Consumers benefit from efficient and effective services in the public and private sector. Service providers reap benefits from discriminating consumers. A balanced partnership between the two is essential. The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) seeks to represent the consumer interest, particularly the interest of disadvantaged or excluded consumers. We seek to influence policy in matters devolved to the Scottish Parliament, those reserved to the Westminster Parliament, and issues where the European Parliament has lead responsibility.

The Scottish Consumer Council was set up by government in 1975. Our purpose is to make all consumers matter and to ensure the interests of all consumers are heard by people who can make a difference in business, the public sector and in government. Our objectives are to:

- make markets and public services work for all consumers
- enable consumers to be effective and demanding in their selection and use of goods and services
- provide solutions to the problems of exclusion (from the provision of goods and services) that some consumers experience
- improve the understanding, communication and management of risk and uncertainty
- strengthen consumer representation so that decision-makers are consumer aware

We place strong importance on the value of research with consumers in providing a robust base of evidence on which to base policy. This is complemented by our development projects 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. When the Scottish Parliament was established we highlighted a number of issues of key importance for consumers and we have been pleased to see our recommendations acted upon in areas such as:

- reform of the complaints system in relation to solicitors
- the commitment to central funding for money advice provision to complement the new debt collection procedures introduced by the Debt Arrangement and Attachment (Scotland) Bill
- increased recognition by the Scottish Parliament, Scottish Executive and others of the need to provide in-court advice services throughout Scotland.
- independent consumer representation in the water industry
- the enactment of freedom of information legislation granting greater rights of access to consumers in Scotland than those elsewhere in the UK

This agenda contains the issues we are identifying as priorities for consumers in Scotland. By tackling them, the Scottish Parliament will ensure that public and private services are delivering for consumers, that consumers have the advice and information they need, and that they have better protection when things go wrong.
CONSUMER PRINCIPLES

The Scottish Consumer Council uses the following set of tests to assess the consumer perspective in any situation:

- **Access** Can people get the goods, services or information they need?
- **Choice** Can consumers affect the way goods and services are provided through the choices they make in the marketplace?
- **Information** Is information available, is it easy to understand, and does it help consumers to make informed choices?
- **Safety** Do goods and services meet acceptable standards?
- **Redress** Is there a simple, cheap, quick and fair system for dealing with complaints and disputes if things go wrong?
- **Representation** Are consumers’ views properly represented in services where there is little or no consumer choice?
- **Fairness** Are consumers subject to arbitrary discrimination for reasons unconnected with their characteristics as consumers?

How the Scottish Parliament can help consumers

**Protecting and Promoting the Consumer Interest**

Ensure that the parliament and its relevant committees are well informed about the consumer interest, consumer disadvantage and market failure in policy areas devolved to the Parliament.

Ensure that the parliament and its committees are well informed about these matters in relation to areas reserved to the Westminster parliament which may impact on consumers in Scotland, through the work of the Cross-party Group in the Scottish Parliament on Consumer Issues or otherwise.

**Consumer Education** Require the Scottish Executive to promote consumer education at all stages of learning.

**Access to Justice**

**Civil Justice Review** Ensure that the civil justice system in Scotland is truly accessible to consumers by carrying out a full-scale review of the existing system, recognising in particular the potential value of alternative mechanisms for resolving disputes outwith the traditional adversarial court system, including mediation.

**A National Strategy for the Provision of Community Legal Services** Ensure that consumers throughout Scotland have adequate and affordable access to a range of legal services that meet their needs.

**In-court Advice throughout Scotland** Ensure that unrepresented litigants throughout Scotland involved in small claims, summary cause, housing and debt cases, have access to good quality, expert advice when they go to court.

**Freedom of Information**

Ensure that the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act is implemented and monitored in such a way that consumers throughout Scotland have real and meaningful access to information held by public authorities.

**Public Services**

**Best Value** Extend the statutory duty on local authorities to secure best value to all public sector service providers.

**Public Involvement** Support and develop the involvement of service users and members of the public in public service policy-making and delivery.

Extend the use, and support the training and development, of public interest representatives within all regulatory bodies, to balance the professional interests of inspectors and regulators with the interests of the public.

Ensure that providers and regulatory bodies communicate effectively with service users about the standards they can expect and what to do when standards are not being met.
Local Government  Introduce a statutory basis for stakeholder consultation within local government. Service users should have a right to have their views heard and carefully considered when local authorities are making decisions that will affect them.

