

infocus

CONSUMER FOCUS SCOTLAND'S NEWSLETTER

Autumn 2010

The future of Consumer Focus Scotland

From Douglas Sinclair, Chair

As our stakeholders will already be aware, the UK Government recently announced its decision to transfer Consumer Focus' functions to Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland. Subject to the approval of the UK Parliament, it is proposed that the work of Consumer Focus Scotland will transfer to Citizens Advice Scotland in 2012, and at that point, it is planned that Consumer Focus will be abolished.

As it is expected that the necessary legislative measures, if passed by the UK Parliament, will not take effect until sometime in 2012, we will continue our work in making sure that consumers get a fair deal in both private markets and public services. We will be issuing a draft work plan for 2011/12 and look forward to working with you to deliver more benefits for consumers.

We will be working with the Scottish Government to ensure the best future management arrangements for the Scottish Government funded national development projects. We will also continue to work with the Scottish Government on the planned transfer of Waterwatch Scotland's advocacy powers to find a solution that works effectively for consumers.

I am immensely proud of everything which Consumer Focus Scotland, formed by the merger of the Scottish Consumer Council, energywatch and Postwatch, has achieved in the first two years of its life, and of the legacy of over thirty years of

work by these bodies in bringing about real benefits for consumers in Scotland. Consumer Focus and Consumer Focus Scotland have achieved a huge amount for consumers. Earlier this month, Consumer Focus obtained a £70 million energy bill refund for consumers across the UK. Consumer Focus Scotland's achievements have included:

- Establishing the Scotland-based Extra Help Unit (EHU) to support vulnerable consumers across Great Britain with their energy and post complaints. Since beginning work, the EHU has dealt with thousands of complaints and enquiries and obtained over £1.4 million in compensation for vulnerable consumers.
- Following years of campaigning and influencing work, helping to secure the passage of the Legal Services (Scotland) Bill which should widen choice for users of legal services and increase access to justice.
- Securing the inclusion of a new duty on scrutiny bodies to continuously improve user focus in the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act.
- Playing a key role in the establishment of the Post Office Challenge Fund for Scotland to support the development of Scotland's post offices.

If you have any questions about our current work or our future, please contact the Consumer Focus Scotland office.

Making access to civil justice a reality

The Civil Justice Advisory Group, chaired by Lord Coulsfield and supported by Consumer Focus Scotland, held its consultation seminar on Monday 13th September in Edinburgh. The event, attended by approximately 80 delegates including members of the judiciary, solicitors, advice agencies, policy makers and members of the public, gave participants the opportunity to discuss and debate the recommendations of the Scottish civil courts review.

The focus of the discussion was principally on the recommendations of the review relating to improving access to justice for party litigants, proposals for a 'third-tier' of judicial office and a new simplified procedure for cases under £5000, but also included discussion of whether greater links should be made between the courts, administrative justice and alternative dispute resolution.

The Group's wider consultation ended on 24th September. The feedback from the seminar and the written consultation will inform the development of a detailed report for the Scottish Government on how it should take forward some of the recommendations of the Scottish civil courts review. The final report will be submitted to the Scottish Government at the end of November and will be available on the Consumer Focus Scotland website.



Best practice in consumer engagement celebrated

Consumer Focus Scotland believes that involving users of public services in decisions about the kind of services they need and want to use, and how these can best be delivered, is an essential part of designing and implementing service change. Treating consumers as active partners, rather than passive recipients, is one of the most effective ways of ensuring services meet people's needs and are delivered effectively.

To support service providers to actively involve consumers in the tough decisions they have to make, we embarked on our first public sector 'best practice in consumer engagement' awards during the summer. Nominations were received from across the Scottish public sector and an expert panel assessed them against a set of best practice principles for consumer engagement. The eight winning projects met in August to share their experiences and meet members of the expert panel.

Nicola Munro, chair of the expert panel and Consumer Focus Scotland board member, said: 'User engagement is alive and well across a good range of Scotland's public services. We have the experience, tools and willingness to engage. The successful projects are showing the way.'

The projects will be highlighted in a best practice report published later this year. For further information on this project, please contact Jennifer Wallace on 0141 227 6450 or email Jennifer.wallace@consumerfocus.org.uk.

