consumer representation

Making it work
About the Scottish Consumer Council

The purpose of the Scottish Consumer Council is to make all consumers matter. We do this by putting forward the consumer interest, particularly that of disadvantaged groups in society, by researching, campaigning and working with those who can make a difference to achieve beneficial change. We are a non-profit-making company limited by guarantee and funded partly by the Department of Trade and Industry.

Our policy objectives are to work to:

- develop markets and public services that work for everyone by finding the right balance between free markets, regulation and self-regulation;
- create smart, streetwise, skilled consumers by promoting access to high quality education, information and advice;
- provide solutions to the problems of exclusion by tackling the barriers that put goods and services out of reach;
- ensure decision-makers everywhere are consumer aware by strengthening consumer representation;
- achieve the right balance between innovation and consumer protection by improving the understanding, communication and management of risk and uncertainty.

Please check our web site at www.scotconsumer.org.uk for up-to-date news about our publications, policies and campaigns. We can often make our publications available in braille or large print, on audio tape or computer disk.

Please contact us for details.

Scottish Consumer Council
Royal Exchange House
100 Queen St
Glasgow G1 3DN
Telephone 0141 226 5261
Facsimile 0141 221 0731
www.scotconsumer.org.uk

Appointing consumer representatives onto panels and committees is one way in which organisations can involve consumers in the decision-making process. This publication sets out good practice guidelines for such an approach and aims to make representation work for both service providers and consumers.

The guide forms part of a major piece of work - Involving Consumers - supported by the Department of Trade and Industry, to develop a framework for models of consumer representation and involvement in decision making.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the consumer representatives who took part in the research for this publication, and who provided advice throughout its preparation. Our thanks are extended to our advisory group for their guidance and assistance, and to the organisations who gave permission for us to include the examples of good practice.

Published by the National Consumer Council
March 2002
© National Consumer Council
PD 26/02
ISBN 1 899581 77 4
Contents

Using consumer representatives  3
Who is this guide for?  4
Standards for public appointments  5
Fourteen points of good practice - a checklist  7
Fourteen points of good practice  8
Further reading  23
For years, consumer bodies have lobbied for consumer views to be taken into account in decision-making processes. Government and service providers throughout the UK now acknowledge that consumer input is essential to help them design and deliver goods and services that meet people’s needs, improve standards, identify problem areas, and provide value for money. Additionally, research shows that consumer representatives across the globe are making a positive impact in areas as diverse as food labelling for genetically modified foods (Cameroon); improved billing practice for water and electricity (Senegal) and guidelines for E-commerce (Australia).

Appointing consumer representatives is just one way of involving consumers in decisions. Even in the context of this guide, there are many different sorts of representative structures. Though their composition and purpose differ, they all need effective consumer representatives to ensure that policies and practices are informed by a real understanding of consumers’ needs and experience.

Consumer representation: making it work lists fourteen good practice points for supporting and getting the best out of consumer representatives. It draws on our research into the experiences and needs of individual consumer representatives serving on a range of bodies. The extent to which the measures and recommendations in this publication are applied will vary between organisations. However, applying the guidelines will make it easier for consumer representatives to express the consumer viewpoint and to do the job that organisations need them to do.

The Involving Consumers Project

We are working on a major project to develop a framework of different options which deliver effective consumer representation and involvement. The objective is to ensure that the interests of all consumers are properly represented to, and taken account of by, decision-makers. The focus is on domestic consumers, and it covers two groups whose interests cross over a number of sectors: young people, and people on low incomes. The project will analyse the key cross-cutting issues and propose approaches in three case study areas as the work progresses (communications, food, and health).
Who is this guide for?

This guide has been written primarily to help public and private bodies bring a strong and effective consumer voice to their policy discussions or decision-making processes. The intended audience includes government departments, public bodies covered by the code of practice for public appointments procedures, and all other organisations that seek ongoing consumer input into their decisions and processes.

