

# infocus

CONSUMER FOCUS SCOTLAND'S NEWSLETTER

Winter 2010/2011

## Consumer engagement best practice highlighted

Consumer Focus Scotland has launched a new publication highlighting best practice in engaging with users of public services. *Consumer Engagement in Decision-Making: Best Practice from Scottish Public Services* re-iterates Consumer Focus Scotland's view that decision-making in the public sector benefits from the active engagement of consumers.

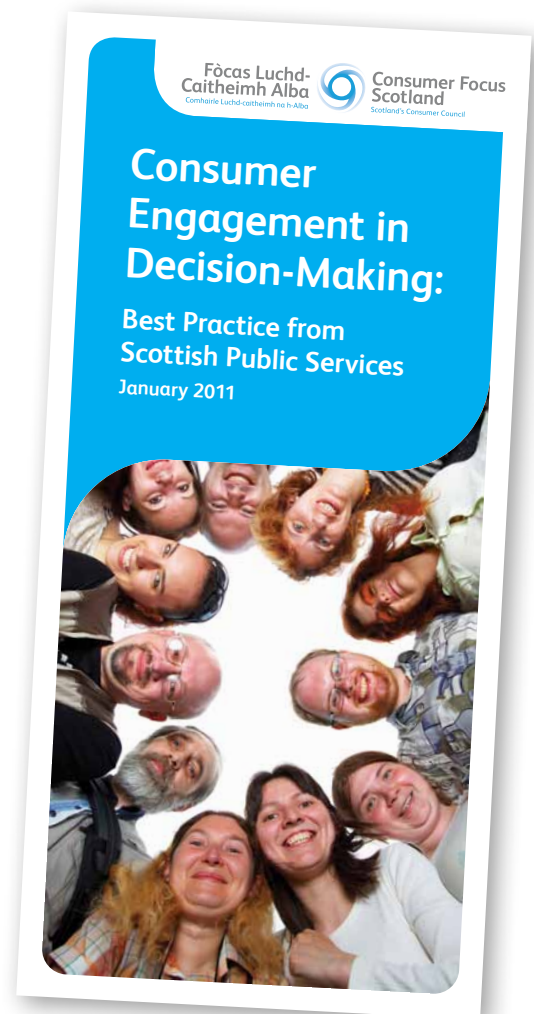
The report uses best practice examples, discussions with staff involved in the projects, and the research literature to explore the principles and practice of high quality consumer engagement.

Jennifer Wallace, Principal Policy Advocate and public services policy lead at Consumer Focus Scotland, said: "With public service providers across Scotland having

to take hard decisions about the funding and provision of services, the need to effectively engage with the communities they serve about how services are designed and provided in the future will be more important than ever.

"We believe that this report has the potential to make a significant contribution to the way in which public service providers make decisions. The best practice it sets out offers tangible examples of comprehensive and meaningful engagement with local communities, especially traditionally hard to reach groups, on service change."

The report and a summary leaflet can be downloaded from the Consumer Focus Scotland website, and the leaflet is also available in hard copy.



# Energy Best Deal campaign update

Work to increase the support available for low income and vulnerable consumers to get the best deal on their energy supply has been ongoing through the winter period as the Consumer Focus Scotland Energy Best Deal Scotland campaign, supported by Ofgem, continued to roll out. The campaign, which aims to build capacity among frontline advice providers on providing switching advice to consumers, has trained nearly 100 advisers across Scotland since its launch in November. They are now using the training to advise consumers in their local area about smarter switching, as well as passing on information to colleagues in their organisations.

The campaign has also sought to raise consumer awareness of the potential benefits of switching

energy tariff or supplier, with widespread media coverage of how to switch smartly and the savings that can be made, as well as by distributing information materials for consumers through a wide range of information providers. Consumer Focus Scotland also took the campaign to the Scottish Parliament, with the help of Kenneth Gibson MSP, briefing a cross-party group of 15 MSPs from every corner of Scotland about the campaign and how it can help their constituents. Mr Gibson also tabled a parliamentary motion backing the campaign.

The adviser training programme will continue through February and March and Consumer Focus Scotland can also give



bespoke presentations on the campaign and its objectives to interested organisations. For more information please visit the Consumer Focus Scotland website or email Annie McGovern.