Call for transparency on broadband speeds

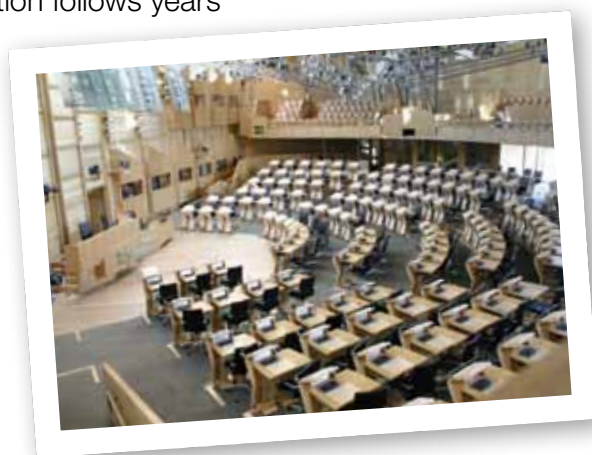
Following new figures showing that consumers are confused and frustrated by misleading broadband advertising, Consumer Focus Scotland has called on all broadband providers to follow the lead of Virgin Media by agreeing to publish details of the typical average speed customers receive each month.

Douglas White, telecoms expert at Consumer Focus Scotland, said: 'Consumers are rightly sick and tired of signing up for broadband and then discovering that they are getting nowhere near the top speeds that are advertised. This is a particular problem for many consumers in remote and rural parts of Scotland who are often further away from telephone exchanges and therefore experience a slower service. Providers need to be honest and transparent about the speeds customers receive.'

Consumer Focus Scotland is also urging broadband customers to check the speed they are receiving through an independent website and compare it to what they are paying for. Earlier this year the telecoms regulator Ofcom announced plans to make it easier for phone and broadband users to take their unresolved complaints to a free independent resolution service.

Legal Services Bill passed

On 6th October MSPs voted unanimously to pass the Legal Services (Scotland) Bill at Stage 3. Consumer Focus Scotland had been active in urging MSPs to back the Bill and widen choice for users of legal services. Marieke Dwarshuis, Director of Consumer Focus Scotland, said: 'We have long argued that these changes are in the interest of consumers, and are pleased that MSPs have paved the way for the development of a legal services market which better meets the needs of users of legal services in Scotland.' The passage of this legislation follows years of campaigning by the Scottish Consumer Council and Consumer Focus Scotland to increase competition in the legal services market and increase access to justice.



Property management consultation

In May the Scottish Government published its draft standards for a voluntary accreditation scheme for property managers. Consumer Focus Scotland has been a strong advocate for the development of a voluntary approach and has argued that in order for the accreditation scheme to be credible, it must reflect the needs of consumers and ensure they are actively involved in its development.

To ensure that the consumer voice was heard during the consultation process, we carried out a short consumer engagement project. This helped to inform our response and provide the consultation with insight into consumers' views on the content of the draft standards and explored consumers' views on the implementation of the accreditation scheme.

Our response to the consultation paper and the report of the consumer engagement project can be found on our website.

User Focus duty comes into force

From 1st October 2010, the bodies that inspect, regulate and audit Scottish public services will be under a duty to improve their 'user focus'. Consumer Focus Scotland campaigned for the duty, which is part of the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010, after research showed that consumers felt scrutiny activity was too disconnected from their experiences as users. As part of the duty, Consumer Focus Scotland is calling on scrutiny bodies to implement the seven key tests of user focus, explored in the pamphlet 'User Focus in the Scrutiny of Public Services' published last year.

Jennifer Wallace, Principal Policy Advocate at Consumer Focus Scotland, said: 'We hope that by implementing this duty, and following our seven key tests, scrutiny bodies will see measureable improvements in the user focus of their activities. This is particularly important in the context of reduction in public sector budgets: resources spent on inspection, audit and regulation must clearly benefit the end user of public services.'

Consulting consumers on foodborne diseases

Consumer Focus Scotland recently responded to the Food Standard Agency's consultation on their foodborne disease strategy 2010-15. To supplement this response, our Consumer Network of 420 volunteers



were surveyed for their views on food safety risks in the home in relation to chicken.

There were some interesting findings. Respondents were aware of cross contamination as an issue, but nearly half stated they would wash the chicken before cooking, which is not advised by the Food Standards Agency as it could spread contamination around the kitchen. The unwrapping of packaging of chicken was another potential area for cross contamination, with few taking enough precautions. Volunteers looked at labels for information on preparing, handling and cooking chicken (43%). Many felt these could be clearer and put on the front, not underneath where they can be fiddly to remove leading to more possible cross contamination. Although the majority would defrost chicken correctly (70%), a third would leave it on the work surface at room temperature which could lead to food poisoning.