The guide should also be of interest to individuals who are already acting as consumer representatives, or who are thinking about becoming one, and to consumer organisations that are frequently asked to nominate representatives to all manner of bodies. We hope they will use the guide's practical proposals to argue their case for increased and better support. Consumer organisations may also find this guide useful when looking at the broad question of how representative of consumers they and other bodies actually are.
This guide's clear consumer focus fits within a broader set of initiatives dealing more generally with public appointments and standards in public life.

The Nolan Committee
The issue of how public appointments are made was considered by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, set up by Parliament in 1994 following a number of scandals involving public figures. Known originally as the Nolan Committee after its first chairman, Lord Nolan, and continuing as the Wicks Committee, the Committee drew up a set of seven principles applicable to all aspects of public life and intended ‘for the benefit of all who serve the public in any way’. The principles concern: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

The OCPA code
Arising out of the Nolan Committee’s recommendations, the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA) was established in 1995 to monitor, regulate, report and advise on ministerial appointments to public bodies. The Commissioner has published a code of practice covering all such appointments. This code also proposes seven principles on which appointments must be based (see below) and applies them to the appointment process. Consumer representatives appointed to relevant public bodies (executive and advisory non-departmental public bodies, NHS bodies, public corporations, regulators, nationalised industries and public utilities) clearly fall under the OCPA code. We believe that other bodies seeking to appoint consumer representatives should adhere to these principles as far as possible, too (in practical terms, principles 2-7, as the principle of ministerial appointment rarely applies to non-public appointments).

OCPA code principles of public appointments

1. Ministerial responsibility
   The ultimate responsibility for appointments rests with ministers.

2. Merit
   All public appointments should be governed by the overriding principle of selection based on merit, by the well informed choice of individuals who, through their abilities, experience and qualities, match the needs of the public body in question.

3. Independent scrutiny
   No appointment shall take place without first being scrutinised by a panel, which must include an independent assessor.
4. **Equal opportunities**
Departments should sustain programmes to promote and deliver equal opportunities principles.

5. **Probity**
Board members must be committed to the principles and values of public service and perform their duties with integrity.

6. **Openness and transparency**
The principles of open government must be applied to the appointments process. Its workings must be transparent, and information must be provided about appointments made.

7. **Proportionality**
The appointments procedures need to be subject to the principle of ‘proportionality’. That is, they should be appropriate for the nature of the post and the size and weight of its responsibilities.

A new Scottish Commissioner for Public Appointments is expected to be established by 2003. Public appointments in Scotland will remain the responsibility of OCPA until this time. Northern Ireland has its own post of Commissioner for Public Appointments.

For further information
OCPA, 3rd floor, 35 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BQ;
Telephone 020 7276 2625; www.ocpa.gov.uk
Fourteen points of good practice - a checklist

**Defining purpose**
1. Define a clear role
2. Decide how many representatives you need

**Finding your representatives**
3. Include a variety of viewpoints
4. Use a variety of recruitment methods

**Managing expectations**
5. Communicate a purpose
6. Specify rights, powers and responsibilities
7. Clarify the commitment required
8. Give precise terms and conditions

**Supporting consumer representatives**
9. Provide relevant training
10. Manage the flow of information
11. Have dedicated consumer budgets
12. Provide support for representatives with special needs

**Accountability checks**
13. Monitor effectiveness
14. Help representatives to be accountable
Fourteen points of good practice

Defining purpose
Before you start to look for possible candidates, you need to be clear about the job that needs to be done.

As well as working to our guidelines, all bodies should follow, as far as possible, the OCPA Code's appointment process. This covers:

- establishing the competencies and experience required on your committee/panel
- defining the task (job description) and qualities sought (person specification)
- identifying a range of candidates
- selecting a shortlist
- choosing the preferred candidate(s)
- confirming the appointment.

Consumer representatives will expect to be treated on an equal footing with other members of an organisation.

