



about the
consumer network





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AIMS AND PURPOSE OF THE CONSUMER NETWORK

The Scottish Consumer Council Consumer Network was set up in 1986. Our aim is to keep the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) in touch with the concerns of ordinary people throughout Scotland. We do this by recruiting around 100 volunteers from all age groups, covering different geographical areas, and with varying interests, abilities and income levels. In recent years we have also welcomed member groups to the Network, which enable us to gain a perspective from specific sections of the community, and a wider range of consumer experiences. Whilst we would not claim that the Network forms a representative sample of Scottish society, we have an ongoing commitment to draw volunteers from as wide a base as possible, and to target disabled people, people from ethnic minorities, younger people, those facing disadvantage or discrimination - those who feel excluded from decision making processes for whatever reason.

The purpose of the Consumer Network is to aid the research programme and inform the Workplan of the SCC in two main ways: -

1. *Providing information to give a wider picture of valid issues for the SCC, and acting as a sounding board to determine which issues are of common concern across the country.*

Our staff and Council members can bring their own personal experiences as consumers to our various projects, but the groups and individuals who form part of the Network provide us with a vital insight on the problems that they face in their day-to-day lives.

We know from some of our volunteers that it can be difficult to find a dentist who carries out NHS work. What further barriers exist for someone who does not have English as his or her first language, or who has impaired mobility and can only access surgeries on the ground floor, or who lives on an island that only has one dentist? We want to know.

2. *Providing a source of qualitative data for existing research studies and providing small-scale research input in the form of 'mystery shopping' etc. as appropriate.*

Information from our volunteers is given to all the Policy Managers within the SCC keeping them up-to-date on issues affecting different sections of communities across Scotland. Regularly throughout the year, Policy Staff meet to discuss progress in carrying through our Workplan for the current year, and also to discuss research projects for the following year. Sometimes a Network member will 'kick off' a research project by bringing an issue to our attention that we will discuss at Workplanning meetings. On other occasions, we may ask the Network for their views on a particular topic, such as the health care of older people.

In October 2002 the Consumer Network was involved in a project looking at how councils provide performance information about services to the public. SCC has long held concerns that the performance information published by councils is not meaningful to consumers and suspect they may not help to improve services in line with consumers' needs. As part of the study Network members took part in a telephone exercise to test out access to council performance information by:

- Telephoning their local council to request written information on the performance of council services; and
- Completing a short questionnaire on their experience of contacting the council and their views of the clarity, relevance and usefulness of the written information itself.

The issues identified by the Network were used to inform the next stage of the research project – a series of focus groups with members of the general public. In April 2003 one of the Network members attended a seminar held by SCC to discuss further the issues related to performance reporting. The findings of the overall SCC study are now helping to shape Scottish Executive guidance, which will be issued to all councils aiming to improve how councils report on service performance to the public.

Another recent Network research project was to establish the availability, accessibility and cost of accessing the Internet from public locations throughout Scotland. The Scottish Executive pledged to provide 'universal' access to the Internet by 2005, and this provision seems to be focused on public access in libraries and community centres. In Scotland, fewer people have access to the Internet than anywhere else in the UK, and this is particularly marked in low-income groups. Network members were asked to visit their nearest public Internet access terminal, and complete a questionnaire on their experience of attempting to locate their nearest access point, and logging on to different web sites. This research gave us a valuable 'snapshot' of the situation throughout Scotland regarding the cost of public Internet access, and the availability of facilities for those with disabilities and/or no previous knowledge of the Internet.

VOLUNTEER JOB DESCRIPTION

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) works to represent consumer interests to policy makers, regulators and suppliers, by researching the experiences of consumers and identifying ways in which the provision of goods and services can be improved for all consumers, particularly those who face disadvantage.

Network activities

We ask volunteers to send us information about any issue that affects them or their local community using an Information Form. For example, they may be concerned about the lack of access to basic foods at a reasonable price, or the level of service provided by a bus company or their local council. Information from our volunteers is circulated to the Policy Managers within SCC keeping them up-to-date on issues affecting different communities and different sections of these communities throughout Scotland.