If you would like to join the Consumer Network to have your say on topical consumer issues and keep up to date on Consumer Focus Scotland's work, please contact Gill MacGregor on 0141 227 8432 or gill.macgregor@consumerfocus.org.uk

HRIS WINS PRESTIGIOUS AWARD

At the British Medical Association Patient Information Awards, Health Rights Information Scotland's 'Caring and Consent' leaflet won the carers' information prize. The multilingual DVD and web-based resource 'How to use the Health Service in Scotland' was highly commended in the electronic or web resources category.

In recent months, HRIS has also produced new information for the Scottish Government:

- 'The Chronic Medication Service' describes a new service for people with a long term condition
- 'Decisions about Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation' explains what CPR is and how decisions about CPR are made, and
- 'Access to New Medicines' describes the process medicines go through before they can be prescribed.

We have also revised some of

our core information, including 'Consent – it's your decision', 'Consent – it's your right' and 'Have your say. This information is available at www.hris.org.uk.

SMALL GRANTS IMPACT

Applicants to the annual Community Food and Health (Scotland) small grant scheme have yet again, despite all the challenges and uncertainty currently faced by local communities, provided no shortage of well-planned, imaginative and tangible proposals to tackle the barriers faced by some of Scotland's most disadvantaged consumers.

The 56 who are receiving funding, from Stornoway to Stranraer, should be congratulated for being able to achieve so much with grants that average only just over £2,500. Investing in all sorts of organisations from playgroups to lunchclubs, for everything from gardening equipment to cooking classes, the message was loud and clear – to achieve a fairer, healthier and greener Scotland you need buy-in the length and breadth of the county, particularly from those traditionally hardest to reach and with the most to gain. www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk

AWARD HOLDERS SCORE A HAT TRICK

Just over four years on from the launch of the healthyliving award, the earliest award



holders are showing superb commitment and consistency by renewing their awards for a third term.

First to achieve this success was Eurest Services at Chivas Brothers in Dumbarton.

The award is valid for two years, after which establishments must pass a further assessment visit to renew their award, or opt to try and attain the higher level healthyliving award *plus*.

In recent months increasing numbers of award holders have been opting to go for the *plus* award, encouraged by the realisation that with just a little bit more effort they could achieve this extra special accolade. With all this activity, an estimated 220,000 people a day on average are eating in award-holding establishments where it's easy to eat healthily, which is great news for Scotland's diet.

Community Food and Health (Scotland), Health Rights Information Scotland and healthyliving Award are Scottish Government funded projects managed by Consumer Focus Scotland.



Digital plans must tackle exclusion

Consumer Focus Scotland welcomed the publication of the Scottish Government's *A Digital Ambition for Scotland* paper on its plans for Scotland's digital future. The paper sets out some high level targets for digital services in Scotland and, crucially, indicates that the Scottish Government will publish a detailed Digital Strategy and Action Plan in the next few months.

Douglas Sinclair, Chair of Consumer Focus Scotland, said: 'We first called for a digital strategy for Scotland over a year ago and are pleased that the Scottish Government has published more detail on its future plans.'

'We welcome the government's commitment to improving the uptake of broadband in Scotland and to making superfast broadband available throughout the country, but our central concern is the need to ensure that consumers in Scotland, particularly those suffering disadvantage, are not excluded from the digital future.'

'The more detailed strategy and action plan that are to follow must ensure that the needs of consumers are at the heart of this work, and should be very clear about tackling digital exclusion.'

More information about Consumer Focus Scotland's work on this issue is available on our website.



Review must have consumer interest at heart

Consumer Focus Scotland responded to the launch of Ofgem's review of charges for using Britain's gas and electricity grids by calling for the consumer interest to be at its heart. Trisha McAuley, Deputy Director, said: 'Any change to transmission charges will have a direct impact on the level of household energy bills and the review must assess the likely impact on consumers of all possible options for change. We understand the concerns of both the Scottish Government and the business sector that the current system may be hampering economic growth and the development of the renewables industry. However, as fuel poverty and fuel debt continue to rise in Scotland, the voice of the consumer must be heard in this important debate.' Ofgem has promised that Project TransmiT will be an "open, comprehensive and objective" review of the charges. The initial findings of the review are due next spring, with a decision on any changes in summer.



Tackling healthcare associated infection



Infections contracted while attending healthcare services are an important patient safety issue and a key challenge facing NHSScotland. In recognition of the scale of healthcare associated infection (HAI) in Scotland, reducing HAI is a priority on the health agenda for the Scottish Government. Over the past decade, a major programme of work has been undertaken to tackle HAIs, and national standards for HAI have been published by NHS Quality Improvement Scotland (NHS QIS).

