

Consumers Count!

Newsletter for Consumer Network volunteers



This special edition of our newsletter is to mark our 25th anniversary and also to celebrate the fact that we now have over 500 members! All of us at Consumer Focus Scotland would like to thank you for all your contributions to our work and this newsletter will look back at some of the research projects you have helped with and where you have made a difference.

Research projects over the years – a selection!

1998 – bus timetables

All the timetables that were examined by our volunteers provided the basic information on bus times and routes, and could be understood. However, no timetable provided the full range of information which would be helpful to a potential traveller. Overall, we found the presentation and information to be of the highest standard in timetables produced by Dumfries and Galloway Council. First Bus and Stagecoach timetables were also well presented. At the other end of the scale were some poorly photocopied sheets providing very basic information only.

Result – improved bus timetables



1999 – health care for older people

We circulated a survey to our members and the results showed that our respondents were reasonably satisfied with health care services for older people. However, some of our volunteers told us that they had concerns about the availability of community care services and the impact this may have on health in the future.

Result – evidence to support our response to 'Better care for all our futures' consultation in this area



2000 – labeling of genetically modified food

Our volunteers told us that they would like to know if genetically modified ingredients are present in food that they eat. The system in place, which requires catering establishments to label food only if it does contain GM soya or maize, does not enable consumers to obtain this information easily. The survey also indicated that staff in some catering establishments are not very well informed about the presence or otherwise of GM ingredients in the food they serve.



Result – we recommended that if the regulations about GM soya and maize are to be meaningful, then all catering establishments should be able to provide this information easily to consumers

2001 – licensing of butchers

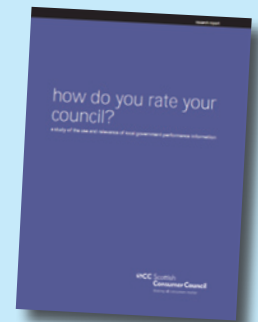
Following the Lanarkshire E-Coli outbreak we wanted to find out if people were in favour of licensing. Most of our members bought meat from supermarkets, although half used butchers' shops. Nearly all were aware of the importance of keeping raw meat separate from ready-to-eat food. Nearly three-quarters of our respondents thought that licensing would reduce the risk of food poisoning from shops, and they did not think that licensing was an unnecessary burden for small businesses.



Result – evidence to support the licensing of butchers in Scotland

2002 – How do you rate your council?

We wanted to examine how local authorities throughout Scotland report information on their performance to members of the public. This resulted in the publication of our report – How do you rate your council? We found that over half of the councils provided a performance report which goes beyond the statutory newspaper advertisement, but the majority of our volunteers were sent a copy of the newspaper article.



Result – evidence that there is room for improvement in reporting methods for Scottish local authorities

2003 – Internet access

Public internet facilities are generally situated in local authority libraries. Our members were asked to visit their local library to assess how accessible the internet facilities were. We found that these facilities seem to be situated within easy reach of most of our volunteers, whether they are using public transport or their own car. Other types of location mentioned were leisure centre (4%), archive & information centre (2%), chemist (2%), council offices (2%), hotel (2%) and tourist board offices (2%).



Result – evidence that most of our volunteers could access the internet fairly easily through local libraries and other locations in rural areas

2004 – Attitudes to the Scottish Government’s smoking ban

A large majority of our members thought that all enclosed public places should be smoke-free (87%). Almost all of our respondents (99%) agreed or strongly agreed that all public transport should be smoke-free. 80% agreed that people should only be allowed to smoke in public places if there was a separate smoking area, and smoke could not get into other parts of the building.



Result – 89% of respondents would support a ban on smoking in enclosed public places and this evidence was used to inform our consultation response to the government

2005 – viewing your personal health records

Our research suggested that some of the front-line staff contacted by our volunteers did not know much about the rules and regulations regarding patients’ access to their health records. This was what we would have expected, as few patients do ask to see their health records. This is a relatively simple area, and clear information is available for patients which receptionists should be aware of.



Result – we recommended that NHS staff should be made more aware of patients’ rights in this area.