## Off-gas energy problems

Following the rocketing price of heating oil and difficulties ordering new supplies during the severe weather conditions, Consumer Focus Scotland is looking to obtain further qualitative evidence of the problems faced by off-gas consumers over the winter period. This feedback will help to inform new research on a larger scale of the experiences of off-gas consumers in Scotland which is planned for later in the year, as well as supporting our input to the Office of Fair Trading's off-grid energy market study. Feedback on problems with heating oil, LPG or other off-grid energy supplies should be emailed to [mail@consumerfocus-scotland.org.uk](mailto:mail@consumerfocus-scotland.org.uk) or posted to Andrew Faulk, Consumer Focus Scotland, Royal Exchange House, 100 Queen Street, Glasgow G1 3DN by the end of February.

# Working to protect consumers

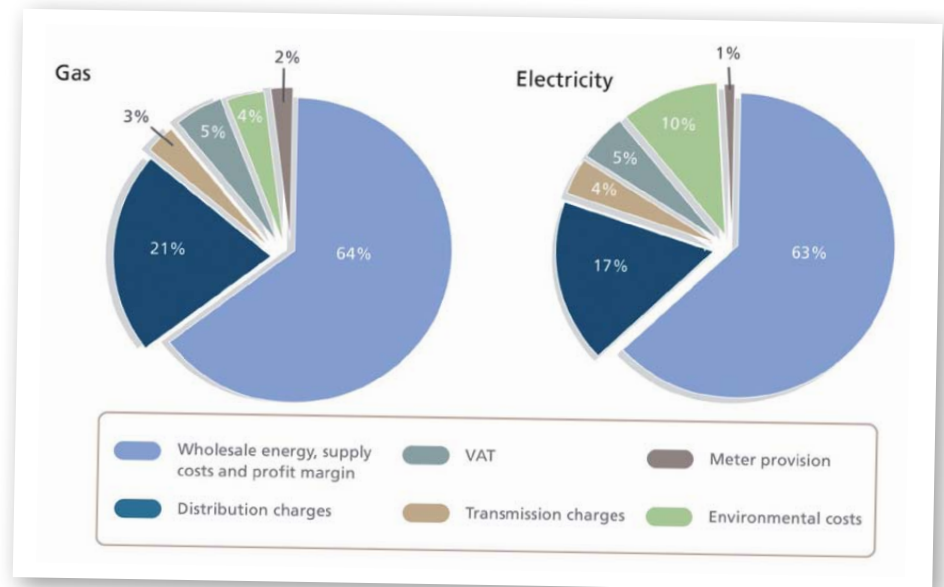
Ofgem's first duty is to protect the interests of gas and electricity consumers, both present and future. We do this by promoting effective competition in the energy markets and by regulating the monopoly companies which deliver gas and electricity to our homes and businesses.

We also take a longer term view of consumers' interests. For example, this includes planning for the investment needed in our energy infrastructure to maintain security of supply and curb climate change and promote sustainable development.

The breakdown of an average consumer's bill shows the different activities and costs involved in our energy system. The average gas bill for a standard direct debit account is £653 and for electricity it is £461.

The biggest part of our bills are the wholesale costs, supply costs and the profit margin. While Ofgem doesn't regulate the prices that energy companies charge consumers, we do have powers to investigate the energy market and place obligations on companies if we find they aren't treating consumers fairly.

In 2008 we completed a significant review of the retail market, called the Probe. We found that there were unjustifiable price differentials for customers on some types of tariff, such as pre-payment meters and that suppliers were charging more to people



living inside their former monopoly areas. So we introduced new rules to ban undue discrimination between consumers. One of these requires that any difference in price between payment methods offered by a supplier should reflect the costs they incur for providing that payment method. Average premiums for prepayment meters compared with direct debit have dropped from £111 to £69 (-38%).

We continue to monitor how the changes we introduced are delivering for consumers and in September 2010 launched an investigation into allegations of doorstep and telephone mis-selling by four companies.

In November 2010, our quarterly analysis of retail prices showed that the profit margins on a standard dual fuel tariff (gas and electricity) had risen to £90, an increase of 38% from September. We decided it was right to ask if the companies are playing it straight with consumers

and embarked on a comprehensive review of the retail market. With newly available information, we are investigating how companies are implementing the changes made following the 2008 Probe and if further action is needed to ensure the market is providing value for money. We will report in March.