We also ask volunteers to take part in small research projects 2-3 times a year. Sometimes this can take the form of investigating local services or facilities (a 'mystery shopping' exercise) or very often it simply means completing a questionnaire and giving us their own views and experiences on a particular topic.

Once a year we have a meeting of Network volunteers, and we produce a newsletter for members 3-4 times a year to keep them up-to-date on Network activities.

Person specification

There is no such thing as a 'typical' volunteer. The strength of the Network lies in its diversity. We want to ensure that members of the Network are drawn from all walks of life, from different geographical areas, with a wide range of consumer experiences. The 'ideal' Network member is one who **gives us information**, who **takes part in surveys**, in short - one who **participates**. The time commitment is small, perhaps an hour or so every couple of months. There are no formal qualifications required and no barriers to eligibility: -

- You **don't** have to be an expert on consumer matters - you **do** have to have an interest in local and national consumer affairs
- You **don't** have to be opinionated - you **do** have to have an opinion
- You **don't** have to be fit and active - you **do** have to have an active open mind
- You **don't** have to be well educated and highly articulate - you **do** have to want to communicate with us and keep us informed!

We prefer that members of groups give us their individual opinions, rather than a 'collective' response from the whole group, as this gives us a wider range of views. Volunteers, whether individual or group members, can communicate by whatever method suits them best – by Information Form, telephone, e-mail etc.

THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT – A SHORT HISTORY

'Consumers, by definition, include us all. They are the largest economic group affecting, and affected by, almost every public and private economic decision. But they are the only important group....whose views are often not heard.'

John F Kennedy

The USA was the first country to develop any kind of organised body representing consumers as a whole, founding the Consumers' Union in 1936. By the late 1950s consumers' associations had been formed in several European countries including the UK. They were mostly based on the American model, which adopted the approach of testing products and publishing 'value for money' and 'best buy' judgements.

In 1962 US President John F Kennedy declared in a speech to Congress four basic consumer rights:

- The right to safety
- The right to be informed
- The right to choose
- The right to be heard

The gradual recognition by UK government that consumers' interests should have the same weight as those of manufacturers, providers and employers led to the establishment in 1975 of the National Consumer Council (NCC). The NCC was given the role of representing consumers' interests with a special focus on the needs of disadvantaged consumers. Although NCC was set up by government, its independence was written into its constitution, guaranteeing its freedom to be critical of government, where appropriate. NCC subsequently set up the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) and the Welsh Consumer Council (WCC) to promote and research the interests of consumers in Scotland and Wales.

The term '**consumer**' is often used to refer to someone who buys goods - a shopper, but in connection with the work of the Scottish Consumer Council it means someone who buys goods or uses services, whether they are provided privately or by the public sector. This means that hospital patients, bus and rail passengers, school children receiving an education and benefits claimants are as much consumers as shoppers in a supermarket are. All members of the public are consumers at some point in their lives, and as such, need to be able to make appropriate decisions about products and services.

Seven Consumer Rights

The four consumer rights set out by Kennedy are still at the heart of the framework which the NCC, SCC and WCC use to evaluate and promote the consumer interest, although the original four have been expanded to seven and are:

- Access - can people get the goods or services they need or want?
- Choice - is there any?
- Safety - are the goods or services dangerous to health or welfare?
- Fairness - are some or all consumers unfairly discriminated against?
- Information - is it available, accurate and useful?
- Redress - if things go wrong, is there a system for putting them right?
- Representation - do consumers have a say in how goods or services are provided?

THE POLICY WORK OF SCC

Although SCC and its associate councils need to be aware of the position of service providers, manufacturers and retailers, as well as other groups such as farmers and environmentalists, our job is to promote and protect the interests of **consumers**. In all our policy work, we consider the **seven consumer rights** (see page 6). This work is aided by the Consumer Network whose members give us information, not only on what is going on in their own neighbourhoods, for example, on their local GP service, but also their views on national issues like food safety and transport policies.