As part of a commitment to ensure these national standards are being met and to provide public assurance, the Healthcare Environment Inspectorate (HEI) was established as part of NHS QIS in April 2009. HEI's work includes both announced and unannounced inspections in acute NHS Scottish hospitals. These are planned at least once every three years and are undertaken by a team of inspectors which include public volunteers. During the onsite visits, the HEI team:

- inspect a sample of wards and departments,
- meet with patients and visitors to elicit their views on hospital cleanliness, identify issues of importance to them and use these to inform inspections,
- interview staff to ascertain their knowledge on the prevention of HAI and whether policies and procedures are being used, and
- hold group meetings with senior NHS board staff.

The inspection findings for each hospital are published in a report, which also sets out requirements (actions NHS boards need to take to comply with the HAI standards) and recommendations (national guidance hospitals should follow to improve standards of care). These reports are publicly available on the NHS QIS website (www.nhshealthquality.org). If HEI identifies a serious risk to patients during their inspection, a further unannounced follow-up inspection can be scheduled.

Between 29th September 2009 and 10th August 2010, HEI undertook 24 announced inspections and five unannounced inspections of 23 hospitals in the 14 Scottish NHS boards. During this time, HEI established 145 requirements and made 150 recommendations. In its second year, it is anticipated that most of the inspections will be unannounced.

NHS boards are required to produce an improvement action plan to address the requirements and recommendations, against which progress is monitored by HEI. In all cases HEI expects NHS boards to address all requirements to raise standards of cleanliness, hygiene and infection control in acute hospitals.

HEI will publish its first annual report in November summarising overall findings on the quality of infection control, hygiene and cleanliness in acute Scottish hospitals inspected to date, and articulating what needs further improvement. The general themes include the cleanliness of hospitals, hand-hygiene practice, the maintenance of hospital buildings and equipment, infection control procedures and policies as well as systems to assess the risk of infection, and clarity of staff roles and accountability for infection control. The annual report will be available at www.nhshealthquality.org

HEI works independently of the Scottish Government and NHS boards. The inspectorate is led by Susan Brimelow, and the team can be contacted on 0131 623 4300 or by email at safeandclean.qis@nhs.net

REFUND FOR NPOWER CUSTOMERS

Consumer Focus welcomed npower's announcement on 1st October that it will be refunding customers who overpaid for gas in 2007. In 2007 npower changed the way it applied its charges for the first block of higher-priced gas units which households pay, but this change was not communicated effectively to customers. An estimated 1.8 million customers across the UK are likely to have paid for more of these higher-priced units than they expected to pay. Consumer Focus worked with the company to secure around £70 million in refunds.

HOME INSULATION FUNDING WELCOMED

Responding to the Scottish Government's announcement of plans to support thousands of households in Scotland to be insulated this winter, Douglas Sinclair, Chair of Consumer Focus Scotland, said: 'This expansion of the Home Insulation Scheme is a welcome development for consumers who want to make their homes more energy efficient and save money.' The £15 million funding, made available under the Home

Insulation Scheme, will benefit 19 local authorities across Scotland with around 200,000 households due to be contacted over the next few months.

POST OFFICE PROJECT UNDERWAY

Consumer Focus Scotland has embarked upon a new project to look at the delivery of local government services through the post office network. The work will comprise a mapping study to explore the extent to which local authorities in Scotland currently use post offices in their area to support service delivery; analysis of the benefits and challenges that both local authorities and post offices experience in using this model of service delivery; an international literature review to explore the use of this approach in other countries; and an omnibus survey to gather consumers' views on using the post office to access local government services. For



If you have any comment on this issue of In Focus or are interested in contributing to a future one please email ryan.norton@consumerfocus.org.uk or call 0141 227 1852.

more information about the project please contact douglas.white@consumerfocus.org.uk or 0141 226 5261.

CONSUMERS AND THE ECONOMY

Douglas Sinclair, Chair of Consumer Focus Scotland, was among a panel of high profile speakers at the New Economic Reality: Meeting the Challenge conference on 29th September in Edinburgh. He put the case for users to be at the heart of decision-making about changes to public services as economic austerity measures begin to bite.

TOP UP SAFE CAMPAIGN

Consumer Focus Scotland has backed the energy companies 'Top up Safe' campaign to raise public awareness of top-up scams for electricity pre-payment meters. An estimated 85,000 households across the UK are already feared to have been affected by the doorstep scam which leaves customers paying for their electricity twice – once to the criminals and then to their suppliers. Anyone affected by the scam should contact their supplier or Consumer Direct for advice. More information about the campaign can be found at www.top-upsafe.com

