

CONSUMER NETWORK FOR SCOTLAND MEETING

Thursday 14 December 2023

10:00 – 12:00

Edinburgh

Present:

David Wilson (Chair); Sam Ghibaldan; Douglas White; Tracey Reilly; Eleanor Mullan; Craig McClue; Eva Brahim – Consumer Scotland
Advice Direct Scotland – Pamela Stewart
Citizens Advice Scotland – David Hilferty
Competition and Markets Authority – Carol-Anne Frame
Department for Business and Trade – Carol Rice
Financial Conduct Authority – Andy Murphy
Ofcom – Ross Hamilton
Ofgem – Adam Cochrane-Williams
Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland (SCOTSS) – David MacKenzie
Scottish Legal Complaints Commission (SLCC) – Vicky Crichton
Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) – Rosemary Agnew
Trading Standards Scotland – Fiona Richardson
Trust Alliance Group (TAG) – Craig Wilson
Which? – Tim Mouncer

Apologies:

Mark McGinty, Chartered Trading Standards Institute (Scottish Branch)
Harry Mayers, Energy Saving Trust
Stacey Dingwall, Federation of Small Businesses Scotland
Glenn Preston, Ofcom
Wendy McCutcheon, Scottish Government

Welcome and introductions

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting with a round of introductions.

Minutes and matters arising

2. Members approved the minutes of the previous Consumer Network meeting, held on 21 September 2023.
3. Eleanor Mullan provided a brief progress update on the intelligence subgroup on Technology and Compounded Vulnerability (“the TCV subgroup”), The subgroup is examining the actions required across markets, products and services to minimise detrimental impacts of technology, by identifying those at increased risk, explaining how technology is compounding vulnerability, and highlighting opportunities to mitigate. The subgroup will gather case studies which will be brought to a Consumer Network meeting.
4. The subsequent discussion amongst Members highlighted the need to also highlight the opportunities technology can create and showcase best practice in addition to looking at incidences of detriment.

Discussion on Cost of Living

5. Pamela Stewart of Advice Direct Scotland (ADS) presented ADS data and insights into the use of their services relating to the cost of living. Key insights focused on the number of new service users seeking advice, who may not have required it previously; the impact of the cost of living crisis on mental health; and consumer challenges and experiences with regards to a structural change in living standards.
6. The subsequent discussion included the following points:
 - An increase in the complexity and urgency of the advice being sought by consumers
 - Particular demands for advice in relation to energy and housing
 - Concerns about rises in illegal money lending
 - Pressure on consumer savings and increased use of cash through ATMs
 - The differential experience of the cost of living crisis amongst different groups of consumers, with the impact not evenly distributed
 - The impact of consumer financial pressures on wider economic growth and resilience
7. Members agreed that the Consumer Network is well placed to collectively engage with relevant stakeholders to share insights and suggestions to help prevent and minimise consumer harm.
8. **Action:** A number of suggestions were made for future engagement on this issue and the Secretariat agreed to consider a programme of future discussions, to be agreed by Members.

Discussion on Complaints and Redress

9. Craig Wilson (TAG) Vicky Crichton (SLCC) and Rosemary Agnew (SPSO) delivered a presentation focussing on awareness and accessibility of ombudsman services as a form of alternative dispute resolution to consumers in Scotland. Key insights focused on : the different levels or tiers of complaints handled by ombudsmen; which groups of consumers are accessing (or not accessing) ombudsmen services; awareness and understanding of the role of ombudsmen; actions underway to enhance accessibility; the consumer journey to improve signposting to relevant services.
10. During discussion, the following key issues were considered:
 - Opportunities for improved signposting and awareness raising across the consumer landscape
 - Gaps in the landscape for ADR schemes and how to map and address these
 - Information for consumers on when an ombudsman service may be available to them, and when it is not
 - Data sharing arrangements across complaint and scrutiny bodies
11. It was agreed that Network members should give further consideration to assessing gaps in the ADR landscape.
12. **Action:** Secretariat agreed to liaise with relevant Members to discuss potential next steps.

Consumer Scotland 24/25 Work Programme

13. Douglas White, Director of Policy & Advocacy at Consumer Scotland, noted the Consumer Scotland 2024/25 Draft Work Programme will be published for consultation in the week commencing 15 January 2024. Consumer Scotland will welcomes engagement or comment from members on the Draft Programme.

Proposed items for next meeting

14. Fiona Richardson (TSS) has agreed to lead discussion at the next meeting, with a focus on consumer protection issues in the energy efficiency market. Members agreed this approach.
15. Online Markets and Digital Harms: Ofcom and the CMA will speak at the next meeting about the impact and implementation of the recent Online Safety Act, which has established Ofcom as the online safety regulator; and the Digital Markets, Competition, and Consumers Bill, which will provide additional powers and functions for the CMA. Members agreed this approach.

Flash updates

16. Craig McClue introduced himself to Members in his new role as Head of Investigations at Consumer Scotland, and invited Members to contact him to discuss relevant issues.
17. Ross Hamilton highlighted Ofcom's consultation on its plans for new consumer price protections in telecoms, including a ban on mid-contract price rises linked to future inflation. The consultation closes in February 2024.
18. Fiona Richardson advised that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) Policy Coordination Group has held its inaugural meeting, and will meet next in Q1 2024.
19. The Chair noted that an agenda item on Consumer Duty had been postponed from this meeting to the next Consumer Network meeting, and the duty will now come into force on 1 April 2024. Consumer Scotland is responsible for issuing guidance, and an update will be provided at the next Network meeting.

Close

20. It was agreed that future meetings will take place from 10:00 – 12:30.
21. The Chair thanked those who facilitated and attended the meeting and expressed his best wishes for the festive season and the year ahead.
22. The meeting was closed at 12:00.