Education  Introduce greater choice and flexibility into the school education system reflecting a balance of academic, vocational, creative subjects and sports.

Require the Scottish Executive to support the development of an independent education advice service which could provide information, advice and independent mediation services for parents and families.

Provide better support and guidance for home educating families

Support a research consortium to facilitate the development of a parental research programme to provide a solid research base to feed parental perspectives into future education policy-making.

Planning  Require the Scottish Executive to provide the opportunity for consumers to debate the issues arising from the introduction of a third party right of appeal within the planning system.

The Police  Set up an independent body to handle complaints against the police.

Health/Social Care  Rationalise the regulation of mental health care services, to reduce the duplication and confusion caused by the number of bodies currently having a role to play in this area.

Ensure that the particular needs of mental health service users are recognised within the new NHS Quality Improvement Scotland.

Encourage effective joint working between the new Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care (the Care Commission) and NHS Quality Improvement Scotland.

Produce a replacement for the Patient’s Charter in Scotland.

Agree a target that all members of society, including homeless people and travellers, can access primary care services. Improve accessibility of primary care services by removing physical barriers and barriers caused by communication problems, or attitudes.

Raise awareness amongst service providers, especially in primary care, of the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Ensure that advocacy services are available for all who need them.

Review the practice of local authorities in charging for non-residential care services with a view to ensuring national consistency in charging levels.

End the uncertainty and delay over decisions about how public involvement in the health service will be supported by the new Scottish Health Council.

Housing

Require the Scottish Executive to set out an information strategy for providing clear, accurate and timely information to owner-occupiers about the changes to property law.

Ensure that the reform of the law of the tenement provides a fairer system for distributing the obligations of common repairs among tenement dwellers.

Single surveys  Support and encourage 1) the development of market-led, non-compulsory ‘single survey’ schemes, backed by a guarantee for the buyer and 2) the introduction of a non-mandatory homebuyer’s information pack, containing essential information about a property for potential buyers.

Water

Ensure that water charges take account of people’s ability to pay

Ensure that Scottish Water delivers on consumers’ investment through charges by scrutinising its performance and ensuring its efficiency

Ensure that Scottish Water is responsive to consumers’ interests and concerns by ensuring that the water customer consultation panels are properly resourced

Digital Inclusion

Ensure effective rollout of broadband in Scotland’s remote and rural areas. The potential for broadband to make a real difference to the ability of people in rural areas to access services on the same basis as everyone else must be realised.

Make a commitment to ensuring universal Internet access in the home within an agreed target date. Lack of access to the Internet is fast becoming an indicator of social exclusion and a reliance on public access terminals are no substitute for home access to the essential public services envisaged under e-government.

Food

Ensure that all public agencies, concerned with any aspect of food, operate in the interest of all Scottish consumers in an open and transparent manner, responding to the needs and concerns of Scotland’s distinctive food culture.
Nutrition  Tackle the barriers of access, availability, culture and skill, as outlined in the Scottish Diet Action Plan and recognise the knowledge and understanding disadvantaged consumers bring to this process. Help improve the diet of the Scottish population by working with caterers to encourage them to provide healthy food in a healthier environment, as recommended in the Scottish Diet Action Plan. Ensure that the recommendations made in “Hungry for Success. A Whole School Approach to School Meals in Scotland” are implemented.

Genetically Modified Food  Ensure that both retail and catering outlets meet their statutory obligations with respect to Genetically Modified Food labelling requirements. Ensure that the UK Government takes into account the interests of consumers in Scotland when GM food is discussed at European level.

Food Safety  Ensure that the Food Standard Agency makes food safety and hygiene messages clear, relevant and understandable to pupils, parents and teachers. Ensure that the data is available that will enable the monitoring of change through time of the level of knowledge on food safety and hygiene among the general population of Scotland as a whole.

European Common Agricultural Policy  Ensure that consumers’ interests are clearly and consistently considered in the current UK government debate on the CAP reform proposals.

European Common Fisheries Policy  Ensure that the market aspects of a sustainable fishing policy are adequately addressed with regard to both competition policy and the issue of consumer demand.

Transport  Bus User Complaints Tribunal  Ensure that the Tribunal operates in the interests of all Scottish bus users in an open and transparent manner.