Other significant elements of consumer's bill are environmental costs (government schemes to encourage the move to a low carbon economy) and transmission and distribution costs (the pipes and wires that bring energy to our homes and businesses). Over the next decade, the UK faces unprecedented challenges to deliver our long term energy security, and to meet our emissions targets. In a complex marketplace, Ofgem will continue to ensure that the interests of current and future consumers are centre stage.

For further information contact Alison Hardie on 0141 331 6009.

## Private Rented Housing Bill

The Private Rented Housing (Scotland) Bill was introduced to the Scottish Parliament in October 2010. As a member of the Private Rented Sector Strategy Group, Consumer Focus Scotland has played an important role in helping to ensure that the provisions in the Bill are in the consumer interest. We are pleased that the Bill includes a number of proposals to improve communication between tenants and landlords, and to improve the information provided to tenants at different stages of their tenancy.

In particular, we have been supportive of the measures in the Bill which place a statutory requirement on landlords to provide tenants with a standard information pack at the beginning of a tenancy. This will help to ensure that tenants receive vital information on a wide range of important issues, and will therefore bring significant benefits for consumers in this sector.

Since the Bill was introduced, we have provided both written and oral evidence to the Local Government and Communities Committee as part of its scrutiny of the Bill, and we are represented on the Ministerial Sounding Board where we have the opportunity to provide further feedback and views.

## Consumer agenda for Holyrood

Consumer Focus Scotland has been working on a Consumer Agenda for the next Scottish Parliament. The agenda, which features 11 key consumer policy priorities for the next Parliament and Government to consider, will be launched in February. We want the agenda to help inform MSPs and political parties about the issues they could implement to make a real difference to consumers in Scotland across different sectors. It will be shared with all current MSPs and candidates and a discussion seminar will also be held on 14<sup>th</sup> March to consider the Agenda alongside the draft Consumer Focus Annual Plan for 2011-12.



## Putting people at the heart of Scottish Civil Justice

The Civil Justice Advisory Group has published its final report, recommending a series of reforms designed to improve the process of dealing with civil disputes in Scotland. Its proposals aim to address the various needs that users have at each stage in resolving their disputes, as effectively and early as possible in the process. The recommendations of the report were informed by the Group's consultation process, and a consultation seminar.

The Civil Justice Advisory Group was first convened by the Scottish Consumer Council in 2004. Its original report, published in November 2005, recommended that some important aspects of the civil justice system in Scotland should be reviewed and four of its six recommendations were adopted within the remit of the Scottish civil courts review. The Group was reconvened by Consumer Focus Scotland last year, under the Chairmanship of the Right Honourable Lord Coulsfield, to consider the proposals of the civil courts review, which were published in September 2009, and to make recommendations about future reforms.

The Group's focus was principally on the recommendations of the review relating to pre-court measures, including improving access to justice for party litigants, the proposed 'third -tier' of civil jurisdiction, and the proposed new simplified procedure, but also included discussion of whether greater links should be made between the courts, administrative justice and alternative dispute resolution. The full report and a summary version are available on the Consumer Focus Scotland website.



## AN APPETITE FOR POLICY

Two of Consumer Focus Scotland's Scottish Government-funded initiatives, the healthy living award and Community Food and Health (Scotland), continue to make an impact not only on the ground but at policy level as well. Both were invited to have stalls at the recent national food and drink policy conference, Tomorrow's menu, held in Edinburgh in November. CFHS chair the policy's working group on 'food access and affordability', as well as sitting on its 'grow your own' working group.

CFHS also assisted in the formulation of the recently launched Maternal and Infant Nutrition strategy and the forthcoming Obesity Route Map, the latter specifically featuring the healthy living award and incorporating its activity into the strategy's indicators of impact. Specific national policy discussions around food culture and food advocacy have also benefited from both projects being well-grounded in front-line activity.