1. Define a clear role
The fundamental issue you need to address is what you want consumer representatives for. All else flows from what you are trying to achieve and what role you want consumer representatives to perform. This may vary depending on whether you are setting up a body composed entirely of consumer representatives (such as the Food Standards Agency’s Consumer Committee) or you want to ensure consumer views are heard alongside those of other interests (like many government advisory committees). Whatever the structure, defining and communicating your expectations will help shape the support you give consumer representatives so that they can perform effectively.

The real value of consumer representatives lies in their ability to identify consumer needs and to champion their interests. Consumer representatives exist primarily to put the consumer side of the argument. Collectively, it is then the task of decision-making boards to take the balanced view once all the interests have been properly identified.

If you appoint someone to represent a particular organisation, you may be confining them to feeding into debate only in areas where that organisation has carried out research or formulated specific policy. If you appoint someone in an individual capacity, this does not mean they will only be able to contribute personal experience and will not be able to reflect consumer views on a wider scale.
Many consumer representatives have expertise and experience of consumer issues and concerns drawn from links with a wide range of consumer interest bodies, research projects, advice and enforcement agencies, and voluntary activities. Appointment in an individual capacity can allow them to draw on all of this knowledge and feed it into your process.

So, these are some of the questions that can help clarify your purpose:

- Are you looking for people to represent the views of all or some consumers, or are you looking for typical consumers who can speak from their own experience?
- Will you appoint people in their capacity as individuals, or as representatives of particular interests or particular nominating bodies?
- Do you want consumer representatives to champion consumer interests, or do you expect them to take a wider public interest view?
- What do you want them to achieve in the short and long term?

Clearly, your intentions will dictate the skills, competencies and experience you then need to seek.

2. Decide how many representatives you need

If you are serious in your intention to gain a consumer perspective, you will need to consider how many representatives to appoint or what proportion of your board or committee to allow for this. The lone voice all too easily gets lost and, to the outside world, can appear to be a token gesture. If a consumer representative cannot attend a meeting and there is no-one else to put that view, then a valuable element of debate is lost and a potentially important consumer perspective may be overlooked.

As well as ensuring you have more than one consumer voice to feed into deliberations, you should also consider allowing consumer representatives to send substitutes (as professional interests are often permitted to do), or to have one or more 'reserve' representatives who can fill in if the usual members cannot participate.

Where specialist knowledge or a particular perspective is needed, which your consumer representative may feel unable to contribute, you should consider allowing your consumer representative to bring in - by arrangement - an outside expert to feed in expert views to a meeting or individual discussion item.
The more representatives you include, the wider the experience and input you are likely to get. However, being realistic, no matter how many representatives participate, they will not be able to represent every consumer viewpoint or concern. Using individual representatives is not a substitute for other forms of consumer involvement and this method needs to sit alongside other ways of gauging the consumer interest. If you want to find out what all your consumers think, ask them directly. There are many ways in which this can be done. The National Consumer Council suggests possible approaches in Involving Consumers project (see page 3) to help empower young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to become involved in the governance and delivery of the service.

Examples

The Direct Marketing Authority (set up by the Direct Marketing Association to deal with consumer complaints and monitor the direct marketing industry) has rules stating that industry members will never form a majority in the Authority.

The Connexions Service uses young people as representatives on a variety of its key decision-making bodies. It also uses a range of consultation methods - surveys, focus groups, role play, suggestion schemes - to find out more about what young people want from the service, and to actively involve them in the service.

The National Consumer Council is working with Connexions West of England as part of its Involving Consumers project to help empower young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to become involved in the governance and delivery of the service.