2005 – recycling

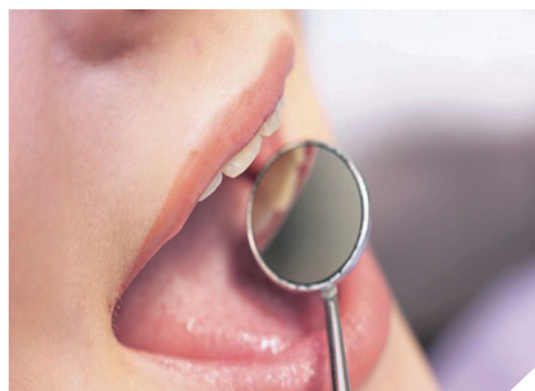
Our volunteers told us that they wanted consumers to change their purchasing habits and not buy packaged goods, and in addition to this they wanted to see shoppers re-using plastic carrier bags and/or more use of “proper” cloth shopping bags or paper bags (recyclable). Most of our respondents reported that they would like to see an increase in the availability and accessibility of local recycling banks and more kerbside collections provided by local authorities.



Result – we recommended that more kerbside collections should be provided

2006 – access to NHS dental services

We found that 80% of the surgeries in our sample provided a mixture of NHS and private treatment and 15% offered private treatment alone. 5% provided only NHS treatment (all of these were community dental clinics). Our volunteers reported that 80% of the surgeries in our sample provided free NHS treatment to children, and 78% provided free NHS treatment to exempt adults.



Result – we wanted to see an end to this postcode lottery and access to NHS treatment available to patients all over Scotland

2009 – review of Waterwatch Scotland’s new website

We asked our members to help us to assess how user-friendly Waterwatch’s website was. The majority of our volunteers told us that they were able to navigate around with no problems with 86% describing the website as ‘clear and easy to use’. In addition to this, 89% reported that it was written in plain English and was easy to understand.



Result – website became more user-friendly for consumers

2009 – assessment of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman’s (SPSO) new complaints form

The SPSO invited us to have our say on their new complaints form to make sure that it is as user-friendly as possible. They asked for our help to find out what consumers think about the its overall design, language and whether it is easy to complete. Overall, our survey showed that most of our volunteers viewed the complaints form very positively, and a few were highly complimentary in their feedback.



Result – mostly positive feedback with a few areas for possible improvement, for example, too much emphasis on the website for further help and a lack of clarity about timescales.

2010 – Food Standards Agency guide on country of origin labeling

Our members were invited to help the Food Standards Agency develop a guide on country of origin labeling for consumers. A draft of the leaflet was circulated and we found that the majority of our respondents (79%) reported that the draft guidance had the right balance between being informative but not over technical. Most of our volunteers (77%) thought the information was clear and easy to understand. Some felt it would be better to have a short summary with details on how to obtain the full document if needed. A majority (83%) found that the examples provided were a good range of products, although some felt there should be more non-meat examples. The point was also made that country of origin labeling is not important to those consumers who purchase solely on price.



Result – new booklet on country of origin labelling produced to inform consumers in this area

2011 – user-focus by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary for Scotland (HMICS)

HMICS asked Consumer Focus Scotland to help them explore consumers' views of their latest Annual Report (2009-10). They were keen to make sure that as many people as possible were able to access their reports and wanted to find out what consumers thought about the quality of information given. Our findings showed that 7% of our sample rated the quality of the information as 'outstanding', 36% as 'good' and 41% 'satisfactory'. However, 9% rated it as 'unsatisfactory' and 7% did not give a rating.



Result – the findings from our survey will be used to help improve the reports published by HMICS in the future

What our members say...



John from Shetland

Without a group like the Consumer Network the public would be so much worse off - this is an important voice for the general public in Scotland - I hope it continues for many years.



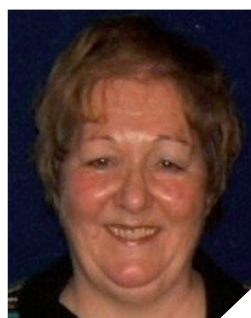
Valerie from Alexandria

I particularly enjoyed the utilities presentations and discussions.



Alex from Kilsyth

My membership has definitely been worthwhile - CFS has done an excellent job in highlighting issues for consumers.



Margaret from Ayr

My membership has been very worthwhile – I've been made to feel 'one of the team' especially when I've had occasion to visit the office.



Jim from Stewarton

Looking back over the years, I think that checking my medical records gave me the most enjoyment - a veritable 'walk down memory lane!'

Coming up...

CFS is now representing the needs of water consumers too. We have been given a range of statutory powers to ensure organisations in the water industry take account of what we say.

As a result of this we will be consulting you on various water-related issues over the next few months.

New volunteers needed

If you, or someone you know, would like to find out more about joining our Consumer Network please contact Gill MacGregor, Consumer Engagement Officer at:

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