

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

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1 Introduction

This paper is about the work and priorities of the Welsh Consumer Council. It has been prepared in support of the Council's presentation to the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee of the National Assembly.

2 The Welsh Consumer Council is a generalist all-Wales consumer advocate that researches and champions the consumer interest in Wales. The Council currently works in the areas of: food, housing, public transport, sustainable consumption, consumer education, transport, public services, health, consumer debt, and financial services.

3 Vulnerable and Disadvantaged People

The Council has a particular responsibility to represent the interests of people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged. This is particularly important in Wales, with our higher than average levels of sickness, disability and benefit dependency; low income households; and high proportion of older people.

4 Established and Funded by Government

The Council was set up by government in 1975. It comprises a Chair, and nine Members, with a staff of twelve. The Chair and Council are appointed by the Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry.

5 The Council's running costs are met by a grant of £462,000 from the Department of Trade and Industry. The grant is paid through the London based National Consumer Council, of which the Welsh Consumer Council is, in formal terms, an independent policy making sub-committee.

6 Working in Partnership

The Council raises additional funding for particular projects through grants, partnership work, and through contract work. Examples of grant aided work include the development of a Sustainable Consumption web site (grant aided by the Welsh Assembly Government). Current partnership projects include a report on gender and public transport and one on gender, public services and older people - both carried out in partnership with the Equal Opportunities Commission.

7 The Council sees working in partnership with others as an important part of its work, not only through working on joint projects, but also through providing leadership to the consumer movement in Wales – for example by organising regular meetings of the all-Wales Consumer Forum, and by publishing a newsletter reflecting and focussing on key consumer issues in Wales.

8. Current Work and Publications

Welsh Consumer Council work currently ‘in hand’ or awaiting publication includes policy on:

- Hospice provision in Wales (for publication in July)
- Financial advice services for older people (for presentation to Council in September)
- Shopping on the Internet (approved by Council in May)
- Water conservation (for publication in June)
- Water charges and low-income consumers (approved by Council in May).

9. Achieving Beneficial Change for Consumers

Our aim, in everything we do, is to achieve beneficial change for consumers. We do this by identifying problems, proposing solutions, and working to persuade those who take decisions of the need for change.

10 United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection

In developing our work we are guided by the eight consumer rights developed by Consumers International, endorsed by the United Nations, and used by consumer organisations around the world. We also work within the framework of four strategic themes, agreed and adopted by the consumer councils in Wales, London and Scotland. The eight UN endorsed consumer rights are:

- The right to satisfaction of basic needs
- The right to safety
- The right to be informed
- The right to choose
- The right to be heard

- The right to redress
- The right to consumer education
- The right to a healthy environment.

11 Within the framework of the UN Guidelines, the Council's strategic themes, guiding its work over the next three years are:

- To make markets work for consumers
- To achieve more sustainable consumption
- To ensure that vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers get a fair deal
- To put users at the heart of public services.

12 Welsh Consumer Council Policy

Consumer policy is developed through research, and in dialogue with consumers and decision takers. And while effective policy is often complex, it also needs to be clear and the key messages simple. Below are examples of some of the key areas for consumer work in Wales, and some of the policy objectives we work for.

13. Public Services

- that respond to how consumers are
- that are available when needed
- that respect and respond to difference (of gender, age, language, ability, income, race, social class, and location)

14 Public Transport

- that is reliable, frequent, comfortable, affordable and safe
- with effective coordination and integration between bus, rail, plane, foot, car and cycle
- underpinned by reliable and accessible information

15. Food & Nutrition

- labelling that is accurate, informative and accessible
- nutritional messages that are clear and comprehensive and that promote the positive health benefits of eating a well-balanced diet,
- statutory controls on the advertising and promotion of foods high in fat, salt and sugar to children.

16 Health and Well-being

- medical services delivered when needed

- clear, accessible information on health and well being, available to all, accessible face to face and using the full capability of modern information and communications technology.
- affordable and safe facilities and opportunities for sport, exercise and fitness available to all.

17 Sustainable Consumption

- a healthy, safe environment, now and in the future
- transport of goods and people by means and routes and over distances that cause the least damage to the environment and to the quality of life of others
- consumption patterns that support local economies, address poverty issues in the developing world, and respect environmental limits

18 Money, Debt and Financial Services

- a national strategy for developing financial literacy for both children and adults
- sustainable funding for advice services, sufficient to respond to the higher than average levels of financial problems in Wales
- universal access to basic bank accounts and affordable credit

19 Consumer Education and Information

- consumer education embedded within the school curriculum
- consumer education – not only in school, but through clear information and explanation in super markets and shops, from local authorities, from government, and wherever and whenever those supplying or regulating the supply of goods and services are taking decisions which affect consumers

20 Information and Communications Technology

- regulation of broadcasting and communications to ensure provision of services to meet the needs of all people in all parts of Wales
- access to the Internet for all who want it
- necessary and timely information and advice for dealing with the switchover from analogue to digital television.

Welsh Consumer Council

June 1st 2005