For further information

Direct Marketing Authority, DMA House, 70 Margaret Street, London W1W 8SS; Telephone 020 7291 3300; www.dma.org.uk

Connexions Service, E4b, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ; Telephone 0114 259 1104; www.connexions.gov.uk

The more representatives you include, the wider the experience and input you are likely to get. However, being realistic, no matter how many representatives participate, they will not be able to represent every consumer viewpoint or concern. Using individual representatives is not a substitute for other forms of consumer involvement and this method needs to sit alongside other ways of gauging the consumer interest. If you want to find out what all your consumers think, ask them directly. There are many ways in which this can be done. The National Consumer Council suggests possible approaches in Involving Users in the Delivery of Public Services (available online at www.ncc.org.uk/pubs/1999archive.htm). The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC), The Scottish Association of Health Councils and the NHS in Scotland have published guidance - Designed to Involve - for senior clinicians and health service managers on how to ensure patients and the wider public are involved in new primary care structures. The NHS is now using Designed to Involve as the basis for enhanced patient and public involvement through its health services in Scotland.
Finding your representatives

Once you have identified the job that needs to be done and decided how many people you need to recruit, you can start finding the people with the right skills and competencies.

3. Include a variety of viewpoints

Your consumers may come from a wide range of groups and diverse backgrounds and hold a variety of different, sometimes conflicting, views. Plot the boundaries of your intended constituency and consider how all these different views can be represented. Be realistic about the area a consumer representative can be expected to cover.

Example

As well as advisory committees which represent the interests of consumers throughout the UK, OFTEL also has a special interest committee (DIEL) which advises on how disabled and elderly people can make the most of telecommunications services available to them. A majority of DIEL members have disabilities or are over 60.

For further information


4. Use a variety of recruitment methods

The OCPA code of practice recommends identifying a wide field of candidates for public appointments using a variety of recruitment methods. These include:

- advertising (both general and for individual posts)
- executive search
- consultation with interested bodies such as recognised consultative/user groups, and community organisations
- lists and databases of ‘interested and appropriate people’ kept centrally and within government departments.

Individuals are also encouraged to make nominations - and to nominate themselves.

Go as wide as you can in your search for the right people to represent consumers. Advertise your search in the national and local press, community newsletters, TV text services and web sites. Think creatively about how to find representatives from particular groups. Consider using other languages where appropriate, see if voluntary or community organisations’ networks can draw attention to your search,
and look for other ways - leaflets and flyers, promotion at community or special events, for example - to spread the word about your search.

It is important that you are clear and open from the start, irrespective of the recruitment methods you use, about the methods and criteria you are going to use to make your final selection. You may consider involving an independent person to help you in the selection process.

Managing expectations

Just as you need to think clearly about your aims in appointing consumer representatives, so the people you approach need to be absolutely clear about what they can expect to achieve. They will also want information about practical matters concerning the terms and conditions of their engagement. All these points need to be raised during, rather than after, the selection process itself.

5. Communicate purpose

When you have decided what you want consumer representatives for, you need to communicate very carefully what you hope they can achieve and how they fit into the overall picture. This means setting out what you hope they will bring to your organisation - and what they can hope to achieve for themselves.

Right from the start, people must be clear in what capacity you are seeking to appoint them - whether as individuals, as representatives of particular organisations or as representatives of particular interests. Tell them whether you expect them to fight the consumer's corner, or to balance consumer views with those of other interests.

Other members of the group will also need to understand the role of consumer representatives - just as the consumer

Example

OFWAT (Office of Water Services - the regulator for the water industry in England and Wales) carries out a rolling programme to recruit members to its regional Customer Service Committees using advertisements in local press and letters to a variety of bodies, including: trade unions; ethnic and women's groups; and specialist consumer, welfare and professional bodies.

For further information

OFWAT, Centre City Tower, 7 Hill Street, Birmingham, B5 4UA;
Telephone 0121 625 1300; www.ofwat.gov.uk
members will need to understand the role that other members play, and what their different interests are.

6. Specify rights, powers and responsibilities

Rights and powers
Before they agree to take part, people will want to know if they can exert real influence and call for support to do the job effectively. The right to influence the agenda is particularly critical. So, too, is the power to call for more information or back-up research, for example by surveying consumers directly or undertaking consumer impact assessments to examine how policies affect consumers.

