



Consumer Focus Wales

Senior Director: Maria Battle

ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE LAST BOARD MEETING (16 Dec – 31st Jan)

1. Change/ Impact Achieved

1.1. WELSH LANGUAGE MEASURE AND CONSUMERS

1.1.1. The final Welsh Language Measure has now been passed and included a number of the amendments that we recommended. For example, individuals now have a right to appeal the decision of the new Welsh Language Commissioner and there is a duty to consult the public on the development of the new Welsh Language Standards. These will help strengthen both the rights and the voice of individual Welsh speaking consumers.

1.1.2. We are also responding to the Welsh Assembly Government Welsh language strategy *laith Fyw: laith Byw* and our research into consumers and the Welsh language has been quoted in the strategy.

1.1.3. The evidence we gave to the Enterprise and Learning Committee resulted in the committee adopting our recommendations. These include commissioning research into the specific factors that affect the confidence of non-fluent Welsh speaking consumers to use Welsh when engaging with public and private sector organisations, the views of consumers in Wales are represented on the Welsh Language Commissioners advisory panel, working closely with businesses in Wales to ensure that consumer demands for Welsh language services, including on-line and telephone services, are identified and robustly evaluated, and whether there are any barriers to people utilising those services. That the Welsh Government collaborates with businesses and consumers to develop guidance on innovative approaches to promotion of the Welsh language in the workplace and in businesses and seek regular feedback from consumers on its effectiveness. That the Welsh Government commission research into the benefits that financial institutions have found in providing a bilingual service to their customers, and explore ways in which this good practice can be promoted to other customer service organisations in the private sector.

1.2. FOOD SAFETY

1.2.1. The FSA review of food safety in Wales commissioned by the First Minister as a result of our report on E Coli is expected to report in February 2011. We have met with Steve Wearne, the CEO of FSA Wales and given him our views on the interim report.

1.2.2. This review has now been extended to cover the whole of the UK. On 25 January 2011 the FSA Board discussed this proposal and agreed to use the Wales review as a blueprint for a UK-wide review to scope the potential for a centralised model of food law enforcement, delivered not by local authorities but by the FSA in the four nations. Proposals for action are due to be considered by the FSA Board at its July meeting

1.2.3. We have also influenced the development of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme in the UK through our membership of the Steering Group. We have argued successfully for more

accessible website design and for the inclusion of information on how to make Freedom of Information requests to get more detail on particular premises.

1.3. CF LABS

1.3.1. An updated version of the popular StayPrivate.org service was released in January. StayPrivate.org simplifies the process of signing up for the various direct marketing opt-out services.

1.3.2. Version 2 of the website sees the addition of further opt-out services as well as significant changes to the interface. These are intended to make the service even more convenient and simple to use. Enhancements include:

- Inclusion of the Direct Marketing Association's Corporate Telephone Preference and Fax Preference services
- Separation between residential and business accounts to allow for registration to different preference types
- The ability to register multiple addresses on a single account. This was in response to users' requests to register family members and friends lacking email accounts (each submission to the preference services requires provision of an email address)
- Revised help and FAQ sections providing improved support for users.

1.3.3. Version 2 also benefits from significant enhancements to the technology behind the website and improvements to the visual design.

2. Significant Activity

2.1. ENERGY

2.1.1. We funded Children in Wales to work with children across Wales to find out about their experiences of fuel poverty. Their voices have been brought vividly to life in a DVD and accompanying report, '*Keeping Warm This Winter: Hearing the voices of children and young people in tackling fuel poverty in Wales*'. It brings together the stories of primary and secondary school pupils and highlights the real impact that fuel poverty has on children's lives. The project has also produced a colourful poster highlighting children's 10 Top Tips to stay warm which will be distributed to all schools across Wales ahead of winter 2011/12.

2.1.2. Lindsey Kearton has now taken over the policy lead on energy. She provided a briefing for the Minister for Environment and Sustainability, Jane Davidson AM, in advance of her meeting with the Big 6 energy providers on 27 January 2011 and attended the meeting.

2.2. POST

2.2.1. We met with Royal Mail in December 2010 to discuss the draft agreement drawn up by Consumer Focus Wales on how the two organisations can work together.

2.2.2. We are organising a stakeholder event in February to discuss the future of the Post Office network in Wales.

2.2.3. We are in the process of discussing with colleagues in Consumer Focus about joint work on the Royal Mail complaints process, as proposed in the last Consumer Focus Wales Post Board meeting. Consumer Focus have suggested they lead on this work and that Consumer Focus Wales and Scotland conduct a review of the Welsh and Scottish experiences.

