has passed to Rebecca Thomas.

- 2.2.3. On 23 February, Consumer Focus Wales held a roundtable drawing together some of the key post office stakeholders in Wales to discuss what more can be done to ensure a thriving and sustainable network in Wales, and to discuss the UK Government's plan for the future of the Post Office network.
- 2.2.4. We will be seeking to influence the development of these plans to ensure that the needs of consumers in Wales are represented in the process. Those attending the meeting included Post Office Limited, the National Federation of Subpostmasters, the Welsh Assembly Government and local authority representatives.
- 2.2.5. Consumer Focus Wales will publish the first in a series of briefing sheets on consumer perceptions of quality of service at the post office network in April. This will be followed by briefings focusing specifically on disability and financial services.
- 2.2.6. We held a constructive meeting with RNID/RNIB on to discuss how we may be able to work together on post office access issues for people with sensory impairments across Wales.

2.3. LBRO

- 2.3.1. Over the last few months we have been in discussions with the Local Better Regulation Office about their workplan and what specific work they could undertake in Wales. As a result of these discussions LBRO came to us with a proposal for a commissioned piece of work. They asked us, as part of their work with the Welsh Assembly Government, to help them build a stronger understanding of the issues faced by consumers in Wales in relation to regulatory services.
- 2.3.2. We are undertaking this work as part of our commitment to working with the Welsh Assembly Government and to help them put people at the heart of regulatory services. Our role in this work will further promote citizen-centred services and enable us to advise policy makers on consumer engagement in public services.
- 2.3.3. Four Focus groups will be held across Wales in the w/c 21st March with a variety of consumers in different areas of Wales. The focus groups will gather information on the following regulatory issues:
- Provide adequate protection to consumers of *goods and services*
 - Maintain standards of *food safety and hygiene*
 - Maintain minimum standards for *rented accommodation*
 - Monitor and take appropriate action against *animal diseases*
 - Protect the local environment from hazards such as *waste or pollution*
 - Prevent unlicensed activities, such as selling alcohol *without a licence*
 - Foster healthy and safe *work places*
 - Ensure healthcare and social services regulation (including the registration and regulation of providers) supports *safety and quality of provision*
- 2.3.4. The aim is that the consumer voice is heard in the design and delivery of the joint LBRO/WAG work plan for Wales; however this work also provides an opportunity for us to identify how regulatory services could better address the issues faced by consumers and take action as a result.

2.4. CONSUMER FOCUS INVESTIGATIONS

- 2.4.1. Referrals have been received about the problems faced by many residents of park homes. We interviewed ten residents, all elderly and allegations were wide ranging from concerns about electricity, water, breach of their legal rights and intimidation and criminal behaviour. The owners of the mobile homes have limited legal rights. Preliminary investigations are continuing,
- 2.4.2. Gemma also met with the Residential Property Tribunal Service in London to discuss the transfer of jurisdiction over Park Home disputes to the Tribunal from the County Courts. This is due to take place in England by the end of April but will take longer in Wales. There is therefore the scope to feed in some of the residents' experiences to the Welsh tribunal.
- 2.4.3. CFI has been assisting CFW to challenge the refusal by various councils to release food hygiene reports under the Freedom of Information/Environmental Information Regulations. This work is ongoing. It is expected that a meeting will be held with the Information Commissioner.
- 2.4.4. CFI has had a meeting with Maclaren and their solicitors and proposals for how we report back on the investigation are being considered.
- 2.4.5. CFI completed the work necessary to provide CF Labs with the diagram so that they can produce the first phase of the right to manage tool. This online tool will walk users through the steps necessary to decide whether they are legally entitled to exercise their right to manage their block of flats. CFI is in discussions with various organisations such as LEASE, Age Concern, ARMA and others. The hope is that they will make the tool available on their sites as we have linked in to various pieces of information held elsewhere to avoid unnecessary duplication.
- 2.4.6. CFI is also helping a charity to secure case studies by contacting consumers who have been in touch with Consumer Direct with complaints about high costs credit providers, such as Buy as you View, Homebuy and PerfectHomes. This is a follow up piece of work to the investigation which the team carried out as a result of the complaints against Buy as You view and referral from Trading Standards.
- 2.4.7. The team continues to receive referrals (6 external referrals since 1 January 2011 to date and one internal legal referral). CFI has struck up a good working relationship with Citizens Advice through the work on car park operators and more recently on civil recovery.
- 2.4.8. A referral to a trading standards team from CFI about a company involved in call prevention is now being actively investigated by the enforcement team at trading standards.
- 2.4.9. CFI received a trading standards referral which has been passed to Which? for further action as it related to the sale of fridge freezers which are then stored in outside garages

3. Future Challenges

- Agreeing an implementing work plan 2011/12
- Managing the organisation during continuing uncertainty
- Launching report on Switching