We have six Policy Managers who cover the following areas: -

- Utilities
- Local Government, Housing and Education
- Food and Diet
- Rural Issues, Environment and Transport
- Legal Policy
- Health and Social Care

All of the matters raised by Network members should fall within these six broad headings. There are some topics which may be of importance, but which we do not cover in our work. SCC does not cover issues like taxation, employment, voting, the criminal law system and law and order, immigration and nationality, and religion. These matters are usually regarded as **citizenship** issues, rather than **consumer** issues.

For example, a member of the Consumer Network may be concerned about vandalism in their area. This would not be a consumer issue as such, although if the concern was about the way in which the local council dealt with the repair/reinstatement of public property damaged by vandalism, then this would fall within the definition of a consumer issue, as it concerns the level of service provided by a public body.

We have links with organisations like the Consumers' Association and Citizens Advice Bureaux, but our work is distinct. SCC does not give advice directly to members of the public in individual cases. To give an example, if a member of the public, or indeed a member of the Network, contacted SCC to complain about the way their solicitor handled a transaction on their behalf, whilst we may sympathise, we would not be in a position to take direct action or to provide legal advice. However, we are interested in hearing of such concerns from Network members.

For example, in 1998 SCC carried out research after being made aware of difficulties with the way in which the Law Society of Scotland dealt with complaints from clients who had concerns about the service they had received from their solicitor. As a result SCC recommended that the Scottish Parliament should review the complaints procedure of the Law Society of Scotland, with a view to establishing an independent body to deal with complaints against solicitors. We are pleased to note that the Justice1Parliamentary Committee has recently reported that they are in broad agreement with the setting up of an independent body to deal with complaints against solicitors.

We hope that this information gives members an idea of what is, and what is not a valid consumer issue.

Q & A

Here are some examples of questions that new members may want to ask about Network membership: -

'What will I be expected to do as a Network member?'

Members are free to contact the Co-ordinator at anytime, but two to three times a year we will send you a form called an 'Information Form'. This can be completed and returned to let us know of any consumer issue that concerns you or your local community. We encourage volunteers to use e-mail if possible, but you can choose to correspond by whatever method suits you best: - by using the Information Form, by letter, e-mail / fax, or by telephoning the Consumer Network Co-ordinator. The topics raised can cover anything that is a legitimate consumer issue.

We also ask members to take part in Network surveys around three times a year. The questionnaires themselves do not normally take any longer than 15-20 minutes to complete. Sometimes the survey will take the form of investigating services / facilities, and will involve a 'mystery shopping' exercise in their own locality, such as the Internet access research referred to on page 3.

'Will I be able to claim back any expenses?'

Yes Travelling expenses and the cost of telephone calls etc. can be claimed back by volunteers. Advance payments can be made - please contact the Co-ordinator for details.

'Can I report only my own personal experiences?'

No You do not need to have personal experience of something that is a concern to you. You may be fit and able yourself, but have noticed that a lack of lowered steps on buses in your area makes it difficult for those who have impaired mobility to get on and off. This would be a valid concern for you to raise with us. You may know of an unfair or discriminatory system operating in the public or private sector. You do not have to have been on the receiving end yourself, to be in a position to bring it to our attention.

'Will I have to go around my neighbours and friends asking them about any concerns they have?'

No We don't ask volunteers to conduct 'polls' or canvass opinion in their local community on a particular issue, although if you happen to hear of something that is of concern locally, then we would be pleased to hear about it, assuming it is a valid consumer issue.

'Will I be able to represent SCC at public meetings?'

No We don't ask members of the Network to speak on behalf of the Scottish Consumer Council, although from time to time we may ask volunteers if they wish to be nominated by SCC to sit on over-seeing committees for public bodies e.g. VisitScotland. The Chairman and other Council members represent the policies of SCC in the public domain. Our Director and Policy Managers have been appointed to various Expert Groups set up by the Scottish Executive, and give evidence to Parliamentary Committees to represent the consumer interest. They are also asked regularly by other organisations, government and the media to comment on public policy from a consumer perspective. As a Network member you have been recruited to give us your **own** views on consumer issues, and inform us of consumer concerns **in your own locality** - which brings us neatly back to the purpose of the Consumer Network, that is: -

***keeping SCC in touch with consumers
throughout Scotland at 'grassroots' level.***



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Making all consumers matter

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