2.3. FINANCIAL SERVICES

2.3.1. Our work on financial exclusion and care leavers is progressing well. We developed this project having identified care leavers as a vulnerable group of young people that were not considered specifically within the Welsh Assembly Government's financial inclusion strategy. We have established an advisory group of key organisations with expertise in working with care leavers and undertook the research in a participative way. This included a peer steering group, which helped develop and advise on research methods, and peer researchers who undertook interviews with fellow care leavers aiming to make young people feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences.

2.3.2. The report will be launched on 8 March in the Pierhead building in Cardiff Bay. Dr. Brian Gibbons AM is sponsoring the launch and we have invited the Minister Carl Sergeant AM to attend to speak. We also hope to welcome some of the peer researchers to the launch, who have really engaged with the project and are keen to see the calls for action taken forward.

2.3.3. A key element of the launch event and ongoing influencing work is a DVD which will be shared with all Directors of Social Services in Wales and local authority leaving care teams and others working directly with care leavers, to hear the issues care leavers are struggling with financially as they make the transition to independent living. The DVD makes recommendations to take action to improve planning and provision for care leavers to ensure they are better equipped with more financial education, access to support and advice.

2.4. CONSUMER FOOD SAFETY

2.4.1. Our second report scrutinising the implementation of the recommendations of Professor Pennington is currently out for peer review and will be launched at the Senedd on 22 March 2011. This is being sponsored by Andrew RT Davies AM. Sharon Mills (mother of Mason Jones who tragically died as a result of the 2005 outbreak in South Wales) will also be speaking and other families affected by Ecoli will be attending. Viv Sugar will present the report to the Presiding Officer, Lord Dafydd Elis Thomas AM. Many of the recommendations have now been implemented, some as a direct result of our reports and intervention.

2.5. CONSUMER FOCUS INVESTIGATIONS

2.5.1. Consumer Focus Investigations (CFI) is awaiting final comments from a major producer on the draft pushchair safety report.

2.5.2. CFI has been working closely with Henry Smith MP involved in putting forward a 10 minute rule motion before Christmas in respect of the licensing of private car park operators. He sent CFI the following comment in relation to their efforts:

"I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the team at Consumer Focus for the invaluable support and useful information that they have been able to provide me with as I have been putting my Private Member's Bill, Consumer protection (Private Car Parks) Bill, together."

2.5.3. CFI presented their evidence of consumer detriment to the MP, as well to the OFT and the British Parking Association. As a result the OFT is considering the issues surrounding private car park operators in more detail and commissioning an internal legal opinion on the legality of the excess charges, as well as considering some other civil recovery issues.

2.5.4. CFI worked closely with one local authority when they submitted a successful application for additional funding for a legal opinion involving the practices of a large car parking company. The team was praised by one of the members of the fund panel for joining up other local authorities to make the best use of limited resources.

- 2.5.5. CFI is also working towards producing a briefing in respect of the Freedom Bill (which is intended to ban private wheel clamping) in partnership with Citizens Advice and TSI. The purpose of this will be to ensure that any issues that the Freedom Bill does not intend to raise, i.e. about regulation of the private operators, do get addressed.
- 2.5.6. CFI has been producing the self-help online guide for those leaseholders who want to take over management of their building from their current management company. This guide has been borne out of the complaints received by CFI about the way in which they have been treated by their management companies. It is intended that it will complement the existing work of LEASE and CF Labs will be turning the guide in to the online tool commencing early February 2011
- 2.5.7. CFI continues to investigate the alleged practice of letting agents and landlords switching tenant's energy supply mid-term without consent.
- 2.5.8. CFI is actively considering the issues facing static caravan owners after receiving referrals from the National Association of Caravan Owners, the leader of the Lib Dems in Wales and the Welsh Tenants Federation.
- 2.5.9. CFI met with the trading standards office local to Buy As You View (BAYV) to consider the business model and practices of the company which requires consumers to pay for appliances through a slot in their television. Following this meeting, BAYV has been very cooperative and responded to all requests for information. Consideration is now being given about what further work is necessary, possibly involving directing consumers to other forms of lower cost credit and also making the terms of BAYV as clear as possible.
- 2.5.10. The premium sites such as those that offer to deal with your passport applications are now being actively considered by the OFT. CFI gave evidence to the OFT, PhonepayPlus and Ofcom about these practices. CFI continues to monitor developments in this area and has passed some evidence to the media who may look at the call prevention services in more detail.

3. Future Challenges

- Retaining a viable operation in Wales after losing 50% of our Senior Advocate capacity
- Publishing and consulting on Consumer Focus Wales 'annual plan'. We are proactively having discussions with stakeholders and using these, and our other supporting evidence, to shape our project proposals for the remaining life of the organisation.
- Launching our reports on children in fuel poverty, care leavers and financial exclusion, switching energy suppliers in Wales and the safety of pushchairs.
- Stakeholder meeting on 23 February to discuss the future of the Post Office network in Wales.