gathering evidence

researching the consumer issues of the future
The Scottish Consumer Council

The Scottish Consumer Council's purpose is to make all consumers matter. We are an independent cross-cutting policy organisation with a solid foundation in consumer research. We have a special focus on the needs of disadvantaged consumers. Over the years, we have been able to bring about real benefits for consumers across the broad range of issues which affect people's lives including health, education, justice, local government, and food, to name just a few. We seek to ensure that the consumer agenda has high priority with policy- and decision-makers within Scotland, at Westminster, and in Europe.
Shaping the agenda

Our workplan for 2002/03 has a clear focus on specific areas of consumer need and interest where we think we can have greatest impact.

Partnerships are key to the SCC's work. We have strong connections with a wide range of organisations in Scotland and work closely on many issues with other consumer bodies, policy-makers and with providers of goods and services in private and public sectors. These connections play a key role in helping us plan and prioritise our work so that we achieve maximum gain for consumers.

The result is a workplan for 2002/03 that covers the broad range of the consumer policy agenda but which focuses on the issues where we think we can have greatest impact. This summary highlights our key work priorities and explains how we will work within each of them. We place strong importance on the value of research in providing a robust base of evidence for future policy activity.

We plan to complete the priority projects outlined in this summary in the current financial year. Your comments on these would be welcome. Our full workplan document, which covers a much wider range of projects, is available on our website (www.scotconsumer.org.uk) and your views on that are invited also. Finally, our workplanning programme is continuous - please let us know, at any time, of issues you think we should be addressing on behalf of consumers in Scotland.

Our corporate objectives

- 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.
- Achieve the right balance between innovation and consumer protection by improving the understanding, communication and management of risk and uncertainty.
- Ensure decision-makers everywhere are consumer-aware by strengthening consumer representation.
What will we do in 2002/03?

Our workplan has a strong focus on the needs of disadvantaged consumers. It combines a challenging research agenda in new areas with the production of a range of policy reports building on existing evidence. This is complemented by our development projects and our network of volunteers which offer practical benefits to consumers at grass roots level and ensure that, in turn, their experiences form a key part of our policy thinking.

**Highlights**

**Local government performance information**

**Training in complaints handling for staff in public services**
The SCC has successfully carried out wide-ranging work with public services on best practice in complaints handling. However, it appears that translating policy into practice at service delivery level is problematic and providing training for frontline staff in this area is a particular issue. The SCC will carry out research on provision of training in complaints handling for public service staff.

**A replacement for the patients charter in scotland**
The creation of a template for a replacement of the charter that meets the needs and concerns of members of the public, patients, NHS staff and managers. Work commissioned by Scottish Executive Health Department.

**Research on consumers' knowledge of rights**
An opinion survey of Scottish consumers to test their knowledge of their basic consumer rights, carried out by means of a Scottish booster sample of previous DTI research with some additional questions related to the introduction of the Community Legal Service in Scotland.

**Research with consumers on experiences of direct payments**
This is a generally vulnerable group of service users, who are undertaking new responsibilities as employers and purchasers of services.

**Getting advice by phone**
A mystery shopping exercise, testing a number of telephone advice providers to assess the quality of advice given and the quality of the customer service.
Issues paper on civil justice
Looking at the current state of play in civil justice in Scotland from the consumer perspective.

Fluoride in water - issues surrounding risk & freedom of choice
Organising and running a citizen's jury or deliberative seminar on the addition of fluoride to water. To demonstrate how well chosen methods can yield more useful input from ordinary people, and to enhance our understanding about how consumers make decisions involving risk.

Policing food law - exploration of practice in food law enforcement
Survey of environmental health officers in Scotland in collaboration with the Royal Environmental Health Institute for Scotland to explore the experience of good and bad practice in food law enforcement.

Policy paper on class actions
Analysis of the arguments in favour of class actions, particularly in the context of consumer protection legislation.

Development projects

Scottish Community Diet Project
This award-winning project provides a national, strategic focus of support to community food initiatives and overcome the barriers faced by low income consumers in accessing a healthy diet. The SCDP is funded by the Scottish Executive Health Department following a recommendation in the Scottish Diet Action Plan. The project's activities include:

- Funding community activity through a small grants scheme.
- Supplying a route for low-income communities to feed their experiences and views into policy-making through organisations of conferences and seminars specifically aimed at these groups.
- Running a successful series of capacity building training events covering topics such as: how to carry out research; running a community food initiative; and good practice in participation.
- Dissemination of good practice through promotion of networking via study tours for community groups and a regular newsletter.
- Publishing toolkits, for example on breakfast clubs and community gardening.

Scottish Accessible Information Forum
The Forum aims to improve the
standards and accessibility of information and advice services for disabled people and their carers. It consists of representatives of both organisations for and of disabled people, and information providers. SAIF has published National Standards for Disability Information and Advice Provision in Scotland. It also played a lead role in the establishment of a national disability information service and continues to monitor the operation of the service on behalf of the Scottish Executive. SAIF works extensively with local authorities on the development of local accessible information strategies.

Scottish Healthy Choices Award Scheme
This is a national healthy eating award scheme that the SCC manages in partnership with the Health Education Board for Scotland and as part of the Scottish Diet Action Plan. The award aims to provide a national strategic focus to the development of locally-based award schemes; to encourage and support inter-agency working among health boards, local authorities, retailers, consumer groups and caterers; to encourage caterers to provide healthy choices; to influence consumer awareness of healthy choices; and to stimulate interest in and demand for healthy foods.

The award is open to all eating establishments in Scotland and is based on comprehensive criteria for healthy food choices, food safety and hygiene, and provision for non-smoking areas and breastfeeding mothers. The award is being delivered via the majority of health boards and environmental services in Scotland. It has been successful in encouraging bulk applications among private and public sector mass caterers and suppliers, including those who provide school meals services.

Contact us

• We welcome comments on this summary and would be happy to provide more information about any of the projects listed.
• Our full workplan document is available on our website (www.scotconsumer.org.uk) and your views on that are also invited.
• Our workplanning programme is continuous and the views of others are an important factor in how we decide on future work and priorities. Please let us know of any issues you think we should consider.
• The person to contact is Trisha McAuley, our Head of Corporate Resources.

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More information

For general information on the Scottish Consumer Council’s activities, please visit our website at: www.scotconsumer.org.uk

The website gives free access to all our recent reports, policy work, press releases, and Council agenda and minutes.

We can often make our publications available in braille or large print, on audio tape or computer disk. Please contact us for details.

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