If a committee is a part of a wider decision-making process, consumer representatives need to know what happens to the decisions their committee makes, and how much influence it has on decisions further down the line. A consumer representative who serves on a board or committee which makes collective decisions that may be against the consumer interest should have a right to opt out of such decisions. It will need to be recorded clearly and openly that they disagreed with a particular decision.

Example
The General Insurance Standards Council (GISC) has a Scrutiny Committee that consists of independent directors and other independent members, including consumer representatives. It can review the GISC’s compliance with its objectives, commission and manage research to assess GISC’s effectiveness from a consumer perspective. It produces an annual report describing its activities against its terms of reference.

For further information
General Insurance Standards Council, 110 Cannon Street, London EC4N 6EU; Telephone 020 7648 7820; www.gisc.co.uk

Responsibilities
Potential appointees need to be clear about your requirements concerning confidentiality and accountability. Full confidentiality may restrict their freedom to raise committee issues with colleagues to gain a broader consumer view. Depending on how you have defined their role, you will need to think about how consumer members might demonstrate their accountability to any nominating body or to consumers generally (see also point 14). It is very important that nominating bodies, consumer interest
groups, and consumers at large can gauge whether their representatives are doing an effective job.

Potential appointees will need to be made aware of rules governing the declaration of outside interests, handling potential conflicts of interest, and dealing with gifts and hospitality. You will also need to inform your representatives about adherence to the Nolan principles and to the probity principle required by the OCPA code.

7. Clarify the commitment required

Tell potential appointees what the appointment means in practical terms. In particular, they will want to know the nature of the exercise and how much time they will need to set aside. The timing and frequency of meetings, and the amount of preparation involved, are all relevant. So, too, is the amount of reading and paperwork involved.

8. Give precise terms and conditions

Consumer members expect to be treated just like everyone else. If they are joining an established committee or forum, you need to tell them about any remuneration, recoverable expenses and the period their engagement covers. It is usual to limit the length of time members can serve, and you may need to explain why this is considered desirable. From a consumer perspective, limiting terms of office brings fresh ideas and faces into the group, and ensures that consumer representatives do not become so familiar with the position and viewpoints of other members that they begin to identify with them too closely, clouding their consumer perspective. Under the OCPA code, performance appraisal should always precede reappointment, and a second reappointment should only be allowed in exceptional circumstances.

If you are setting up a new committee or panel, you will need to decide suitable terms and conditions. The issue of remuneration is very important, and there are many views on whether people appointed as consumer representatives should be paid. At one extreme, recompensing committee members in full for their time and experience will undoubtedly encourage wider participation; and as an added bonus, it often brings in its wake greater accountability and rigour. At the other extreme, paying only expenses emphasises the ‘public service’ nature of the role. In between these two extremes, limited payments and allowances may attract some members who otherwise could not afford to give up their time, without undermining the public service ideal.
Each organisation will need to decide for itself which approach is likely to achieve the most suitable appointments. The fact remains that consumer representatives are frequently at a financial disadvantage to industry or government participants. Paying fees or making ex-gratia payments levels up the playing field. It also reflects the value you place on the contribution made by the representative. After all, if you want to commission specialist input and expertise from any other source, you would likely face a significant consultancy bill. All out-of-pocket expenses should be covered, such as travel and subsistence, cost of phone calls, faxing and photocopying, and postage. Loss-of-earnings payments, childcare and carer’s allowances should be available so that representatives can claim them if they wish.

**Example**

**Owat** cannot by law pay a salary to members of its Customer Service Committees, but it reimburses travel and subsistence expenses and has a system of allowances payable towards loss of earnings, childcare and care for elderly relatives.

**For further information**

Owat, Centre City Tower, 7 Hill Street, Birmingham BS 4UA; Telephone 0121 625 1300; www.owat.gov.uk

---

**Supporting consumer representatives**

No matter how experienced your consumer representatives are, they need practical help and support to be effective.

**9. Provide relevant training**

Our research among consumer representatives found that many were given no induction or training of any kind to prepare them for their committee posts. We think this is wrong. The point of training is to help representatives perform effectively by giving them specific skills and developing their confidence to do a good job.