[www.healthylivingaward.co.uk](http://www.healthylivingaward.co.uk)  
[www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk](http://www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk)

## EHEALTH EXPLAINED

The Health Rights Information Scotland team has been working on a leaflet and video clip about eHealth which explain the increasing use of computers in health care, and in particular how this affects the way personal health information is stored and shared. Both the leaflet and video clip are now complete, and will be published and distributed by the Scottish Government eHealth Programme. We hope the leaflet will be widely available in GP surgeries and other NHS settings, as well as on-line. Project staff have completed reviews and updating of the factsheets about entitlement to NHS services for overseas visitors, and of the *Have your say!* leaflet which explains to children and



young people how they can provide comments or make complaints about NHS care or services. All the updated information is available on the website [www.hris.org.uk](http://www.hris.org.uk)

## PUBLICATIONS REVISED

The Scottish Accessible Information Forum's Standards working group has now rewritten the SAIF Standards for Disability Information and Advice Provision in Scotland to make it a new, short checklist of best practice. It will be available soon on-line, in hard copy and in alternative formats. Similarly, the Ecommunciation working group is rewriting Making Ecommunication Accessible to focus directly on how to make websites accessible. The revised publications will be available in the next few weeks. Sign up for the SAIF ebulletin at [www.saifscotland.org.uk](http://www.saifscotland.org.uk) to be kept up-to-date.

CFHS, HRIS, SAIF and healthy living Award are Scottish Government funded projects managed by Consumer Focus Scotland.

# Post Office Challenge Fund



The Scottish Government has announced the 49 post offices that have been successful in their applications for funding from the Post Office Challenge Fund. The winning post offices have each been awarded grants of up to £25,000 and will be using this money to improve the services that they offer to customers.

For example, several post offices are using the money to open new cafe facilities at their premises, others are developing a website to support their retail work, and one is introducing a new tourist information service. Consumer Focus Scotland previously played a key role in lobbying for a Post Office Challenge Fund to be introduced in Scotland.

## Property Factors (Scotland) Bill

Consumer Focus Scotland continues to campaign in support of the Property Factors (Scotland) Bill. The Members' Bill, brought forward by Patricia Ferguson MSP, aims to improve the quality of services received by consumers and provides an independent route for resolving complaints against property managers. Our briefing paper, issued in advance of the Stage 1 debate in December, provided MSPs with an overview of our work in this field, stretching back over a decade. On 26th January 2011, the Bill passed Stage 2 of parliamentary scrutiny and the Stage 3 debate (the final approval of the Bill) is expected in March 2011. However, amendments to further strengthen the rights of consumers of land owning maintenance companies, lodged by Patricia Ferguson MSP, were not supported by the Local Government and Communities Committee at Stage 2. We will continue to advocate for improvements to the rights of consumers of land owning maintenance companies during Stage 3, with the release of our research into the experiences of consumers of land owning maintenance companies.

## RBS accounts at the Post Office

The UK Government has announced that Royal Bank of Scotland customers will be able to access their current and business accounts at the post office for the first time, as well as at bank branches. This will bring particular benefits for consumers in Scotland and is something that Consumer Focus has called for previously. We believe that HSBC and Santander – the only other high street banks who do not provide access to their current accounts at the post office – should now follow suit, and commit to making this service available to their customers.

# Satisfaction tool goes from strength to strength

The Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tool (CSMT) has grown from strength to strength in recent months, with almost 50% of Scottish councils now using it.

Established to provide a standardised service evaluation framework across the country, CSMT is a simple tool that allows local authorities to evaluate their performance and effectively benchmark with each other.

At present, 13 councils have adopted it but more are expected to follow in the coming weeks, with expressions of interest being received from all areas of the country. Already, CSMT is helping to drive service improvement across Scotland and target resources where they are most needed.

The City of Edinburgh Council recently provided a compelling snapshot of CSMT's value. The local authority used CSMT as an Exit Survey with 3000 library customers over the last three months – an exercise that demonstrated how important it can be in offering a robust, comprehensive and credible evaluation of services.

“A shared standard for customer satisfaction is an essential part of improving services for customers across Scotland,” said David Porteous, Research Project Officer at City of Edinburgh.

“We have lots of objective, well-defined process measures, but until now we haven't had a robust way of measuring customer service across local authorities and other public services. CSMT enables us to learn from each other in a structured, productive and cost-effective way.