So, think about the training you will offer your consumer members - and how you will train non-consumer members to appreciate the consumer perspective. We offer the training pack, Stronger Voice (see page 16), to help new and more-experienced representatives speak out clearly and effectively on consumers’ behalf. It can help other members operate more effectively, too. You will need to weigh up the options for training consumer members separately or jointly.
with others, and consider the different methods of delivering training, from multi-day training courses to forums and discussion groups. Each can be tailored to meet specific needs.

Training is needed in all these specific areas:

- gaining a working knowledge of the particular industry or sector
- how to be effective on a committee
- knowing how to find out about consumer concerns
- developing the skills to lobby and influence decision-makers.

Training for consumer representatives

We have long argued the case for more effective consumer involvement and representation. We have developed a modular training pack, Stronger Voice, in collaboration with other major consumer organisations, which helps people to develop the skills and expertise which they need to be effective representatives.

Postwatch has given Stronger Voice training to its staff and members, including all its regional committees.

Hillingdon and Oldham Voluntary Service Councils are using Stronger Voice to help their volunteer members become more effective representatives when engaged with public service providers.

As well as receiving training that includes background information on the water industry and field trips to water company plants and call centres, new members of OFWAT’s Customer Service Committees take a customised version of our Stronger Voice training to enhance members’ consumer representative skills.

For further information
John McCulloch at the National Consumer Council
Telephone 020 7881 3009; e-mail j.mcculloch@ncc.org.uk

While new members may need an introduction to the technical operations and processes of a sector or industry, be wary of induction training that inadvertently imposes an industry or producer view.

Ideally, there should be some overlap between retiring and new consumer representatives, although this may not be practicable.

Very experienced representatives may feel that training is neither necessary nor desirable. While they will evidently be skilled in certain areas, such as operating effectively through committees, Stronger Voice-type training refocuses attention on key consumer concepts and on ways of evaluating policy options from a consumer perspective. It can be offered to all new (and existing) members.
10. Manage the flow of information

Information is critical to effective performance and you will need to manage the flow of information carefully. Giving people too much information can sometimes be as big a handicap as giving too little - don’t swamp people with information.

It is also important to give representatives enough time to read and digest the information they need (and to consult others about it when necessary). Electronic communication and information-sharing is becoming increasingly common, but don’t forget that not all representatives will have e-mail or internet access. They may be at a disadvantage if they have to wait for printed information that others receive faster electronically. You could consider providing representatives with equipment and resources to communicate electronically, so that they are able to participate fully.

Example

In Australia, the Consumers’ Health Forum is a national coalition of consumer and community groups with an interest in health which provides and supports consumer representatives on more than 100 national committees at any time. The Forum publishes guidelines for consumer representatives, now in its fourth edition, aimed particularly at representatives nominated onto committees and other bodies by consumer interest organisations. The Forum has also held training workshops for consumer representatives on a variety of topics, including representing consumers, and developing and understanding research.

For further information
Consumers’ Health Forum, PO Box 170, Curtin, ACT, 2605, Australia;
Telephone +61 02 6281 0811; www.chf.org.au

Example

Postwatch has provided independent members with IT equipment, and has set up an intranet to enable them to participate fully in discussions, irrespective of where they live. Members also have access to library archives, reports and other material of interest.

For further information
Postwatch, 28 Grosvenor Gardens, London SW1W 0TT;
Telephone 020 7259 1200; www.postwatch.co.uk
Usually, consumer representatives need two types of information, depending on their background and their role:

- If they come from a non-industry background, they may require technical briefings on complex issues concerning products, services, or the sector as a whole.
- As consumer representatives, they need to tap into research or other information sources about consumer views, experiences and perspectives.

At the very least, they need a contact person within the organisation who can brief them on what information exists and how they may obtain it. They will still want to retain their independence and critical distance.