“However, the success of CSMT depends on uptake across the public sector - the more people use it, the more useful it will be. We're excited to be working with the Scottish Housing Best Value Network (SHBVN) and other organisations to ensure we get the most out of this tool.”

The creation of a common, national framework from which to benchmark is a key aspect of the CSMT, but unlocking the full potential of this feature



**CUSTOMER  
SATISFACTION  
MEASUREMENT  
TOOL**

on a national scale is wholly dependent on all councils and public sector bodies adopting CSMT and embracing its value.

A benchmarking pathfinder using CSMT in housing services has now begun, in conjunction with SHBVN and the Improvement Service, and involving seven local authorities across Scotland.

Beginning in early 2011, the pathfinder is expected to run until September, allowing for thorough implementation, roll-out and evaluation, using the findings to drive service improvement based on good practice identified elsewhere.

Developed by the Improvement Service, Consumer Focus Scotland, LARIA and Scottish Government, CSMT is available free of charge to councils and public sector partners.

Based on a comprehensive question bank of five key customer satisfaction drivers, CSMT saves time and money on developing in-house performance measurement tools and aligns to other national self-assessment techniques like Customer Service Excellence and the Public Service Improvement Framework (PSIF).

CSMT comes with pre-built survey templates and scripts, which can be used online, via telephone, through face-to-face interaction or by post. These resources can all be localised by councils and their partners.

The online CSMT Community of Practice website hosts all the essential resources and is attracting new members on a daily basis. Visit the site [HERE](#).

For more information, contact Tallulah Lines on 01506 775584 or at [csmt@improvementservice.org.uk](mailto:csmt@improvementservice.org.uk)

## NEW RULES WELCOMED

Consumer Focus Scotland has welcomed the introduction of rules clarifying the use of Lay Support or 'McKenzie Friends' into Scotland's sheriff courts. The court rules governing the use of McKenzie Friends came about following a long campaign by various organisations and individuals.

Gemma Crompton, Senior Policy Advocate on Legal Services for Consumer Focus Scotland, said: "It has long been our view that McKenzie Friends offer valuable support to unrepresented parties in court. We are delighted that users of the civil justice system in Scotland now have clarity on the use of McKenzie Friends within the sheriff court, as well as the functions they are able to perform."

## POSTAL SERVICES INQUIRY

The Scottish Affairs Committee published its report into postal services in Scotland in December 2010. Consumer Focus Scotland and Consumer Focus jointly submitted written evidence to the Committee, and also gave oral evidence to the Committee on 8 December. The Committee's final report makes a series of recommendations on the protection of the Universal Service Obligation; the proposed separation

of Royal Mail and Post Office Ltd; the number and nature of post offices in Scotland; the delivery of new services through the post office network; and the parcel delivery market. A number of the Committee's conclusions reflect the issues raised by Consumer Focus Scotland and Consumer Focus.



## BROADBAND SURVEY

Consumer Focus Scotland recently conducted a survey with our Consumer Network to find out what they think about the service they receive from their broadband service providers. We were interested to find out: why consumers chose a particular provider, how satisfied they are with their current provider and their broadband speed, what they think of customer service from their provider and their experience and attitudes to switching provider. The full survey results are available on the Consumer Focus Scotland website.

## PROMOTING USER ENGAGEMENT

Nicola Munro, Consumer Focus Scotland board member, will speak at the Holyrood New Economic Reality Conference on Wednesday 16th March. She will address the principles of good engagement and explore the gains for public service providers who do engage with service users, the criteria and tools for successful engagement, and practical and successful approaches developed recently by Scottish councils and health boards, some in particularly challenging areas like service tendering and budget reductions.

## TENANT DEPOSIT SCHEME

Commenting on the Scottish Government's announcement that regulations governing the approval of a national Tenancy Deposit Scheme are expected to become law in March, Douglas White, Senior Policy Advocate for Consumer Focus Scotland, said: "We welcome the introduction of this scheme and the new protection it will give tenants. Getting a deposit back has often been an uphill struggle for many tenants in the private rented sector and the scheme will result in a fairer and more efficient system for all concerned. The hard work now has to be done to ensure the scheme is implemented as soon as possible."

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](mailto:ryan.norton@consumerfocus.org.uk) or call 0141 227 1852.