Networking among consumer representatives and consumer groups can improve information flow about consumer needs and preferences. If your organisation has a number of consumer representatives on different committees, do all you can to encourage networking. There is a role here for consumer organisations, too, to help develop support networks among individual consumer representatives.

**Examples**

In 2001, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) hosted a workshop for consumer-representative and lay members on its advisory committees and working parties. This provided an opportunity for discussion of issues that affect non-scientific members of committees. Ideas for improving their work included:

- clarifying the role of consumer representatives and lay members
- producing a guidance note for secretariats on helping consumer representatives
- adding a plain-language summary to committee papers, including the likely impact of decisions for consumers
- providing feedback to representatives on their performance.

The FSA’s Consumer Branch is examining how it can address these ideas. The workshops will become biannual events if feedback from participants confirms they continue to meet their requirements.

**East Dunbartonshire Council** has established a School Board Forum to enable School Board Chairs to meet regularly to discuss issues of common concern and ensure parental involvement in policy and service areas. Members can contact a small steering group of parents to raise issues at any time. The steering group’s role is to ensure that these issues addressed by the Forum, that Forum decisions are addressed by the Council and that Forum members receive feedback.

**For further information**
Food Standards Agency, Aviation House, 125 Kingsway, London WC2B 6NH; Telephone 020 7276 8000; www.food.gov.uk

East Dunbartonshire Council, Tom Johnston House, Civic Way, Kirkintilloch G66 4TJ; Telephone 0141 578 8000; www.e-dunbarton.org.uk
11. Have dedicated consumer budgets
Effective consumer representation will not work without some financial investment. One way to add weight to the consumer interest is to give a dedicated budget for consumer involvement. Gathering information about consumers' views and consumer impact assessments, for example, could then be funded out of this budget (see point 6 about rights, powers and responsibilities). Consumer members should be able to influence how and when this budget is spent, although the powers of decision would rest with the committee as a whole.

12. Provide support for representatives with special needs
If you genuinely want to obtain the views of a particular group, you may need to make special provisions to ensure that representatives can attend meetings and contribute effectively. On a simple level, this may involve checking that venues and meeting rooms are accessible to representatives with disabilities. Meetings should be held in a way that encourages all members to participate. This could include: having an accessible location and convenient start and finish time for people who have to travel a long way; scheduling some meetings in the evening if some participants cannot get time off during working hours; ensuring there are arrangements for disabled drivers to park; or reimbursing childcare costs. Don't forget to take dietary requirements into account.

Representatives with impaired hearing may need communication support, such as sign-language interpreters or speech-to-text translators. Hearing-aid users may need an induction loop in the meeting room. People with visual impairment may need information in large print or braille. Some people may prefer electronic communication and information to paper documents. Don't assume you know what support people need - ensure you liaise from day one with a representative and/or their nominating organisation about what you should provide.
Accountability checks

Consumer representation is a two-way process. You need some way of judging how effectively your representatives provide a consumer perspective. And consumer representatives need to report back to their constituents in some way. Openness and transparency are crucial to this whole process.

13. Monitor effectiveness

Think about how you intend to monitor the effectiveness of consumer representatives — and your own efforts to support them. Formal appraisal systems may not always be appropriate. But at the end of each year or each monitoring period you will need to ask yourself whether you are getting a clearer idea of consumer wants and needs — and whether you are responding to the needs identified.

In policy work, identifying cause and effect is notoriously difficult, but here are some questions to ask:

- Do you have a better understanding of the issues that concern your consumers?
- Is the consumer case argued more cogently?
- Has this influenced decisions in any way?

Ask consumer representatives themselves about any difficulties they may have experienced in areas such as:

- influencing the agenda
- gaining technical information
- gathering information about consumer views
- making their voices heard
- making their opinions count.

Check your committee’s performance in responding to the concerns and difficulties raised.

14. Help representatives to be accountable

If you appoint members to represent consumer views, think about how they can report back to their constituents or nominating bodies. There may be issues of confidentiality to resolve. There are a number of ways you can assist.

Annual report/review

Annual reports and reviews are a good way of ensuring accountability, but only if they are comprehensive and widely available. You should involve consumer representatives in the preparation of these and their work.
and contributions should be covered prominently. Consumer representatives may also wish to prepare short written reports for their constituents, setting out progress, achievements and setbacks for the year. Reflecting on how much or how little has been achieved is a powerful spur for greater effort. Confidentiality requirements should not prevent them from reporting back in this way. If a problem over confidentiality arises, the committee/panel chairman should agree an acceptable version with the consumer representative before a report is circulated.

Example

The Financial Services Consumer Panel (FSCP) provides advice to the Financial Services Authority (FSA) on the interests and concerns of consumers, and assesses the FSA's effectiveness in meeting its objectives to protect consumers' interests and promote public understanding of the financial system. The Panel publishes an annual report on its work. It also publishes its consultation responses, the results of its research, and summaries of other advice it gives the FSA on policy development and regulatory action. All of these are on the Panel's web site. The FSA's own annual report (published on their web site) contains a response to the Consumer Panel's report.

For further information:
FSCP, FSA, 25 The North Colonnade, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HS; Telephone 020 7676 9346; www.fs-cp.org.uk

Information about consumer representatives
Details of consumer representatives and how they can be contacted can help consumer and public interest organisations (or other consumer representatives) to identify members who may be interested in sharing research information or policy views. However, you should ask your representatives what level of profile they would prefer. This may depend on whether they (or you) have the means - such as secretarial backup - to respond to wider enquiries.

Performance review
You should regularly measure how well your committee or panel meets its objectives, and make the results public. You should include measurements such as how effectively you:

• listen to consumers and their representatives
• act on what consumers and their representatives say
• give reasons for the decisions you come to
• show where decisions differ from views put by consumer representatives.
Open meetings

Open meetings are a way for all members, not just consumer representatives, to be open to scrutiny. However, this will not always be practical for logistical reasons, especially for small organisations. Some committees and subject areas will attract a lot of outside interest; others very little. However, you should ensure that meeting information - agendas, papers and minutes - is available widely well in advance, so that consumer representatives can get views from other groups where appropriate. The internet is one way of providing such information to a large audience - but remember that not everyone has web access.
Further reading

Consumers' Health Forum of Australia, Guidelines for consumer representatives: suggestions for consumer or community representatives working on committees, 2001.


National Consumer Council, Representing consumers: information for people seeking appointment to consumer bodies, 1999.

National Consumer Council, Consumer Congress, Service First Unit, Involving users - improving the delivery of local public services, 1999.


Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, Leaflet for nominating bodies.


Public Appointments Unit, Cabinet Office, Frequently asked questions about public bodies and public appointments, 2000.

Scottish Consumer Council, Designed to involve: public involvement in the new primary care structures, 1999.

Service First Unit, Cabinet Office, How to consult your users, an introductory guide, 1998.
For good practice in using consumer representatives, ask yourself:

- How will you ensure your recruitment methods adhere to the OCPA code?
- Have you defined what you want consumer members for?
- How many consumer members do you need to represent a variety of consumer interests effectively?
- Have you searched as widely as you can to find the right people?
- Are potential appointees clear about whether you wish to appoint them as individuals, as representatives of particular organisations or of particular interests?
- Do other members of the committee or group understand the role of consumer representatives?
- Have you clearly defined and communicated members’ rights, powers and responsibilities?
- Have you set out the practical commitment involved?
- Have you made provisions to pay consumer representatives and cover their costs?
- How will you train consumer representatives and help them to acquire information about your organisation and the sector in which it operates?
- What parallel training do you propose to offer non-consumer representatives?
- How will your consumer members tap into information about consumer views, experiences and perspectives?
- Do you propose to introduce a dedicated budget for consumer involvement and research?
- How will you secure the active participation of members with special needs?
- How will you monitor the effectiveness of consumer representatives?
- What arrangements will you put in place to enable consumer representatives to report back to their constituents?